

In my early years as I was starting my working life (1960s), I was in the society of a religious group that had tapped into a 'university' somewhere enabling them to gain degrees and diplomas almost overnight. As I was slugging it out at what is now called the Auckland Institute of Technology, trying to get a good NZCE so I could then go across the road and finish an engineering degree, I was a bit miffed that some of my acquaintances in that group (some, I'm sure, with IQs not much greater than their shoe sizes) were suddenly waving their Masters and Doctorate degrees at me.

Obviously a lot of nonsense; but for the past few years, and with the power of the World Wide Web, these types of qualifications can be gained almost immediately in as much time as it takes to type in your credit card details.

Even so, diplomas and degrees (in part or whole) are available from a wide range of sources; many selling them on the premise that life experience directly equates with academic scholarship. Certainly, there are good grounds for waiving study in certain subjects from many types of curricula, for folk who have, and can without doubt, prove relevant life experience to justify the waiver. But just who is this assessment done by and how? If it's over the internet, I'm sure it's someone giggling when they see the application; and the assessment is solely about whether a credit card payment is honoured or not.

This ever readily available 'qualification mill', developed outside of our industry, has, I am certain, evolved this pejorative of 'zero to hero' and because our process of diver development is also seen by some to be relatively quick, is unjustly dumped in the same metaphorical rubbish bin as bullshit BAs.



But what's this got to do with diving? To some, a lot, apparently.

I've been teaching instructor development courses for more than two decades and have received many students who can



## Zero to Hero

by Keith Cardwell

show me that they have the established minimums of experience and subordinate certifications required to attend. It's usually about 10 days after my job's done that they've been examined and have earned their instructor certification. For many of these new instructors, it's not been much longer than six months from being a land-lubber to becoming what many in the recreational diving industry define as a dive professional.

But to many others (the divers who know more-or-less everything), this quick transition is often referred to as 'zero to hero' and usually said with the derision that I have for those sporting sham degrees; bullshit qualifications unearned other than by the presentation of a healthy credit card.

So, is 'zero to hero' a fair thing to say about the way in which dive instructors are presently certified, or is it just another expression created by the same childishness that generates other twitticisms like 'Put Another Dollar In,

'Not Another Useless Instructor' and 'Stupid Silly Instructors'? These epithets really are unfortunate. I've more to say on this but not enough space here to give it a decent airing - so I'll give my conclusion quickly and give a brief justification:

This thinking ('zero to hero' = qualification doubtfully earned), when applied to professional diver training, is uninformed, rarely considered in true context and downright appalling. It is not a fair thing to say about budding dive professionals and their training, when referred to in this manner, is rarely considered in its entire context.

Although at first sight, having a certification that endows a person with such power (to train or drown someone else) in such a short time frame may appear a bit quick, there are two unspoken, unregulated, natural braking systems that are either already present or are evolving within the industry; who/what the person is, and just as importantly, the dive operators' knowledge of the limitations of certification without wider experience.

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### The person who wishes to become a dive professional

Many will agree that after a year or two of consistent diving, dive instructor 'wannabes' may make for a better instructor than many of those presenting themselves at an instructor development course after only just a few short months. Maybe. But if they are required to wait longer than is presently the case, just who are they going to dive with? Will they learn good or bad habits from 'whoever'? Will they have good mentors or morons to learn from? Leaving these questions aside, those who see diving instruction or divemastering as a potential career option probably don't want to be sitting in front of a computer screen or cleaning out a stable until a 'decent' time is up according to some of the 'experts' they've been listening to. That'd be like waiting for a couple of years after divorce to date again. Perhaps okay for some, but not for many.

More and more folk are choosing this career after gaining substantial life experience and have a lot to offer any dive operator and the industry at large, apart from good diving and training skills. Many are often too mature and knowledgeable to be held back and told to wait for mythical benchmarks to be reached.

And what, besides the mythical ones, are these benchmarks? Some may appear arbitrary but they have been established in the main by the collective wisdom of

thousands of diving professionals.

One of the existing ones in the diver training process is to have 100 dives before going to an Instructor examination; but for some 'experts', 100 dives isn't enough experience, to others, it should be several hundred if not a 1000. I've had folk become instructors with this established minimum that have been a damn sight better than many others with (apparently) considerably more experience. It's certainly not the rule, but it does indicate that there is no magic formula.

On the dark side however, some dive instructor 'wannabes' whether appearing well experienced or not by virtue of great diving skills and academic strengths, may know it all too well and be the truest of pains in the derriere; winning no popularity contests. Then something else often happens - 'the market decides' - or more often nowadays, the dive operator sensibly steps in and suggests they alter their career direction.

### Dive operators

I've met some, who, when I think about them, get a mental image of someone hunched and dragging their knuckles across the ground. I've seen others who I'd call 'Queen Street bankers' - the ones who've cashed in their chips, got their outlandish severance package and are ready to show the dive industry how to really do business - only to realise that what's been said about a lifestyle thing is closer to the reality than what they'd imagined or really cared for. Then when profits don't go to plan, quit quick and leave a mess for someone else to pick up. I've seen others that are just plain con men (I got dealt to by one of those) and some (most, thank goodness) that really are decent folk and have a good handle on what they're doing.

Dive operators also have a range of views about dive instructors as those just expressed above; usually with slightly different descriptions and ranging from the truly positive and supportive to other expressions such as: lazy, pissheads, losers and in need of sex therapy. I've also noticed a consistent resemblance between a dive operators' attitude and the performance of instructional staff. There is a formula there. A dive operator will get what he expects of his staff. Period. Almost in the category of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Fortunately, I have seen many improvements evolving in this regard and many dive operators are using some form of mentoring and induction scheme to bring newly certified instructors 'up to speed' with not only their particular dive operation but, alongside efforts made to improve general diving/divemaster abilities, as a way to strengthen an individual's interpersonal communication skills and awareness of their overall duty of care. Some operators are in fact nurturing potential dive professionals from a very early stage in their diver education and, where they can, wisely extending their experience base. This is the sort of operation to look out for if deciding on choosing a career in this industry.

The processes of diver development we have are certainly not perfect, but in short term, and not necessarily at the end of any course or examination, it is what significantly transforms certification into qualification - and deserves respect.

Yes, maybe we can't shake off this epithet of zero to hero, it's not one I like to see used, but even so, the heroes I continuously have the privilege to meet are the ones who are following their dream but not staying asleep.

