In the early 1990s New Zealand took a bolder and more comprehensive approach towards qualifications reform than any other country appears to have taken by attempting to develop and implement a unitary qualifications framework, one which embraces all national qualifications within a single framework. This process began well before NZQA was formally established, but with the 1989 reforms and the introduction of a market-based approach to education, NZQA had a unique window of opportunity to implement its 'big idea' of a unitary qualifications framework (the National Qualifications Framework or NQF) by drawing upon policies from other countries with dual or multi-track qualifications frameworks. I argue that the development of the NQF was strongly influenced by these overseas policies from the mid-1980s, particularly curriculum, assessment and qualifications policies in England, Scotland, Australia and the United States. The mechanism of policy importation is used to account for how New Zealand policy makers adopted the policies of other countries and created the NQF. A seven-stage model of policy importation is described, which includes the phases of accumulation, incubation, assimilation, translation, contextualisation, refraction and resolution. These stages are then used as a framework for analysing the NQF, with a particular focus on its implications for and impact on the senior secondary school. Finally, I conclude by suggesting that the policy importation model could play a useful role in understanding global policy developments.
In the early 1990s New Zealand took a bolder and more comprehensive approach towards qualifications reform than any other country appears to have taken. While the New Zealand qualifications reforms have been influenced by developments in other countries (as will be shown), New Zealand is unique in attempting to implement a unitary qualifications framework, that is one which embraces all national qualifications within a single framework. As noted by Curtain & Hayton (1995, p. 205), "New Zealand has attempted a more comprehensive approach [than Australia or the United Kingdom] by applying competency standards to all sectors of post-compulsory education and workplace training."

I contend that the recent qualifications reforms in New Zealand not only required the establishment of a new agency, NZQA, but that the NQF would not have been invented unless certain overseas policies which were already in existence (and were borrowed or adapted by NZQA) were grafted on to significant indigenous developments. The critical condition was a combination of the public sector reforms which, from 1989, established a new educational administrative structure, and allowed the emergence of a new organisation (able to function in certain ways), and the need for the Government to solve New Zealand’s economic problems. Although various measures were introduced to achieve this goal, a policy window for a new approach to qualifications opened in the late 1980s in New Zealand allowing influences from other countries to shape the preferred policy.

In developing a framework for national qualifications, NZQA chose a unified approach to standards and qualifications development in order to create a single, national qualifications/award structure. This has not yet happened in any other country, and hence is extraordinary in terms of international practice.

This paper examines the origins and development of key ideas and policies, with emphasis on those from overseas, which have resulted in the NQF (or the big idea), emphasising the NQF’s development from 1990 until the end of 1997. This is done by examining the methods used by NZQA, in particular policy importation, and considers both the local and overseas origins of the key concepts underpinning the NQF. However, the unitary framework did not magically spring up in 1990 when the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was established; its origins can be traced to the mid-1980s, and even earlier, as part of national and international debates about qualifications reform. Comment will therefore also be made on the early stages of policy importation which pre-dated the formation of NZQA.

**POLICY IMPORTATION**

Policy importation, it is argued, is considered to be a key mechanism for developing the NQF. The term policy importation is not restricted to the wholesale adoption or adaptation of other countries’ policies but is interpreted broadly to include more subtle influences (viz Wolman, 1992). This might involve, for example, consideration of other countries' policies and programmes in order to ensure consistent developments between countries which is particularly important for ensuring international compatibility between qualifications with an increasingly mobile workforce, the use of similar concepts and the rhetoric of reform, and developments in New Zealand which parallel or are different from those in other countries, as well as what appear to be explicitly adopted or adapted policies. NZQA also used a range of other strategies.

The NQF was such an all-embracing idea that it could not be trialled before it was implemented. An alternative option, therefore, is to borrow ideas from other countries as a readymade policy option. Wolman (1992, p. 27) suggested the importance of policy transfer or "the borrowing of a policy from one political system for use in another" and claimed that it is occurring with increasing frequency. Although his focus was upon the transfer of urban
renewal policies from other countries (primarily the United States) to Britain he also noted (1992, p. 29) that:

We ... know little about the role policy information from abroad plays, either in a systematic or an idiosyncratic fashion, in the broader policy process and under what kinds of circumstances policy transfer is likely to occur.

Finegold, McFarland and Richardson (1992, p. 10) also noted that analysts have been pushed

... beyond the normal academic exercise of studying the influence of one country’s policies on another. We are now interested in knowing both why countries borrow and what the domestic effects of such borrowing might be.

As they indicated, policy borrowing or importation is a key mechanism in the development of systems of post-compulsory education and training.

Policy importation is one example, but a very influential one, of the kinds of mechanisms by which governments and the bureaucratic structures created by the state initiate and shape policy change. This account draws in particular from Wolman’s (1992) early 1990s description of the borrowing of urban renewal policies by England from the United States, Kingdon’s (1984) study of how policy ideas become part of the policy solution melting pot and then infiltrate the policy determining agenda, and Finegold, McFarland and Richardson’s study (1992/1993) of England’s appropriation of American education and training policy during the Thatcher Government. Policy importation is an integral part of the process of policy development.

The political process can facilitate or impede the spread of a powerful idea. At particular times, education becomes part of high politics, i.e., education is at the forefront of a government’s priorities and it is determined to push through educational change. A recent New Zealand example is when David Lange held the portfolio for education while also the Prime Minister from 1987 to 1989. Similarly, Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in the United Kingdom took a close interest in education. When this occurs, change or innovation is facilitated compared to times when education does not occupy a prominent position in a government’s priorities.

**Why are policies borrowed?**

Phillips (1989, p. 273) asked a key question in relation to the issue of why ideas from other countries are adopted or policies borrowed: "Why is it that particular countries at particular times become interested in the educational systems of particular other countries?" One response is that, in order to resolve difficult internal issues concerned, for example, with unemployment, governments look for solutions which have been adopted elsewhere so they can retain their credibility by having the answers. Borrowed ideas are like quick remedies which allow governments to save face.

Another response might be that all the available local options have been tried, so why not try something different from another country? This approach could well lead to the adoption of radically different policies which replace the status quo. As Kuhn (1970) has argued, ideas once popular are often replaced.

A third response might be that countries try to stay a step ahead of what is perceived to be the opposition, i.e., other countries, because it may give them a competitive advantage. Up-to-date information about developments in other countries becomes important because it
enables policy makers and others to be kept informed about how other countries are dealing with similar issues, and to borrow or adapt ideas so that they retain their competitive edge, or at least minimise the risk of falling behind strategies adopted in other countries. This is particularly likely to be the case when the issues are of major importance to the economic wellbeing of a country.

**Internationalisation: role of policy importation**

The opportunities for exchange of influential ideas in education are growing. This is partly a result of the increasing trend towards globalisation, enhanced by more sophisticated communications systems, the breaking down of traditional boundaries (for example, between nations) and ready exchange of information on an international scale, all of which impact upon a variety of social areas. It is also partly because of growing moves towards international comparability, for example in terms of defining standards of performance in education, and mutual recognition of standards for qualifications, to assist in easy transfer of labour around the world. Increasing travel between countries has assisted in the development of more frequent contacts between policy makers and officials who regularly share ideas as solutions to intractable problems such as growing youth unemployment have been sought.

Policy importation is more likely to happen when certain circumstances apply. In recent times, such circumstances have included the increasing internationalisation of the world’s economy; massive expansion and sophistication of technology which has led to increasingly more rapid exchange of information between institutions and between countries; and, thirdly, heightened competition between firms and countries as each tries to stay one or more steps ahead of its competitors.

At a regional or global level, countries are aware of the need to work for common systems in order to address common problems; note, for example, the internationalisation of the economy, the common market and associated changes in education and training. As Gourevitch (1989, p. 102) noted:

> The international system itself has a profound impact on the politics of economic policy choice in countries. It does so by shaping the calculations of actors within countries as well as the resources at their disposal. At certain moments the international system may even alter internal arrangements - institutional, economic, social, and ideological - through direct intervention.

Another trend contributing towards increased incidence of policy borrowing has been the attempt by national systems to harmonise their education systems and qualifications. The means by which this can happen are made simpler and quicker (for example, through technological innovations) as the demand for more rapid economic responsiveness drives the search for more effective ways of implementing change. To the extent that there is an international movement towards more harmonised or standardised systems, policy importation is likely to increase.

As countries are subject to similar economic pressures, and have experienced similar debates about the purposes of education and training in relation to economic performance,
there has been a perceptible move towards greater similarity in their systems of education and training as these are seen to be the route towards increased competitiveness in the global market. As Grubb (1985, p. 544) has noted:

The different manifestations of vocationalism have generated striking similarities in the education systems of different countries in educational practices as well as in ideologies. Of course, one reason for similarities is the borrowing of ideas and programs among countries. Early in this century the German system of vocational education influenced educators in other advanced countries, and some advanced countries exported vocational systems to their colonies. But it is difficult to believe that such exports would be so widely accepted if conditions in many nations were not appropriate for such innovations.

Policy importation is the mechanism which enables countries to adopt some of the policy ideas and practices of other countries. Borrowing is assisted if there is a sense of affinity between the country from which the ideas are being borrowed and the recipient. The broad cultural and linguistic context provides a climate for policy adaptation. Wolman commented that ideas for policy transfer can be based on patterns of information flows, or linguistic or cultural similarities, and that other countries facing the same issues are an ideal source. A suitable policy is not necessarily borrowed from overseas; however, as Wolman (1992, p. 34) noted:

Policy transfer does not occur in a vacuum, but as part of the broader policy development process. It thus takes place in the context of discussion of existing problems, general ideas about dealing with them, and specific proposed solutions. As one observer remarked, "Demands arise for new policy products and for people to generate them. One of the responses is to look to other countries." There is an obvious rationale in looking particularly to countries which are perceived to share similar problems ...

Policy importation as a response to a crisis

It seems likely that borrowing policies from other countries tends to occur when the borrowing country has a problem of a certain magnitude to solve, and when no suitable internal solutions appear to be available. While there might be alternatives available, if they are not on the agenda they may not be considered appropriate.

According to Finegold, Mcfarland and Richardson (1992, p. 10) the "political arena is where public policy issues are raised and addressed"; they cited Polsby (1984) who "proposes that policy innovation is most likely when three forces intersect: the interest of societal groups; the intellectual convictions of policy makers; and comparative knowledge of policies elsewhere". The political dimension to borrowing is crucial to understanding why borrowing occurs at certain times and not at others. Polsby (1984, p. 168) also noted that policy makers could create a sense of crisis in order to promote their preferred policy solution:

... the empirical difference between an urgent need to act and the capacity to invent alternatives also creates a set of opportunities for those who are prepared; hence there is utility in one common political strategy in America, namely, attempts by sponsors of readymade alternatives to coerce feelings of urgency among decision-makers, to invent ‘crises’.

The temptation to borrow an idea is more likely to occur when the issue is of major consequence. The conditions for borrowing are more likely to be favourable when nations
are in a state of crisis, such as that caused by the economic challenges of the 1980s. As Wolman (1992, p. 42) noted:

> While policy learning from abroad may result in marginal adjustments to existing policy, it is much more likely that policy transfer will involve more major, discontinuous change; indeed, that is frequently the implicit (sometimes explicit) rationale for looking at other countries’ policies.

And, once a crisis has been identified, the urgency with which solutions are required is likely to increase. As noted by Waltman, it is then much easier to look to the policies of other nations than to dream up new policies from scratch.

Thus policies may be borrowed to solve a problem, often because a government is concerned about the economic or political consequences of failing to take action. As other countries often face similar problems, their policies provide a source of information or strategies for dealing with the problem. When crisis conditions act as a catalyst, it is more likely that borrowed solutions will be turned to. However, this raises issues related to how policies are imported and what happens when the borrowed policy is put into a new context.

**A model of policy importation**

While there do not appear to be any models of policy importation, the issues raised by Waltman (1980), Polsby (1984), Fullan (1991), Wolman (1992), Finegold, McFarland and Richardson (1992/1993), provide a suitable starting-point for such a model and reinforce that, for the examples identified, policy borrowing is occasionally a vital step in the public policy process, particularly when it is used at a time of crisis (Waltman, 1980; Polsby, 1984), and that innovations and policies can be traced through various phases, i.e., periods coinciding with the identification, adoption and implementation of imported policies. These stages range from interest by individuals such as government officials or politicians in the ideas or policies of other countries, to circulation and endorsement within decision making circles of some of those ideas, to the adoption of some imported ideas as national policies, and their subsequent adaptation and implementation within a new cultural context.

As a consequence, a seven stage model of policy borrowing or importation is posited. For convenience, the stages are labeled as: accumulation, incubation, assimilation, translation, contextualisation, refraction and resolution. Accumulation refers to the apparently willy-nilly activity of gathering ideas by people who may be able to plant them in the policy arena at the right time. Incubation refers to the phase when ideas or policies begin to enter the realm of the decision-makers, as possible favoured alternatives, but have not yet been absorbed by the government. Assimilation encompasses the emergence, possibly as a consequence of competition among different alternatives, of a favoured option, as stated in official policy documents, while translation relates to the filling out of the details of the policy as an agenda for action. Contextualisation refers to the enactment of the new policy, and its attempted integration into the adopted or local context. Refraction denotes the consequences of the policy’s attempted contextualisation, such as resistance, and how challenges to the policy are responded to, including possible alterations to the policy. Finally, resolution refers to the integration of the imported policy within its new environment, although this may not happen as originally envisaged and could even include abandonment of the imported policy in favour of another option.

The stages of policy importation provide a framework for analysing how a policy agenda which is strongly influenced by overseas ideas emerges and becomes established, how the policy is subsequently developed and whether the response of affected parties leads to further changes during the implementation phase.
POLICY IMPORTATION AND THE NQF

Policy importation has occurred at a broad level through the early involvement of NZQA staff, even before it was established, and on a continuous basis since, with agencies which have influenced the development of the NQF, obtaining useful documents and ideas, and the work experience of New Zealanders - some NZQA employees, others working for NZQA in some capacity such as a contracted agent for a specific purpose in the United Kingdom - who can provide updates on what is happening in the United Kingdom in relation to qualifications developments, and so on.

Once NZQA had been established, the use of policy importation also provided a significant means for NZQA to maintain its authority over the development of the NQF and any subsequent changes that were made to it. Given the close contact between New Zealand education officials and Scottish and English education officials during the 1980s it is not surprising that NZQA drew its chief inspiration for its ‘big idea’ of a unitary qualifications framework from SCOTVEC and NCVQ.

Accumulation

The often apparently magpie-like activity of picking up or accumulation of useful documents or advice from overseas agencies and officials provides an important foundation for much policy development. This is a continuous activity which provides a seedbed from which new policy may eventually arise. Thus in relation to dissatisfaction with the system of qualifications in New Zealand, information about possible alternatives for reform was collected well before the mid-1980s.

Incubation

Around the middle of the 1980s, people who were in a position to consider a range of alternative policy ideas developed preferred options, corresponding with the next phase of policy importation, or incubation. The major structural changes which took place in the public sector in the mid-1980s also provided an opportunity for scrutiny of new approaches, some of which were incorporated in the education reviews. Thus as interest was shown in qualifications developments in other English-speaking countries, in particular Scotland, certain ideas gained ground and were considered appropriate as possible alternatives to the current shape of qualifications in New Zealand and as a basis for potential reform by some New Zealand officials. This stage covered the period from about 1985 up to the release of the Hawke Report in mid-1988.

Assimilation

A third phase, assimilation, when a preferred policy option is confirmed as official policy, lasted from the time when the Government’s official response to the recommendations in the Hawke Report was announced in Learning for Life until the necessary legislation had been enacted to create a new organisation (NEQA) to implement the policy specifications. This phase had two main elements: the official endorsement of a preferred organisational structure for the reform of qualifications, and definition of the broad features which a new national framework for qualifications would be required to address, as expressed in Learning for Life and Learning for Life: Two. The public sector restructuring was a change of such magnitude that it allowed a new state organisation to be set up, which then had the opportunity, power and influence to develop and implement its preferred qualifications framework.
Thus during the phases of incubation and assimilation, two layers of activity can be identified. These are concerned with debates over and reports on, firstly, the most appropriate structures or organisations to implement reforms in qualifications and, secondly, educational issues associated with the purpose or content of qualifications and the most appropriate interrelationships among different qualifications.

Translation

Given a crisis situation, an organisation established to develop a new policy and under pressure to do so quickly and credibly is likely to be very interested in feasible solutions from a variety of sources. If no local alternative is available, or the local options have already been tried and found wanting, or no longer apply within a new environment (such as that created by New Zealand's public sector reforms), imported ideas are an obvious source for developing the details of the policy. But at least two deeper issues need to be considered. One concerns why it was even necessary to borrow any overseas policies to reform the New Zealand system of qualifications, as distinct from developing a unique New Zealand approach. The other concerns the possible advantages which a new organisation such as NZQA might gain by using policy importation as a deliberate strategy (compared to other strategies that might have been available) in formulating and modifying the NQF.

I contend that policy importation enabled NZQA both to develop the NQF as a credible solution to the problems identified with respect to New Zealand's qualifications, such as lack of articulation between different qualifications, obstacles to moving from one qualification to another, the gulf in status between academic and vocational qualifications, and to assist NZQA's long-term survival since its legitimacy could be challenged by either the Ministry of Education, as the Government's official policy advisory, funding and resourcing body, or by a range of interest groups likely to be affected by the new policy.

Overseas policies, regardless of whether they have themselves been researched or have been fully implemented, have validity in that they are identified as solutions to similar problems to those faced in New Zealand and can be taken on board and introduced, perhaps in a modified form, in the New Zealand context. In this way, other agencies were compelled to assimilate what NZQA attempted to implement and in lieu of NZQA itself demonstrating that the new approaches do not work (because this would be at odds with its main agenda) these agencies have the onus of providing evidence that the new policies are inappropriate, should this indeed be the case.

Policy importation played a vital role because this mechanism, firstly, provided NZQA, as a new change agent in New Zealand education, with a coherent, credible and comprehensive solution for rationalising New Zealand's confusing array of national qualifications, and, secondly, because the big idea had its origins overseas it was less familiar to other agencies with an interest in qualifications reform and therefore gave NZQA a competitive or political advantage over the Ministry of Education (the policy successor to the former Department of Education from which NZQA sprang).

The big idea provided a basis for developing a set of rational procedures for qualifications reform which the new organisation - NZQA - would be able to apply and control through its officials with a minimum of interference from other agencies, since it was empowered through its legislation to make and enforce its own policies in relation to qualifications. In addition, because the big idea was complex, it allowed NZQA to exert a considerable degree of power over the developers of qualifications and, at least initially, to fend off competitors with different views about the most appropriate ways of reforming qualifications.
The coupling of the administrative reforms in New Zealand which established new power alignments as new organisations set about fulfilling their own agendas with the proposals for a new qualifications agency then provided an opportunity for policy translation, specifically developing a plan for a unitary qualifications framework based largely on the Scottish approach to vocational qualifications. The degree of change in New Zealand was major, and hence the incentive to borrow overseas ideas and to adopt strategies for legitimation and competitive advantage was perhaps greater than in some other countries.

In this early stage of translation, up to the end of 1991, the NQF therefore represented the Government’s approved solution or, at the very least a viable alternative (by virtue of its continued funding, and the occasional evaluation and review of aspects such as its cost and purpose) to the problems created by the previous multitude of qualifications in New Zealand (and the barriers embedded in this system) and to the desire to upgrade or upskill the current and potential workforce.

The NQF can be clearly traced to SCOTVEC’s National Certificate and some of the characteristics of NVQs in England and Wales. It gave equal billing to skills and knowledge, in particular those aspects considered by industry to be of value in qualifications; it highlighted the degree of competence or level of mastery a person needed to achieve in order to gain credit towards a qualification; it proposed a system for equating all qualifications and their parts within eight levels, and with a minimum of redundancy; it offered a wide choice of qualifications and routes into qualifications; it specifically addressed equity issues by, for example, focusing on Maori qualifications and the recognition of prior learning; and NZQA emphasised the need for education and training providers to meet certain criteria of quality so that the public could be assured that standards were maintained across all providers.

NZQA appeared to have come up with a credible solution - one which was educationally defensible - but even at this early stage NZQA was not without its critics. It had engineered a massive project which would require substantial resources to complete and which would increasingly be criticised from a number of directions. By the end of 1991 it appeared as if NZQA had defined the essential dimensions of a unified national qualifications framework and that all that remained was to further develop and implement the details.

**Contextualisation**

In order to ensure that it was successful in implementing its educational solution, NZQA needed to maintain a competitive or leading edge over forces (i.e., other state agencies such as the Ministry of Education, and the executive including Government), which had the potential to undermine NZQA or to destabilise its big idea. This particularly applied to the Ministry of Education with its responsibility for developing the New Zealand curriculum. The next step for NZQA was to contextualise its vision, i.e., to undertake the development of unit standards across the various sectors by setting up appropriate mechanisms.

Any new policy has to be fitted into an existing policy environment which may set up tensions between the new policy requirements and existing policy requirements. This is particularly likely to be the case if the new policy co-exists with the old policy. The early development of the NQF did not occur in a vacuum; NZQA attempted to implement its unitary qualifications framework at the same time as a range of existing qualifications such as university degrees and school qualifications (for example, School Certificate and Bursary) remained in place. There was also a broader policy environment characterised by a Government emphasis on skills development, increased choice, the seamless education system and greater accountability for education providers. In addition, the policy environment included other agencies making or enacting policy, such as the Ministry of
Education, and the Minister of Education and Cabinet, whose support (or at least non-opposition) NZQA needed to implement its big idea. The existence of other qualifications policies and another Government agency with an educational policy making role created potential sources of conflict because NZQA’s advice could be contested. This posed a significant problem for NZQA because it could not directly control other Government policies or agencies (such as the Ministry of Education) which might have an impact on its ability to implement the NQF.

From late 1991, NZQA began implementing its unitary qualifications framework and, in so doing, attempted to maintain a significant degree of control over the development of qualifications for the NQF, how information about the NQF was presented, and how the public and potential users would perceive the big idea. NZQA used existing bodies such as Industry Training Organisations and established other national advisory bodies (subsequently collectively known as National Standards Bodies) to draft and revise unit standards and to develop new qualifications, encouraged the writing and registering of unit standards, began to develop moderation strategies, and established quality assurance procedures including the accreditation of approved providers, all under the close supervision of NZQA staff or delegated agents. Research was commissioned to help develop some of the details of the NQF, while overseas ideas were also used.

Some of the implementation activities turned out to be more complex than NZQA may have originally intended. Progress with the development and registration of unit standards, the basic building block of the NQF, varied from sector to sector, depending upon the capacity of standards setting bodies to develop unit standards and, to some extent, the degree of support or conflict and resistance NZQA encountered. The extent to which the NQF could be fully implemented also varied from sector to sector. This ranged from enthusiastic support from industry, moderate to strong support from polytechnics and some schools, strong opposition from some schools and almost total opposition from the universities.

NZQA’s attempt to control the development of qualifications through a unitary framework also generated intellectual challenges or conflicts. Criticism came from practitioners such as school principals and academics. The principal sources of opposition came from those sectors which valued traditional, high status qualifications and had an academic focus: some secondary schools, the universities and independent lobbyists such as the New Zealand Business Roundtable who did not accept the NQF at face value nor NZQA’s assurances about the robustness of the NQF. These critics identified basic problems with its design, and challenged NZQA’s view of knowledge and the attempted reorganisation of knowledge and skills for qualifications within what was considered to be a fragmentary and entirely inappropriate structure for some forms of learning. The university sector has managed to retain its considerable autonomy but has been perhaps the staunchest source of criticism because of NZQA’s intention of eventually including degrees on the NQF in order to preserve its inclusive, unitary nature.

While criticism mounted from some quarters, NZQA continued to oversee the development of unit standards and qualifications. The voicing of alternative views and the continuing intensity of opposition may have been unintended consequences of the application of the NQF; however, NZQA officials expected some opposition to be generated by its NQF policy. The main risk associated with failing to deal adequately with opponents’ arguments was that the Government, having created NZQA and endorsed the development of the NQF, could also change NZQA’s functions and could require a different kind of qualifications framework.

Given the existing policy environment, it was essential for NZQA to maintain control over the development and implementation (or contextualisation) of its unitary framework: this was achieved by using various strategies. Some of these strategies were concerned with
developing components of the NQF, which enabled NZQA to maintain close supervision of both the procedures and rules concerning unit standard based qualifications and the content of proposed qualifications. Other strategies enabled NZQA to inform the public or consumers about the NQF as it was essential for NQF-based qualifications to be taken up by qualifications consumers, thus ensuring that people knew about and had accurate information on the NQF. Further strategies involved activities concerned with legitimisation or validation of the big idea as the most credible solution for qualifications reform; this was partly related to increased take-up but also to reduce the likelihood of possible competitors or criticism which might undermine the credibility of the big idea.

The main technical challenge facing the designers of the new qualifications system announced in the Board's decisions was twofold: firstly, to begin to develop a unitary qualifications framework by creating and managing policy implementation mechanisms; and secondly, to ensure that sectors offering students the opportunity to gain qualifications took part in developing qualifications and in meeting quality assurance criteria. In this critical stage, beginning in late 1991 and which has lasted for several years, NZQA set up the structures which would enable the NQF to take shape, established strategies for consulting and working with the sectors most likely to be affected, and managed the implementation of the NQF.

NZQA established new processes to define the content of qualifications, including how competence was to be assessed, principally by generating unit standards (or units of learning as they were often referred to in the early 1990s) and new qualifications which could be registered on the NQF, and procedures to ensure that providers met the necessary quality assurance requirements (i.e., involving registration of PTEs and accreditation of existing providers) with a particular emphasis on their capacity to assess students for credit.

Each of these activities formed part of a complex interlocking control mechanism for ensuring that the unitary qualifications framework was able to be implemented successfully. However, these activities also engendered resistance; in some cases, whether deliberately provoked by NZQA or not, the resistance proved to be too strong for NZQA to handle and contributed to reconsideration of some aspects of the policy. As questions were increasingly asked about the validity of the NQF, competitive advantage strategies became more important to maintain the credibility of the big idea.

Despite an increasing intensity and frequency of criticism from different sources, and patchy application across the sectors, and despite NZQA having three different chief executives over this time and numerous internal reorganisations, NZQA continued to implement the NQF which, in essence, had changed comparatively little since its initial development. The implementation of the NQF continued through the 1990s, though with many activities still incomplete or taking considerably longer to implement than originally envisaged. NZQA’s main activities were geared towards the continued development of unit standards, the creation of new qualifications, the approval of providers’ quality assurance processes and a firm stand against opposition which might undermine the unified qualifications framework, in particular from some independent schools and the universities.

It became apparent that the ease of implementation of the NQF depended on the particular sector involved. The NQF has impacted on different sectors in different ways and while NZQA applied a common approach initially it has had to apply a variety of different strategies with some sectors in order to increase acceptance of the NQF. While not everything proceeded smoothly or according to published timelines (which were periodically revised), this was partly because of the size of the task which NZQA had set itself, but also because of the technical difficulty of implementing some aspects of the NQF. Many concerns were expressed about implementation details, such as the speed of unit standard
development, the intensive nature of the assessment required against unit standards and the cost of the burgeoning NQF. The scope or coverage of the NQF also came under increasing scrutiny during this time, as well as the assessment load, the lack of recognition of excellence and the adequacy of resourcing.

**Refraction**

However, there was increasing opposition to the big idea. This reflected concerns about some of the concepts underpinning the NQF and the processes NZQA used to secure adherence to its approach to qualifications reform; hence, more fundamental matters than resourcing or timing issues were also raised concerning the fundamental design of the NQF. The main criticisms were centered on issues such as the relevance of the unit standard as a way of describing the content of all qualifications, and the validity of standards based assessment as a means for assessing students' knowledge and understanding of some subjects (general education).

The principal aspects opposed by critics were related to the most distinctive feature of the NQF, i.e., its unitary or integrated nature, and NZQA’s insistence on applying the unit standard and standards based assessment to all national qualifications. The very comprehensiveness of the NQF challenged the views of some stakeholders involved with qualifications. Some of the criticisms concerned views about the bureaucratic aspect of the NQF, i.e., the rules and procedures required in relation to national qualifications, e.g., the relationship of national school examinations and certificates such as Sixth Form Certificate to the NQF, the registration of university degrees on the NQF, and intensification of teachers' work around recording requirements (e.g., the administrative load entailed in recording students' progress towards meeting credit requirements) and the assessment burden associated with unit standards, including the lack of clear moderation guidelines.

Other views concerned epistemological issues such as the role of knowledge and skills, their value and application in different contexts, and how they should be assessed (see Chapters two to four for more detailed commentary on some of these issues). Those aspects which provoked concern largely revolved around the application of what was identified as essentially a vocational qualifications model to academic qualifications. Thus concerns were expressed about whether the unit standard model could be applied to academic subjects in schools; the applicability of the unit standard format as a mechanism for describing the content of degrees; and the lack of acknowledgement of excellence. These kinds of concerns were related to but generally independent of resourcing and timing issues, as already discussed in this chapter. As the NQF was a mechanism for the registration of only those qualifications based on unit standards, the content of which (i.e., knowledge and skills, and performance criteria) had been defined in principle by NZQA, or by delegated agents working to NZQA specifications, this meant that NZQA was more responsible for approving what counted as important knowledge and skills for national certification purposes than the bodies developing qualifications.

Inasmuch as NZQA’s existence depended upon the promotion and maintenance of a unified qualifications framework compared with alternative frameworks, the challenges to the unified framework, including doubt about the educational validity of the NQF policy, could be characterised as potential threats to the education sector taking on board the NQF, possibly to NZQA’s authority, and in time NZQA’s continued existence with its current range of legislated functions. One way for NZQA to deal with criticism was to acknowledge the validity of some concerns and to effect modifications to its unitary framework since, at the very least, sustained criticism if left unresolved could undermine adoption of the policy; however, NZQA rarely took this approach. It preferred instead to continue with its
development activities while at the same time trying to minimise the potential harm of the mounting criticism.

Concerns expressed by other Government agencies in some ways presented NZQA with stronger challenges than those arising in public forums, since NZQA's ability to control any decisions taken in these forums was rather more restricted than its ability to respond to public or sector criticism. NZQA attempted to maintain its competitive advantage despite the varying consequences (whether intended or unintended) of policy implementation in different sectors. The responses of Government agencies to some of the concerns raised, and NZQA's attempts to control resistance to its vision of a unitary qualifications framework from Government, constitute refraction.

In the early years of development of the NQF the Ministry of Education appeared to maintain a comparatively distant relationship with NZQA. However, once concerns about the NQF became prevalent the Ministry took a more proactive approach in advising the Minister of Education about issues which the Ministry considered needed to be addressed. Another dimension of refraction is whether the critics’ comments about supposed flaws in the NQF led to any adjustments to the NQF policy, i.e., whether the policy was refracted.

Although few modifications were made to the fundamental concepts underpinning the unitary qualifications framework, some adjustments were made to implementation of the NQF to facilitate its adoption by some sectors, in particular universities and some secondary schools. In part, as NZQA attempted to retain control over its big idea, these timing adjustments occurred only after other events made them necessary and required the intervention and consent of the Minister of Education. Perhaps the most significant change was the relaxation of criteria for the registration of qualifications on the NQF announced in May 1996, although two years later it was still unclear just what the implications of this change would mean for the NQF. In addition, NZQA was unsuccessful in bringing about substantial changes to the two external examinations which remained Government policy, partly because of strong support for them by some secondary principals, partly because of precedent and the lack of feasible policy alternatives (the NQF in the senior secondary school was still not sufficiently accepted despite extensive trials at levels 2 and 3 in some subjects).

Resolution

However, behind the scenes there had been a number of attempts by various Cabinet committees at scrutinising aspects of the NQF and NZQA’s activities. These culminated in a significant statement published in the Education Gazette, May 6 1996 which was countersigned by the CEOs of the Ministry of Education, NZQA and the Education, Training and Support Agency, announcing that the NQF could include qualifications not based on a unit standards approach provided that they met the criteria of quality, clearly specified outcomes and defined levels and credits. Although the term ‘broadened framework’ was not mentioned, this marked a public acknowledgement of pending changes to the NQF. In the following year, after changes in the Minister of Education and the CEOs of both NZQA and the Ministry of Education, a discussion document was disseminated for public consultation, the Green Paper, A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand: A Plan for the National Qualifications Framework. It provided official acknowledgement of possible changes in policy direction, or in terms of policy importation, a move towards resolution of the issues raised by the unitary NQF. Subsequently, changes were announced for school-based qualifications for 16 to 19 year olds with the proposed development of National Certificates of Educational Achievement, based on achievement standards combining both internal and external assessment, and unit standards for non-conventional subjects, to be progressively implemented from 2001.
Since then, in October 1999, a White Paper, *The National Qualifications Framework of the Future* has been published announcing the Government's final decisions, which includes the statement that "we need a broad framework that recognises a very wide range of qualifications, their purposes and quality ... [and] includes any qualification that has been quality assured by a quality approval body, such as degrees, certificates and diplomas, international qualifications, and qualifications based upon unit standards" (p. 4). This effectively signals the demise of NZQA's big idea of a unitary qualifications framework based on unit standards.

**CONCLUSION**

The policy importation framework discussed in this paper with reference to the NQF could also provide a useful schema for analysing the creation and development of policies worldwide which draw upon global influences, including policies and programmes derived from specific countries. In particular, this paper has argued that the fundamental concepts of the NQF were borrowed from Scotland, England and Australia and that NZQA responded to its task as outlined in the 1989 Education Act (as amended by the 1990 Education Amendment Act) by building on developments which had already occurred during the 1980s before NZQA was formally established as a new quasi-state bureaucracy. The NQF was born out of an unusual climate for policy making, one which contained two elements which do not appear to apply in the current policy making environment in New Zealand - the public sector reforms, which allowed the emergence of new kinds of state sector organisations with new kinds of accountabilities (such as NZQA), and the crisis mode generated by New Zealand's economic situation in the mid to late 1980s which together encouraged a policy development focus on strategies for the enhancement of economic recovery. The coinciding of these pressures provided a window of opportunity for borrowing ideas from other countries.

Policy importation allowed NZQA to develop its own approach towards qualifications reform. Arguments have been provided to illustrate why NZQA took this particular approach. Initially its policy behaviour was a response to a sense of crisis - both economic and educational - and depended upon a feasible mechanism (the unit standard) which would allow NZQA to assert itself as a new organisation; from another perspective, it was simply fulfilling another part of the Government's neoliberal agenda by providing a market-based approach for the gaining of qualifications based on the rhetoric of choice (i.e., choice of qualifications; choice of provider).

Policy importation facilitated the implementation of a unitary framework but this mechanism would not have been needed if NZQA had accepted the validity of a broader framework from the beginning. However, NZQA's role would have been severely curtailed if this had happened as the huge developmental infrastructure created for the development of unit standards would not have been needed to develop and maintain a register of qualifications, no matter how many qualifications eventually ended up in the register. By requiring the transformation of the content of qualifications into a standardised format NZQA began a process of classification of seemingly infinite dimensions, given that unit standards were a small component within a qualification which, theoretically, could include numerous unit standards.

NZQA also attempted a reconceptualisation of much of the knowledge and skills traditionally incorporated in high status qualifications through requiring qualifications developers to determine what bits of knowledge belonged to a qualification and how they were to be assessed. Previously, the judgement as to what was important and the standard to be met was entirely in the hands of the teachers involved in certifying the students' performance. On the other hand, NZQA's attempt to make transparent what was hidden within high status qualifications...
qualifications, i.e., to make clear for students the standards which they needed to meet, could be admired, even if the unit standard was an inappropriate mechanism for describing some forms of knowledge.

What NZQA tried to achieve through the use of policy importation and the implementation of a unified qualifications framework was a major enterprise in the reordering of knowledge the complexity of which even NZQA officials may have been unaware of in some respects, at least initially. To have begun with a broad framework would not have required such an activity, nor the use of policy importation (without which the attempt may never have even been able to have been started). However, by engaging in this activity NZQA confronted the strongest lobbyists and the most conservative forces in the education sector - the gatekeepers of high status knowledge. This could not have happened through a role whereby NZQA, without reorganising the content of qualifications, simply ensured that whole qualifications had a purpose and a relationship to each other. In attempting this feat, through the use of policy importation, NZQA carved a role for itself as an organisation which it could never have done if it had promoted a broad or dual framework from the beginning.
REFERENCES


