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An historical overview of flexible learning in New Zealand from 1990 to the present

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Abstract

The recent progress in New Zealand of flexible learning is reviewed, together with its underlying concepts as expounded at the 1995 DEANZ conference by Bruce King, an Australian. These concepts, which already are known and were developed in New Zealand during the 1990s, are considered in the context of changes in New Zealand's political policies for education. The implementation of flexible learning in that environment is traced, particularly in post-secondary institutions engaged in distance learning.

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An Historical Overview of Flexible Learning in New Zealand from 1990 to the Present

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IDEAS, POLICY, AND PRACTICE Why an historical overview of flexible learning? The period discussed is brief and recent, just over a decade, but from the mid-1980s New Zealand education has undergone rapid political and institutional change. Through that same period flexible learning has gained currency, providing a loose unity for a cluster of concepts, most of them in use, worded differently but already familiar to distance educators. As happens with such a phrase, new demands have been made on its underlying concepts, and they have become refined and extended as debate has posed questions about their current function and relevance. This overview reports on how various educational ideas, systems, and practices have interacted with each other—flexible learning, public policy, and the response of New Zealand institutions.

THE FLEXIBLE LEARNING PARADIGM The Distance Education Association of New Zealand (DEANZ), through its 1995 annual conference report and articles in the *Journal of Distance Learning*, is a major source for discovering how flexible learning has become established in the language and practice of New Zealand educators. The latter have become familiar with terms such as "distance," "open," "lifelong," "recurrent," and "continuing" being used as adjectives for "education," "training," or "learning." They are familiar too with creating and supporting opportunities for out-of-the-classroom learners to use various technologies that range from designer print materials to the latest communication electronics. To DEANZ reports of what constitutes flexible learning and how it is practised can be added accounts of political encouragement of its key features and its implementation, both in well-established learning institutions (whether committed to distance learning or not) and in new agencies more narrowly focused on particular aspects of flexible delivery.

Both the 1995 DEANZ Conference Proceedings and the *Journal of Distance Learning*'s second issue published Bruce King's keynote address, "Life, Learning and Flexible Delivery" (1996a, 1996b). King explained how this concept had been evolving recently in Australia as a further challenge to traditionalism in teaching, and he urged conference participants to adopt its fresh perspective. The conference's subthemes

(represented by three dozen local papers)—managing, organizing, and developing; technology that enhances learning; and serving indigenous peoples—suggest that some facets of the term were already under scrutiny.

King (1996a) lists quite comprehensively from his Australian sources various characteristics of flexible learning. Five years later its further development in Australia was reviewed in the *Journal of Distance Learning* (Archee & Saunders, 2001). Summarised and short-listed for the New Zealand context, the characteristics identified by King were:

- education as a lifelong activity;
- flexibility in entry/exit and programme requirements, and in alternative modes of delivery;
- learner control of learning procedures;
- learning technologies (appropriate for learner and instruction);
- learner support systems: access to course information, guidance, services, and resources;
- flexible assessment processes, standards, and quality control.

King (1996a) had some reservations. He limited flexibility, perhaps unnecessarily, to delivery, and he wondered whether teachers might feel their professional authority was threatened by "learner-oriented flexible learning." He recognised that individual learning choices succumb to criteria demanded by commerce or professions from teaching agencies as sponsoring clients, and he regretted that financial stringency affects student choices, teaching resources, and criteria of quality.

Some existing features of flexible learning had only to be sustained and continued in their ongoing development; others have needed more imaginative reconsideration of established practices. So, nearly a decade after King's (1996a) presentation, what worthwhile progress has been made in New Zealand? To answer we must look at how dynamic the New Zealand educational context has been, and then assess changes in learning style.

GOVERNMENT'S CHANGING ROLE IN EDUCATION

The role of government in New Zealand education has changed markedly since the mid-1980s, as Snook outlined recently and with some passion in his chapter on ethics and politics (2003). For a half-century education was largely non-party-political. The social philosophy informing it had been characterised by Labour in the late 1930s. It was adhered to by successive post–World War II governments, which relied on hands-off mechanisms of a Department of Education led by a largely autonomous Director-General, a University Grants Committee (UGC), a National Council of Adult Education (NCAE), and similar agencies able to fend off direct Cabinet intervention in education affairs. Meanwhile party manifestos all uttered similar sentiments.

From the mid-1980s, however, both major political parties have markedly differentiated their education policies, resulting in radical changes to the infrastructure of New Zealand education. An Education Ministry, more directly answerable to Cabinet, replaced the Department of Education. Schools were transformed by "Tomorrow's

Schools," ostensibly democratising their management. The abolition of most quasi non-governmental organisations (quangos) removed NCAE (Dakin, 1988) and opened the way for the eventual abolition of the UGC. Education at the tertiary level, having emerged relatively unscathed from the worldwide turmoil of participatory democracy in the 1960s, was confronted by economics-based political ideologies; that inter alia subverted the practice of largely subsidised post-secondary fees, challenged the accumulation of government-provided resources, and reconstructed the allocation of research funding, moves summarised as "consumer-driven," "user pays," and "market-oriented." These new policies were shared across much of the political spectrum. Ironically—and demanding substantially greater cost—there was a concurrent political drive for larger participation in post-secondary education, more widely across the socioeconomic spectrum, to include more Maori and Pacific Island representation, and to ensure that retraining and upskilling were readily available throughout the economy.

Most recently the New Zealand government's response to the rapidity of change in information and communication technologies (ICT) has included a commission on eLearning, chaired by a distinguished tertiary distance educator but reviewing across the entire educational spectrum. At the tertiary level, a succession of policy reviews, notably an education strategy 2002–2007 (Ministry of Education, 2002) and the reports of an advisory committee have led to a Tertiary Education Commission whose role it is to manage the entire sector of universities, polytechnics, and some private tertiary establishments. These moves are to help implement the government's goal of a "knowledge society," to enable New Zealand to recognise its effectiveness in applied sciences, identify role models among its intellectual achievers, attract New Zealand scholars overseas back home, and create a more effective knowledge-based economy.

The government has also kept a closer watch on educational practice (French, 1998). In the name of quality control, an Educational Review Office assesses schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) scrutinises the curricula and staffing of each new educational venture, whether programme or agency, public or private, particularly those which proliferate degrees. Meanwhile the Vice-Chancellors' Committee, although still claiming autonomy, has had to comply with tight ministerial requirements and pressures (coupled with stringent budgeting) to put the intentions and achievements of each tertiary institution immediately into the public arena where they can be challenged, often by competing non-university agencies. Their future autonomy will depend on how the Tertiary Education Commission resets the guidelines.

To respond to these changes, educators have had to raise questions about their own professional attitudes and practices. Flexible learning, especially its underlying concepts, has suggested some queries and has guided some of the response (Higgins, 1998).

FLEXIBLE LEARNING: NEW ZEALAND INTERPRETATION

Certain features of King's (1996a) programme for flexible learning can be characterised as already well developed in New Zealand. Others were at best in prototype, awaiting imagination and impetus, while none was entirely new.

1. Education as a lifelong activity. The concept of lifelong learning—pre-school, through school, formal post-secondary university and polytechnic programmes, and recurring thereafter for vocational or personal reasons—has long had a significant place in New Zealand education. Schools have acknowledged that their work with children is only part of education, and some have provided for returning adults, especially so at the Correspondence School. Beyond school, post-secondary pre-service training no longer fulfils the changing requirements of careers. There is evident need for renewed educational opportunities for many men and women to retrieve chances missed at school, for others to reconstruct a life that has gone awry or to disclose untapped talents, or for vocational purposes to undertake further education—second-chance, upgrading, re-skilling for fresh tasks or career changes—but as adult learners. Once the first phase of formal education has been completed, flexibility thereafter becomes a necessary, not merely an attractive, feature. For the half-century preceding this overview period through the National Council of Adult Education, voluntary agencies such as WEA, the extension/continuing education departments of universities, and the regional community colleges of the 1970s and 1980s, adults have increasingly returned to education and many have made it a vital component of their lifestyle. There have been increasing pressures to learn, with industry, business, and the professions being perceived as major clients of education. However, even without such pressure (and largely without government finance), cohorts of learners, parents, multicultural groups, and numerous others turn to continuing learning to suit their particular concerns and lifestyles. Among them, the elderly, retired from careers, have established their own modes of learning, often interdependently sharing their own accumulated knowledge. This can be seen in organisations such as Universities of the Third Age (U3As), SeniorNet, and Probus, which support older learners' particular interests, schedules, and resources (Social Advisory Council, 1984).

2. Flexibility in entry/exit and programme requirements, and in alternative modes of delivery. King (1996a) acknowledged that considerable flexibility had already been achieved by distance educators—a point as valid in New Zealand as in his Australian experience—but reminded his audience of room for further progress. Entry requirements, rarely stringent after age twenty-one even at New Zealand universities, have long been flexible. Where prior formal credit was required, a recent beneficial influence of NZQA has been to encourage that prior learning be taken into account so that duplication (and student frustration) can be avoided. However, at many institutions NZQA was preaching to the converted and its own standards sometimes seemed inflexible. Similarly some qualifications in the past have permitted students to track through a

common programme, exiting at certificate or diploma or degree level, according to their wish. What has improved is scope to resume later and trade-in a lower for a higher qualification without penalty. Programme requirements have perhaps diversified toward a smorgasbord of credits, including those from a variety of sources. The issue becomes whether a particular institution can validate and approve a student's self-constructed curriculum, while retaining a principled educational rationale for that particular array of courses. Fortunately prior guidance has become more readily available to explain where infinite flexibility ceases, as well as where someone's innovative programme deserves approval. However, where rigorous entry requirements were observed, every qualification was long-haul, credit structures left interim credit unrecognised and cross-credit was sparse, and classroom and laboratory attendance was unmitigated, there remained barriers, even though distance education agencies had challenged and often undermined them. Open education became a common mantra from the late 1960s for easing some barriers. Many barriers still remain, but in universities, polytechnics, and *wananga* they have become more negotiable; alternative tracks have multiplied and rigid academic orthodoxies are treated with suspicion.

3. Learner control of learning procedures. In recent years, many institutions have opened their policymaking bodies to more student participation, and student views have fed back into the organisation of teaching and learning. However the differences achieved are surprisingly unremarkable and significant questions remain to be asked. Has enough diversity in delivery mode and programme format been created to suit a wide enough range of learners' situations? Have there been enough opportunities to reach out to hitherto disadvantaged groups in ways that have enabled their effective participation? Can the conventional institution-oriented strategy (i.e., recognise a deficiency then provide) be supplemented by one where actual and prospective learners articulate what they need, and institutions follow? New Zealand faces challenges that are qualitatively different from their trans-Tasman neighbours'. Some of the cultural changes among traditional educators in the traditional schools in both countries are no doubt similar, but New Zealand education is confronted by its indigenous Maori culture, where there is still much to discover (Amaru, Rae, & Shadbolt, 1995). New Zealand has to devise learning styles and learning choices that enable Maori to conserve and contribute the values of their heritage culture, but also to integrate that culture with Pakeha-derived educational institutions that give New Zealanders, whatever their ethnicity, access to a worldwide knowledge culture. Whether or not the routes that Maori follow will also guide immigrant Pacific Island families remains speculative; so too is whether any further flexibility is required for the variety of Asian immigrants. So far, opportunities for the latter have focused largely on language competency. These issues, although partly shared by Australia, were left aside by King (1996a, 1996b). And where do the wishes not of collectives of enrolled students nor of ethnic communities but of individuals fit in? How much notice can be taken of the personal needs of any particular aspirant learner? Can such a person

influence how they are to learn, and will that learning be publicly recognised?

4. Learning technologies (appropriate for learner and instruction). Computer-based information and communication technologies (ICT) have made a quantum leap forward with regard to offering access to knowledge. Until the early 1980s, computing seemed an esoteric science. Then much wider interest was aroused. Diverse applications, including "for education," were envisaged by creators of software, but their models were often traditional instructional methodologies. Very few possessed until recently (within the period under review) what one might call educator imagination, sensibility about educational goals and learning processes. That number has grown rapidly as professional educators become adept with the possibilities that new communication technologies offer them (Kinshuk, Patel, Oppermann, & Russell, 2001), develop apt materials, and share them promptly (Zepke, 1997)—as recent DEANZ conferences clearly demonstrate and will be further advanced by the joint DEANZ-Commonwealth of Learning conference to be held in New Zealand in 2004. Equipment and know-how, formerly available only at teaching institutions, are now widely accessible and often are owned by individual learners able to initiate their own eLearning operations. They expect to find instruction online, websites dedicated to their interests, "chat" facilities for them and their fellow students, assignment model answers reached by search engines (monitored and traceable by astute computer-literate teachers), and, at more advanced stages, their research materials accessible via the Internet from major libraries to their home computer.

5. Learner support systems. Most New Zealand distance educators argue that support systems are as important as production and delivery systems, and for years have created various means of interaction with tutors, local institutes, and fellow students (Cull & Walker, 1995; White, 1997). When distance students become independent of the formal structures of traditional schooling—classrooms, and classes with teachers in immediate authority—there can be a variety of responses. Some feel free to seek their own order, some feel deprived of guidance, some are satisfied with occasional provision, most want to feel that they have access to human help if and when they need it, all as much emotional as practical responses (McLachlan-Smith, 1998). Flexible learning means support tasks are both more and less difficult. Diverse delivery systems and schedules increase logistic problems of when and how contact can be made; however, new communication technologies afford immediacy and accessibility and their own capabilities of interaction.

6. Access to course information, guidance, services, and resources. The extension of the clientele for tertiary education that has occurred as polytechnics in particular have burgeoned has meant that the numbers enrolling from sectors of society where tertiary education has been unfamiliar have substantially increased. However for this social change to be effective, newcomers must have adequate foreknowledge of what they are undertaking and receive continuing guidance for their enterprise to be

sustained. Information in earlier years may have suited those with a long-standing expectation of tertiary opportunities. It had needed supplementation when enrolments increased among "second-chance" students. Now a panoply of advertising, marketing, information booklets, websites, and special telephone numbers ensures outreach beyond tertiary education's traditional social groups. Of course, the same devices also serve competition among institutions, especially when they add new programmes that themselves challenge established sources of qualifications.

7. Flexible assessment processes, standards, and quality control. In some ways this feature of flexible learning extends the issues about learner control raised above. Who sets the learner's curriculum, what should be learned, in what sequence, how and by whom assessed, and by what standards formally acknowledged? There is consequent ambivalence. On the one hand, more response is made to learners' views about what satisfies and gratifies their own educational needs. On the other hand, to achieve confidence in new and rapidly expanding institutions offering innovative courses in unconventional ways (and expending public funds to do so), more stringent quality control measures are required (McIlroy, 1997). One of King's (1996a, 1996b) reservations relates to how individual learning choices may succumb to demands put on the teaching institutions by their sponsoring clients—industry, commerce, various professions, and government itself—for so-called objective standards to be applied in place of professional academic judgements and public repute that governed traditional modes of assessment.

INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO FLEXIBLE LEARNING

At the level of individual institutions in New Zealand, whether universities, polytechnics/institutes of technology, private post-secondary institutes, various nonformal organisations, professional associations, and others who claim to be stakeholders in the country's educational enterprise, most have responded in their own ways to the general notion of flexible learning and its various characteristics. In the meantime they have had to ensure compliance with the requirements and strategies of central government.

A factor which King (1996a) did not include, but which has influenced the positive response of the key distance learning institutions to flexible learning, is leadership. Without naming those who have taken the idea forward, it should be noted that new leaders have recently been appointed at the Correspondence School, the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, and Massey University, and that other shifts of leadership are occurring elsewhere.

During the 1990s polytechnics and private colleges continued to proliferate and universities expanded into outlying campuses. For a while, competition for funds, measured by course enrolments and research capability, dictated how institutions responded to government policy. Competition may have energised growth more widely across sectors of society that were previously under-represented, but it caused ill will, duplication, and wasteful marketing. Some universities, for example Waikato,

Otago (Higgins, 2000; Rabel & Higgins, 2001), and Massey (Prebble, 1998), have taken flexible learning to heart. In compliance mode, however, universities have trimmed uneconomic departments and reorganised management structures as demonstrable reform, consequently and perhaps less deliberately altering the balance among academic programmes. Does the widespread substitution of Asian for European languages signal sensitivity to new markets or covert decolonisation? Among polytechnics, some grew in size and status while a few failed to cope, either disappearing or being absorbed by their rivals. Many polytechnics and some private institutions were permitted to award degrees, some in already burgeoning disciplines like business, nursing studies, or design, or degrees in new fields such as alternative health.

Since the new century began, central government has called for reduced competition; educational institutions have answered accordingly with increased rationalisation, cooperation, integration, and mergers. If institutional progress toward those aspects of flexible learning that have been listed above as King's is assessed, the following generalisations might be made:

1. Education as a lifelong activity. Universities cater more and more for midlife, midcareer students; bachelor's and master's degrees are offered in many forms of distance, block-course, limited-attendance formats. Few if any educational programmes confine themselves to school-leavers except some highly technical applied sciences, such as medicine, dentistry, and veterinary science, but even then the increased load for these specialists is shared by support staff for whom courses have multiplied in regional polytechnics.

2. Flexibility in entry/exit and programme requirements, and in alternative modes of delivery. Barriers have been much reduced for student entry and programmes are much more various, but it is especially university continuing education departments and the distance education enterprises across the educational spectrum, especially the Open Polytechnic, that have actively engaged in alternative delivery.

3. Learner control of learning procedures. Many changes could be justified as flexible responses to what modern-minded students choose. Student participation in governance has increased markedly at institutions, but there have been few if any attempts (except perhaps in Universities of the Third Age) to emulate those European universities traditionally governed by students not teachers—although many of them are nowadays controlled by central government funding. All New Zealand institutions have become self-conscious about enrolments among Maori and many have developed particular programmes at their behest. Alongside them, Maori educators—the whanau not the individual student has the initiative—have established independent programmes at various local Te Wananga o Aotearoa with which collaboration is increasingly sought by other tertiary institutions.

4. Learning technologies (appropriate for learner and instruction). The major institutions have all developed a computer culture, for research support, for administration, and eventually for teaching, while their students have

become almost universally computer literate. No form of development has excited more interest and diversity among education institutions at all levels (Stevens, 1995). Their courses offer skills at a variety of levels for technical staff and users, software development and hardware engineering, applications in commercial and managerial situations, and wherever else new applications occur (Campbell, Yates & McGee, 2001). Educational administration depends widely on computers and generates information on websites with email and telephonic access. Not so universally has the computer become a resource and aid to teaching and learning, but each institution's annual report is almost obliged to report substantial progress toward effective use of eLearning, the more so with the publication of a major government report on that topic.

5. Learner support systems: access to course information, guidance, services, and resources. Previously established tertiary institutions budgeted as student information and support services their liaison officer with schools and a health service; otherwise students could seek access to senior staff for course advice. Distance learning institutions knew more was needed, but the most prominent model, the regional offices and study centres of the UK Open University, was hopelessly beyond New Zealand budgets. Nowadays newspapers happily report comparative expenditures by tertiary institutions on advertising, wondering how such millions can be justified. The Correspondence School had a scatter of regional support officers, and its uniqueness, integration with the general school system, and high national reputation have continued to ensure that information about access is readily available. Moreover individual care for its children's learning needs has been quintessential to its teaching methodology. For Massey University, a major resource has been the students themselves, organised as an Extramural Students Society (EXMSS) capable of representing their interests in policy-making bodies, recruiting area communicators to advise fellow students, providing linkage between distressed students and staff, assisting students when they visit campus, and publishing a newsletter slanted to students' interests. In the general competition for enrolments, research funding, and public goodwill, Massey and all other New Zealand universities have engaged in marketing strategies that break down barriers which may deter students. Apart from diversifying the modes—conventionally scheduled internal classes, extramural study, block course and weekends in series, franchised courses at regional polytechnics, and other organisation of delivery—expansion onto other campuses has brought access closer to home for many, especially metropolitan, students. Among polytechnics, the vigour of the Open Polytechnic in marketing its new (and long-established) products and in backing them with quality control (Gröte, 2000) has provided a pioneering stance. Previously its student outreach services depended on the industrial and other organisations whom its courses served. Diversifying its programme beyond the reach of those organisations has yielded fresh concepts of regional support (McCahon, 2000) and closer liaison with local polytechnics and some *wananga*. Above all there has been the recognition, permeating published materials and evident in annual reports (The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand,

1994–2002), of the uniqueness of particular learners, no longer simply classifiable by their courses but as individuals, toward whom flexibility in learning should be addressed.

6. Flexible assessment processes, standards, and quality control. Yet again, the principle of flexibility in assessment has been observed for many years: end-of-year examinations rarely now provide the sole criterion for educational success or failure; longitudinal assessment, sometimes entirely obviating examinations, is not as contentious as it was just three decades ago. However, sufficient public, professional, and academic conservatism persists to affect assessment at certain levels; the price of diversifying qualifications at certificate, diploma, and degree level remains in some instances that there be examinations, open to scrutiny by external assessors. But perhaps the price is simply the time it takes for old-fashioned concepts—including the hoariest of them, the belief that a substantial proportion of failures is a criterion of high standards!—to fade as those graduates assessed differently prove their worth. Meanwhile quality control as a distinctive operation has become more common, especially where an educational institution recognises that in many respects it is a large resource-consuming (and resource-creating) entity liable to strict public scrutiny; notably both Massey University (McIlroy, 1997) and the Open Polytechnic (Grote, 2000) have adopted such mechanisms.

WHERE TO NEXT? Undoubtedly there has been substantial and urgent response to the ideas expounded, some might say reiterated, by King (1996a, 1996b). The response still continues; the tasks remain for further analysis and action. Some impending issues have already been touched on, such as central government's encouragement for tertiary institutions to coordinate and rationalise activities that involve wasteful duplication. Some other issues arising from competition will be reexamined by the newly appointed Tertiary Education Commission. Significant challenges are likely to arise from still headlong developments in information and communication technologies, raising for the individual such questions about knowledge as: How much must I remember? Isn't it there in my pocket?

We have mainly considered flexibility, particularly in the context of educational policy and implementation. Should we be asking more about learning—when is it a process giving access to knowledge, or when is it a synonym for the knowledge achieved at the end of that process? When is it both process and product?

Missing from King's (1996a, 1996b) manifesto for flexible learning is an international dimension. He considers neither the export of learning (the product) nor its methodology (the process), although Australia and New Zealand are both involved in that business, whether at home with foreign students or abroad in aid schemes. Nor is immigration and multiculturalism part of his agenda. New Zealand education is as open to imported learners as it has ever been, and is now less restrictive about the cultural background of its immigrants. What role does flexible learning, especially in distance modes, have when many newcomers must improve their English and, less

consciously perhaps, become aware of the cultural and educational dynamic of *Maoritanga*? The language task is one to which technology makes an increasing contribution; the latter, cultural task remains a challenge to any and all flexible learning endeavours in New Zealand.

As we assess our progress with flexible learning and consider its ongoing challenges, those of us involved in education in New Zealand must eventually ask what changes we should expect to our society now that our capacity for learning is markedly increased, and its opportunities are better and more widely distributed among our society's members. What fresh attitudes, behaviours, and values may ensue? What does emerging into a knowledge-driven society now demand of the imagination of professional educators?

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