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***UNIT STANDARDS AND THE  
UNIVERSITY***

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# **Acknowledgments**

To Mum, Rachael, Peter and Roger. Thankyou.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the possible effects of the NZQA unit standard approach on the pursuit of higher learning. Through a critical examination of the debate concerning this issue, an argument is mounted that the key questions were left unanswered about the implications of unit standards. This is because the NZQA and the academic community failed to clearly define and defend a notion of higher learning, and in turn, why its pursuit should or should not be considered an integral practice and responsibility of universities in New Zealand.

The initial focus of this thesis is a critical examination of the debate emanating from NZQA's decision to include unit standards in universities. In working through these issues within this debate, this thesis engages with the broader issue of how we ought to conceptualise the notion of higher learning, the role, ideals and values of a university, and the pedagogical implications of such a position. This discussion critically engages with the work of Ronald Barnett, Paulo Freire and Martin Buber. It develops and defends a notion of higher learning and elucidates why this form of learning is, and ought to be, considered a role and responsibility of contemporary universities. The key aim of this notion of higher learning is the development of a critical stance or critical being which is oriented towards all realms of experience. Thus it is a pedagogy that seeks to challenge students to understand their interrelationships with one another, knowledge and the world, and is underpinned by a critical, dialogical learning environment. It is a learning process that continually challenges students and teachers to confront the becoming, unfinished nature of reality, and perceive and create in the milieu of fragility and potentiality.

Given this notion of higher learning, and having established its presence and role within universities in the New Zealand context, the thesis then examines what effects unit standards might have had upon its pursuit. It is argued that the inclusion of unit standards would have restricted key facets of this learning pursuit.

## A defended notion of higher learning

*'For three years I've been searching for the attribute of my divinity, and I've found it: the attribute of my divinity is – Self-Will! That's all I can do to prove in the main point my defiance and my new terrible freedom. For it is very terrible' – Kirilov. (Dostoevsky, 1953, p.615).*

*'Man can become whole not in virtue of a relation to himself but only in virtue of a relation to another self. This other may be just as limited and conditioned as he is; in being together the unlimited and the unconditioned is experienced...when the man who has become solitary can no longer say "Thou"...then there certainly remains for him the sublime illusion of detached thought that he is self-centred self; as man he is lost' (Buber, 1947, p.168).*

*'The key point is one of frameworks. Critical questioning – whether of ideas, oneself, or of the world – takes place within a horizon of assumptions (of value, of truth, of being, of right arrangements in the world)...Our frameworks, therefore have to be susceptible to challenge. Our frameworks of value, understanding, self-identity and action have to be continually in the dock. Not that they are necessarily guilty or invalid, but they may be. A higher education, therefore, will promote uncertainty: it will render questionable every aspect of a student's being' (Barnett, 1997a, p.174).*

*'A simple trip from Paris to London on an airplane gives us a vision of the world that our imagination could not have revealed otherwise. Even as we are delighted by our new situation in this enchanting milieu, we are confused with memories of the cares and worries that troubled us on the earth which we glimpse far below us through the holes in the plain of clouds we ride above. And, once we return to our modest existence as pedestrians, we will no longer feel the weight of the grey sky bearing down on us, for we will remember that behind this easily penetrable wall there exist the splendor of the sun as well as a perception of unlimited space in which for a moment we felt ourselves to be free' (Matisse, 1983, xvi).*

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