

# **Teachers talk about NCEA**

**Research Report on  
Focus Groups  
with Secondary Teachers**

**Summary Version**



**Judie Alison**

**NZ Post Primary Teachers Association**

**PPTA**  
NEW ZEALAND POST PRIMARY  
TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION  
TE WEHENGARUA

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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### **Note:**

**This is a summary version of a much larger report of the same name. This version does not contain the voices of the teachers who participated in the focus groups, nor does it contain all the detail of their discussions. Two copies of the full version have been supplied to every secondary and area school. For additional copies of the full version, contact NZPPTA, PO Box 2119, Wellington, or download it from the PPTA website, [www.ppta.org.nz](http://www.ppta.org.nz).**

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Wellington  
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Author: Judie Alison  
Advisory Officer, NZPPTA

# Summary of Recommendations

## REVIEWS

1. That the following aspects of the NCEA be reviewed by the Ministry of Education and NZQA, in consultation with the profession:
  - **URGENT:** An **external** review of NZQA's processes in relation to external assessment.  
(The goal of this review would be to ensure that in future all NCEA exams are high quality and deliver acceptable comparability of results from year to year, standard to standard and subject to subject, this review to be completed by the end of Term 2, 2005, so that it can provide benefits to students entered for NCEA this year.)
  - **URGENT:** The change management processes of NZQA and the Ministry of Education.  
(This review would ensure that in future, any changes in standards or other assessment requirements or processes are signalled in a reasonable timeframe which allows teachers to adapt their practice without undue pressure. It would also consider communication systems in both agencies to ensure that teachers, students, parents and the wider community were all kept well-informed and in a timely manner.)
  - The relative credit values of all standards used in secondary schools to ensure equity between standards.  
(This review must include both the relative credit values of unit standards against achievement standards, and between achievement standards within and across subjects.)
  - The 80 credit requirement for attainment of the Certificate at each level.  
(This is required in view of the indications in the research that the 80-credit requirement tends to de-motivate some students.)
  - The possible benefits of introducing at least a Merit level into unit standards in conventional school subjects.
  - Whether the current range of Excellence, Merit and Achieved levels of achievement in achievement standards is sufficient.  
(This review must give particular attention to the wide range of achievement currently covered by Achieved at Level 1.)

## RESEARCH

2. That the Ministry of Education **urgently** commission research into the impact of the NCEA on student motivation.  
(This research must include consideration of the effects, both positive and negative, of the design of the system on student motivation.)

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

3. That the Ministry of Education re-establish its capacity to adequately resource professional development (including sample resource development) for the NCEA.  
(This would require the capacity to co-ordinate professional development delivery, and to ensure the ongoing provision of new sample assessment resources, including for unit standards commonly used in schools. As was done in the early years of the development, teachers would need to be released to facilitate professional development and to work on development or refinement of resources.)
4. That at least two days per year of Ministry-funded professional development for every teacher, focused on the NCEA and largely subject-based, be provided each year for at least the next three years, starting in 2005. This professional development must enable teachers to work with colleagues within their own schools and with colleagues

in other schools, and must share models of successful school and subject practices in the following areas:

- The effective school-level management of internal assessment.  
(This must include the sharing of ideas on the development of robust systems for flexible and holistic assessment, and manageable approaches to providing further opportunities for assessment.)
- Ensuring a proper balance between curriculum and assessment.  
(This must include issues raised in this report such as curriculum fidelity, ensuring appropriate learning time, focusing on depth of learning rather than credit accumulation, and course coherence.)
- Effective school-level practice in relation to student pathways guidance.  
(This must include issues such as setting of course pre-requisites, teacher up-skilling in careers options, and systems for guidance of students.)

## **WORKING PARTIES**

5. That the following issues be referred to Working Parties established under the Secondary Teachers' Collective Agreement 2004-2007, as follows:
  - That the Teacher Workload working party provide solutions to address the time requirements of school-based assessment under the NCEA.  
(There should be special consideration given to the issues for teachers in small isolated schools and teachers in single-teacher departments in larger schools, and the issues for middle managers in all schools. The workload impacts of the increasingly complex student pathways resulting from the NCEA must also be considered.)
  - That the Career Pathways working party, consultation with NZQA, give urgent consideration to the establishment of an enhanced external moderation service staffed by secondary teachers.  
(This service needs to be available to visit schools and to provide information and advice to teachers as needed, arising out of the moderation processes. It will necessitate additional staffing because it is clearly not feasible to expect busy teachers to provide an adequate service on top of their full-time positions.)

## **RESOURCING**

6. That secondary and area schools Operations Grant funding be increased urgently to recognise the continuing financial impact on schools of qualifications assessment.  
(Small and rural schools must receive extra funding in recognition of the lack of economies of scale in such schools, as highlighted in this report.)

## **GENERAL**

7. That no level of the NCEA be made entirely internally assessed unless there is clear evidence that such a change is supported by the secondary teaching profession.  
(Such support would not be forthcoming until at least the following conditions were met: a robust system of external moderation in which teachers had faith; teachers were confident that such a move would be in the interests of their students; and that the internal assessment of the NCEA had become manageable for teachers as professionals.)
8. That two positions on the NZQA Board be reserved for nominees with secondary teaching expertise.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In late 1997, the New Zealand government announced a policy called 'Achievement 2001'. It involved a complete overhaul of the secondary school qualifications system, to shift it from a mishmash of norm-referenced qualifications to a completely standards-based system under which students would be assessed at three, or possibly four, levels of the same qualification, to be called the National Certificate of Educational Achievement and registered on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

Over the next four years, the new qualification began to take shape, thanks to the extraordinary efforts of a wide range of teachers developing standards and preparing sample assessment activities, working as facilitators of professional development, and at the school level beginning to modify their to prepare for the change. In 2000, the Government decided to delay the start date for the new qualification until 2002, because the system was not ready at school or central agency level.

In 2002, the first group of students and teachers began to experience the new qualification, at Level 1 (Year 11). Over 2003 and 2004, Levels 2 and 3 were successively introduced, along with the separate Scholarship examination which was registered on the Framework at Level 4, but whose content derived from the Level 3 standards. By the beginning of 2005, the previous norm-referenced system of School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate, and Bursary had disappeared from the senior secondary school.

Not surprisingly, given the massive size of this undertaking, the NCEA has rarely been free of controversy, nor has the path of implementation been smooth. Nevertheless, after three years the qualification has become firmly entrenched in New Zealand schools, and the first phase of implementation is complete. At the same time, teachers say that there is still a significant, and in some cases urgent, need to refine the qualification, and that the implementation period for it should more properly be seen to be at least six years from 2002, taking it to the end of 2007 at least.

At this point, halfway through that six-year period, PPTA's Executive resolved to collect detailed evidence about the views of secondary teachers about the NCEA today and how they would like to see it develop. PPTA felt that too little research of any kind had been conducted during the initial implementation period, and secondary teachers' stories were not being told. This led to a series of focus groups with teachers in a representative range of schools across the country, resulting in this report and its full-length version.

The Minister of Education, Hon Trevor Mallard, announced at PPTA Annual Conference in September 2004 plans for a low-key review of the NCEA during 2005, to inform the strategic planning of future work to refine the qualification system. The government has acknowledged that this PPTA research will be a vital source of information to inform that review.

Focus group participants were told that the purpose of the focus groups was to discuss future directions for the NCEA and for the senior secondary school in general, including implications of changes in the senior school on the junior secondary school. However, it was probably inevitable that the discussion would invariably home in on the qualifications area, since this is the biggest challenge facing teachers in the senior secondary school today. However, discussion ranged wider into issues of curriculum and pedagogy and of the fundamental purposes of secondary schooling. Most teachers also saw the NCEA as a qualification on a much larger Qualifications Framework, and discussed the many other standards-based qualifications being offered by schools as well.

This research focuses on the voices of secondary and area school teachers, hence its title 'Teachers Talk About NCEA'. It portrays a profession engaged in a hugely important project which is challenging the intellectual, emotional and physical resources of teachers to the maximum. Teachers talked in the focus groups about fundamental issues about teaching and learning, and the assessment of learning. They were wrestling with huge dilemmas brought upon them by the design of the system, but they were also excited about the opportunities for creative approaches to teaching and to curriculum organisation that the system presents. Many of them expressed a belief that they had been let down by the central agencies, who had failed to resource the new system adequately in a wide variety of ways. It is clear that without the professional commitment of secondary and area school teachers to put their students first and to deliver for them whatever the shortcomings of the support provided, the implementation could never have been successful.

This report highlights the fact that there is considerable work still to be done for the NCEA to fulfil its potential. While the vast majority of teachers do not wish to return to the previous system of qualifications, they are almost unanimous that there is fine tuning, or as one teacher described it 'rough tuning', to be done over the next few years. Much of this fine tuning will be the job of agencies such as the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The rest will need to be done by schools as they find their own solutions to the challenges and opportunities the system presents, but the Association will continue to call for better support and resourcing to schools to enable them all to complete their part of this exercise successfully.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The data for this research was collected from 16 focus groups of secondary or area school teachers, held over 8 days during November and December 2004. The groups were timed to coincide with the senior external exam period, when it was hoped that teachers could be released more easily from their teaching duties than at any other time of the year.

A representative sample of schools was drawn up as follows:

- Two area schools, one High Decile and one Mid Decile, of similar size (total roll less than 500 including primary students)
  - One small rural co-ed school, Mid Decile, about 1 hour's drive from the nearest major centre, roll less than 500
  - One 'rural fringe' co-ed school, Mid Decile, about 20 minutes' drive from the nearest major centre, roll in 501-750 range
  - One provincial co-ed school, Mid Decile, roll in 1001-1200 range
  - Two large High Decile urban single-sex schools, one a boys' school and one a girls' school, both with rolls of 1200+
  - One Low Decile urban co-ed school, roll in 501-750 range
  - One Mid Decile urban co-ed school, roll in 501-750 range
- (School descriptors give decile and roll range to protect the confidentiality of participants)

A deliberate attempt was also made to include in the sample some schools which were known to be enthusiastic supporters of the NCEA, and some schools which were believed to have strong reservations, in order to ensure a spread of views.

Except in the area schools where only one group was held, schools set up two groups, one of heads of departments, teachers in charge of subjects and senior managers responsible for qualifications or curriculum, and the other group consisting of classroom teachers with no curriculum leadership responsibilities.

The normal ethical requirements regarding voluntary participation, confidentiality and a report of the results were met.

The discussion schedule used took participants through what was working well and what was not working so well in the senior secondary school, what needed to be done, and finally, whether on balance the new qualifications system was better than the old system.

### **3. THE FUTURE OF NCEA**

At the end of every group discussion, a question was asked to try to establish the participants' overall views of the NCEA, by asking them 'On balance, is the new system of qualifications working better than the old system of School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and Bursary or not? And if you think it's not working better, what should be done about that?'

In only one group – seven HODs at a small rural school - was there complete consensus that the problems with the new system were so major that it would be better to return to the old system, but almost all of this group still qualified their comments by saying that the old system would have to be modified. One possible factor in this is that their school was struggling financially to the extent that the HODs had no ancillary staffing available to them for curriculum support. In contrast, classroom teachers in the same school were more divided in their views, with two wanting to return to the old system and three to stay with the new.

In the rest of the groups, although most teachers supported the retention of the NCEA, enthusiasm for it varied widely. The largest category of teachers (35% of participants) said that the new system was definitely better, but there were improvements needed. A slightly smaller grouping (28% of participants) gave the NCEA an unqualified tick, listing fairness, motivation of students, parity of esteem of different subjects, and flexibility in developing courses to meet student needs as positive attributes. Hence 63% of all those participating in the groups expressed a view that the NCEA was either definitely better than the previous system but there were improvements needed, or that it was simply definitely better with no qualifications. Only 10% wanted to go back to the previous system, and a small number (6%) appeared resigned but unwilling to commit themselves to the NCEA being definitely better. The 'on balance' judgements of 21% of the participants were either not provided or else were not able to be categorised.

It is clear that there is no general will among secondary teachers to return to the previous system of qualifications.



## 4. CURRICULUM V. ASSESSMENT

In all the groups, teachers expressed concerns about the balance between curriculum delivery and assessment under the NCEA. These included: worries about whether the integrity of the national curricula was being broken down under the new system; about whether curriculum was driving assessment as it should, or whether assessment was driving the curriculum, and, related to that, whether student behaviour demonstrated a greater concern with credit accumulation than with learning; and about the sheer quantity of assessment being done, including the impact of that on the amount of teaching time available. Not all the comments were negative; some teachers are very positive about the breaking down of subject barriers and the ability to create new courses by combining content and assessment from different subject disciplines. Some believe that the motivation of credits is important for students who previously had nothing to show for their learning. Some teachers are finding creative ways to make assessment a part of the learning process, so that time spent assessing is not seen as time lost to learning.

Some teachers are worrying about whether they are covering the curriculum, or even whether they are obliged to do so, and what the implications might be of a decision to not cover it. Others do not see curriculum coverage as a concern, or have found ways around it, and the ability to assess more validly under the new system is seen by some teachers as providing greater curriculum fidelity than in the past.

PPTA has been hearing for some time concerns from teachers that 'assessment is driving the curriculum'. It is a common feature of the introduction of new assessment regimes that for a time at least, assessment will seem to take up the driving seat, and it certainly will occupy inordinate amounts of teacher time as they adapt to the new system. There is also a tendency for teachers to assess more at the beginning of a new system than they do later. Teachers' experience with Sixth Form Certificate is a good example of this. Nevertheless, at this point anyway, it is clear that teachers believe that their teaching is 'assessment-driven', and ways need to be found to change this and to put learning back into the driver's seat.

Some teachers or whole schools have found solutions to all of this that they are happy about, such as caps on the number of credits per course, using extra-curricular opportunities such as speech contests for assessment, working across departments on generic tasks like research, and just leaving out standards where there is not time to cover them adequately. Others cannot see how they can make reductions in their courses.

Loss of learning time is also a concern for teachers. In the main, teachers are still assessing in finite ways that are generally perceived as separate from learning, although the ability for students to learn from one assessment event and apply that learning later in a further assessment opportunity is appreciated. As a result, time which was previously perceived as being used for 'learning' is now being used for 'assessment', either first or further opportunities. The biggest group of concerns about loss of teaching time came from teachers who had to fit in practical assessments, some of which involved group work as well, especially but not exclusively in Science subjects. Time to give feedback to students after assessment was also mentioned as a huge demand on class time.

In all but one of the groups, teachers raised the vexed issue of whether students are motivated by the currency of credits or by the currency of Merit and Excellence, or by learning *per se*. Teachers see this as a dilemma, because it is clear that for students who were not successful under the previous system, being able to notch up credits throughout the year and feel a sense of achievement is a very important motivator. On

the other hand, teachers perceive that some students, once they have reached the number of credits necessary for the relevant Certificate, stop work. Furthermore, teachers perceive that students who could have been achieving at the higher levels are content with an Achieved because that is the currency which qualifies them for the Certificate.

Many teachers said that students invariably want to know what a piece of work is 'worth' in terms of credit value. In some cases, this has led to teachers deciding to change the assessment programme because of a perception by students that a particular standard is 'not worth it'. Concern was expressed that students were missing out on important curriculum goals by picking and choosing which credits they would aim to achieve. There are also issues with students choosing subjects which are seen as delivering 'easy' credits rather than the ones which would challenge them more, for example choosing Tourism over Geography.

Whether students have reached their 'goal' of credits required for the Certificate is believed to affect whether they do the work, including preparing themselves and fronting up to the external assessments, and this is concerning parents who expect their young people to still be working towards external exams at the end of the year. The problem of credit accumulation as the focus of students also rears its head around formative work for external assessments, however teachers agreed that not all students behaved in this way, with some not losing interest when they reached 80 credits and aiming for the higher levels of Merit and Excellence in all standards. Some teachers value the flexibility of the new system because it means that students can take control of their own assessment and make choices about their focus. On the other hand, not all the choices students make are wise.

One Deputy Principal, in the Low Decile school, perceived that the school had in some ways created a problem, because with the goal of trying to give 'parity of esteem' to unit standards alongside achievement standards, they had 'talked up' the value of credits for standards, rather than the value of Merits and Excellences (which are not available from unit standards).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Some of the issues canvassed above arise from the design of the qualifications system, and need to be reviewed by NZQA and the Ministry of Education, in consultation with the profession, to consider whether modifications are needed to deal with any unintended negative consequences of aspects of that design. The most obvious example of this is the 80 credit requirement for the Certificate, and the possibility that it has some negative impacts on motivation for some students.

Opportunities need to be provided so that teachers, especially but not exclusively those in leadership positions, can discuss issues around how to ensure a proper balance between curriculum and assessment. Models of effective practice which schools and departments have found to address the issues raised here need to be disseminated among teachers.

***(See Recommendations 1, 2, 3 and 4)***

## **5. MODULARISATION OF ASSESSMENT**

A feature which distinguishes standards-based assessment from the previous norm-referenced system is that the assessment is modularised, and students are given credits for parts of a course, rather than a global mark. Teachers can see both good and bad in the modularisation of assessment: good in that it provides very specific learning objectives for students and lends itself to huge flexibility in development of courses, but bad because in some subjects, like languages, it is not valid to assess bit by bit from early in the year because the skills are so closely integrated.

Some teachers talked about the advantages for students, and for themselves, in breaking up a year-long course into manageable chunks for which students could gain credit as they went along. Others felt that students were not retaining knowledge or transferring it from one part of the course to another.

Some teachers were thinking creatively about future possible ways of using the flexibility available, such as offering part-year courses to cover the aspects of a subject that particular groups of students really need, or designing courses which covered a range of Sciences.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

There are problems raised here which can be solved at the school level, but there are other problems which may be unintended consequences of the design of the system, for example the perception that in some subjects students do not, despite their teachers' best efforts, transfer knowledge and skills from one unit of work to another. This may explain why in some subjects at Scholarship level in 2004, students performed less well than might have been expected on assessments which required them to integrate knowledge across whole subjects.

Opportunities need to be provided for teachers to work together, both within and across schools, to develop solutions to problems that have arisen from the modularisation of assessment, and for examples of effective practice to be disseminated.

*(See Recommendation 4)*

## **6. STUDENT MOTIVATION**

Teachers generally believe that students are more motivated to succeed within the NCEA framework than in the previous qualifications system, however, there are persistent concerns that the design of the NCEA has prompted some students to take a minimalist approach to achievement, and to be satisfied with reaching the Achieved level in standards and the minimum number of credits for the Certificate.

Many are convinced that the NCEA is a big improvement for less able students and has motivated them in a range of ways, such as the ability to bank credits as they go through the year and carry them into the following year, to focus intensively on those aspects of a subject where they can succeed, to get recognition for what they can do even when there are large areas that they find hard, to have another try at something they have failed, and to access the range of new courses and new options within subjects that are available and which suit them better than what was on offer before the NCEA.

Discussion also often turned to whether the NCEA was challenging and extending the able students, and despite early predictions that it would not, teachers generally seem to believe that it is, with able students aiming for the higher grades and for Scholarship.

However there is much less agreement about whether students in the middle range of ability are being motivated. These are the students who are perceived to be most likely to take a minimalist approach, and settle for Achieved and for the minimum number of credits required for the relevant Certificate.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

One of the main reasons put forward for a change from the previous qualifications system was that it had failed to motivate many students. It is clear that many teachers believe that the new system is much more motivating for many students. However, because there are doubts held about whether the revised system is motivating for particular groups of students, there needs to be urgent research to establish the extent of the problem, and suggest whether particular aspects of the NCEA - the 80 credit requirement for the Certificate, or the wide range of achievement which is covered by the Achieved level, for example - are de-motivating for some students.

*(See Recommendations 1 and 2)*

## **7. MANAGING INTERNAL ASSESSMENT**

Teachers and schools must make professional judgements which balance a number of the goals and principles which inform the new qualifications system, for example student motivation, fairness, inclusiveness, clarity, equity, and manageability.

It has been suggested to schools (e.g. *NCEA Update 11*, May 2002) that in certain circumstances it may be appropriate to seek further evidence from a student orally or in some other way, rather than to have them repeat a whole assessment task or provide further written information. This has been presented as one of a number of ways of reducing the internal assessment workload of teachers and students. However teachers who raised this issue in the focus groups tended to be quite resistant to this kind of evidence collection, especially to using oral clarification.

Making the judgements at the grade boundaries is found to be a big challenge at times, given the fairly generalised descriptors provided, and the subtleties of language involved, e.g. 'describe, explain, discuss'. It is thought to be particularly difficult for new teachers.

The focused nature of standards-based assessment is seen by teachers to improve clarity for students. They are given information that tells them exactly what understandings and/or skills are going to be assessed, and there is not the same element of 'Guess what the teacher/examiner will want me to know' that there was in the previous system. On the other hand, some teachers find they struggle to be clear with students about what is required because of the wording of standards and/or the lack of exemplars in their subjects.

Providing further opportunities for assessment continues to be quite a vexed issue for teachers. It is seen by many teachers to make good sense to them and to students, because it ensures that they take note of teacher feedback and provides an incentive for them to improve their learning. But the time involved in providing further opportunities for

assessment is seen by many teachers as huge, in some cases making it impossible to do, such as Science investigations, Art folios or Technology projects. In many schools, further teaching and further opportunities for assessment are being provided in teacher and student 'spare' time, such as lunchtimes or after school or even at the weekend, and this is proving to be a major burden on teachers.

Some teachers said they were finding ways to collect additional evidence in less structured ways which did not have negative impacts on student or teacher workloads, but there was a wide range of beliefs about what is acceptable and what is not, both in terms of school policies and in terms of perceived national policies. Other teachers expressed considerable discomfort around issues of the time and workload involved, a perceived lack of national uniformity, and the lack of parity between internal and external assessment because one offers further opportunities and the other does not.

Teachers are concerned to ensure the authenticity of student assessment work, and are exploring ways to resolve the tension between the need to ensure that the work students submit for internal assessment is their own, and the need to be able to assess flexibly and not tie up inordinate amounts of class time in whole class assessment events that are not also learning opportunities. They worry that differences between schools in the conditions that are applied for assessment of students, the amount of help teachers give students, the processes they have for ensuring authenticity and the number and manner of further opportunities offered mean that there is a lack of parity of standards being applied, and that this is not picked up by the moderation system. This affects their feelings about the judgements they themselves make about these matters.

Teachers recognise that their professionalism is key, but they are not convinced that everybody will behave professionally. The media publicity about Cambridge High School had not increased teachers' confidence in the system.

Teachers want clearer guidelines about the conditions for assessing each standard, to ensure that internal standards have credibility. They commented on the difficulty in getting authoritative subject-specific advice on judgements about what was acceptable practice and what was not.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter illustrates the extent to which the new qualifications system relies on teachers making sound professional judgements in a range of areas. It also conveys an impression that teachers are struggling with some of these issues, and that many of them would value further support and guidance. It highlights a wide range of areas where ongoing professional development, targeted at the particular needs of teachers and schools, is essential.

For that reason, the report recommends two days of Ministry of Education-funded professional development every year for at least the next three years, beginning later in 2005, to enable teachers to share ideas with colleagues on good ways to manage internal assessment. There is also a need to address the time requirements of school-based assessment, and it is recommended that this be referred to the Teacher Workload working party. In addition, until internal assessment becomes manageable for teachers, there should be no moves to make a level of NCEA entirely internally assessed.

***(See Recommendations 4, 5 and 7)***

## 8. ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS OR UNIT STANDARDS?

Both achievement and unit standards deliver credits towards the NCEA, but there are significant differences between them: unit standards are entirely internally assessed, whereas achievement standards are either internally or externally assessed; unit standards are nearly all competency-based with just one level of achievement, achievement standards have three levels of achievement; many unit standards have been in existence for some years and have been through many revisions, whereas achievement standards are relatively new.

There is a perception that unit standards are easier to achieve than achievement standards, but teachers are divided about this. Some teachers argue that unit standards are harder to achieve because competency requires consistent success across a range of very specific elements and performance criteria, whereas achievement standards are more holistic and general. For some this specificity of unit standards is a plus, but for others it is not and they view the assessment as petty and not allowing teachers to exercise professional judgement. Other teachers believe that achievement standards are more demanding because they require more depth of thought and there are fewer credits for the amount of work involved.

Teachers commented on the huge range of difficulty levels in unit standards, especially at Level 1, where the policy has been that Level 1 is 'flexible downwards', in other words standards which reflect achievement well below Year 11 performance are able to be registered at Level 1. This causes some difficulties for schools, especially if they have not set pre-requisites of particular standards for entry to Level 2 courses, when students have achieved certain unit standards credits and think that means they can cope with a Level 2 course.

Teachers said that there needed to be work done to reconcile the relative credit values between unit and achievement standards. They described cases where roughly similar standards, with roughly similar amounts of work required, generated quite different numbers of credits. In most cases, the unit standards delivered more credits for the amount of time and/or level of work required. There was a call for a thorough review of this.

A number of participants taught courses which were exclusively unit standard assessed, however others were using a mixture. Sometimes teachers offered unit standards to boost the amount of internal assessment available in the course; sometimes it was to assess skills or understandings which were not covered in the achievement standards available, e.g. wide reading in English; sometimes unit standards were being used as an insurance policy against students failing achievement standards.

In no school in the sample did unit and achievement standards appear to have attained equal status among teachers and students. Some factors influencing teachers' perceptions appeared to be their subject areas, their experience with using unit standards, and the decile level of the school they taught in. In two schools there were at least some teachers who were clearly trying to adopt a language which focused on standards and credits, rather than differentiating between the two types of standards. A downside of this, extensively discussed at the Low Decile school, was that this put most of the focus on the number of credits students could achieve, rather than on striving for Merit or Excellence where it was available in achievement standards. The Deputy Principal of the Low Decile school described its policy intention as being 'to 'fudge' the differentiation between unit standards and achievement standards with the students, talking up credit rating', and removing any stigma of unit standards. However a

significant number of teachers there disagreed that this policy was working, to the extent that one teacher said students would describe a unit standards-based course as: 'Oh that's the cabbage course'.

In all the other schools where the issue was discussed, there was clear evidence of a status distinction being made. The 'bad press' for unit standards was blamed by some for the low esteem in which they were held, especially after the Cambridge High School publicity.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is not simple to deliver parity of esteem to the range of options available within a school, especially when there are two different assessment systems operating, one of which in a number of ways appears to be more highly valued, and where the lower status system is associated mainly with subjects that have been labelled 'vocational' or with easier options within subjects. The fact that both kinds of standard deliver credits towards the same qualification is not sufficient to change the perceptions. It may be, as Howard and Greg Lee have argued, that the goal of parity of esteem is not achievable because the relative status of subjects is something that has a long tradition that is not easily overthrown. The story of the low-decile school where the senior manager believes that all kinds of standards have similar status, but where staff clearly contradicted that view, is salutary. If it cannot be achieved in a school like that, it is reasonable to ask where it can be achieved. Furthermore, if the route to parity of esteem is to emphasise credit values rather than working for deeper learning and higher levels of achievement, many schools will rightly choose not to take it.

There are some issues raised in this chapter, however, which can be addressed by NZQA and the Ministry of Education, in consultation with the profession. There is a need to look again at whether introducing at least a Merit level into unit standards would be warranted. There is also a need to have a thorough look at the relative credit values of all standards, and to ensure that the credit values are equitable. Finally, unit standard assessment must be resourced equitably with achievement standard assessment, as discussed more extensively in Chapter 15, Resourcing Issues.

*(See Recommendations 1 and 3)*

## **9. INTERNAL MODERATION OF INTERNAL ASSESSMENT**

The need for internal moderation of assessment is mostly seen as a positive feature of the new qualifications system. Teachers value the professional conversations they engage in during internal moderation exercises, the ability to make shared judgements about real examples of student work, and to share ideas about teaching and learning strategies that will help students to achieve better. However, there is not enough time available in schools for this work to be as professionally productive as it could be.

Teachers in small isolated schools or single-teacher departments in larger schools, who lack anyone in their own school to moderate their work, face the biggest challenges with internal moderation. They are having to approach teachers in other schools to work with them on this task and although many spoke positively about this experience, it is a major time factor for them. But it is also clear that it places a huge burden on heads of department in big departments.

Schools appear to have good systems of internal moderation operating, and teachers take the task of supporting their colleagues to make assessment judgements very seriously. They commented that there was a lot of work needed with new teachers or teachers who were not full-time in one department, and that because in some cases the wording of the standards was quite general, decisions on the grade margins could be difficult to make.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The Ministry of Education needs to consider how these difficulties could be alleviated, because of the huge benefits in enhanced teacher knowledge and capability that would result, hence the recommendation that this be considered by the Teacher Workload working party established under the Secondary Teachers' Collective Agreement. The proposed ongoing professional development would also enable teachers to share ideas about the internal moderation processes which work for them in their particular contexts.

*(See Recommendations 4, 5 and 7)*

## **10. EXTERNAL MODERATION OF INTERNAL ASSESSMENT**

The external moderation system, which is the quality assurance process for the internally assessed components of the qualification, lacks credibility with the vast majority of teachers. The researcher heard many examples of inconsistencies in moderator judgements, of pettiness by moderators, and of inadequate and mistrusted processes for appeal of moderator judgements. The moderation system is an essential mechanism to reassure the teaching profession, students, families, tertiary institutions, employers and the wider public that the NCEA can deliver national consistency of judgements against the achievement and unit standards. Lack of confidence in the moderation system leads to lack of confidence in the whole qualification. As one teacher put it: "I want it to be comparable, and I want it to be able to be better compared: across units, across schools and across subjects. I want to feel that all of that is tighter and that we are operating at one level, consistently across."

The process of sending work away for moderation is stressful for teachers, yet despite this, teachers overwhelmingly want a tougher moderation system. One issue is the small number of standards moderated each year. It is felt that moderation of more tasks would provide better assurance that consistent standards are being applied nationally.

NZQA's process, whereby teachers select eight pieces of work for moderation and are asked to try to demonstrate in their sample a range of achievement and to select pieces which are on the grade margins, was generally supported by participants, although there was a degree of distrust expressed about whether all teachers followed the process, and a feeling that it could be made more robust.

Quality of moderators' work appears to be patchy. Teachers expressed numerous concerns regarding a lack of consistency in moderator judgements, and some examples were given where it appeared that the moderator was lacking in subject knowledge. This was a matter of serious concern to teachers, because it reflects on the credibility of the whole system. Excessive pettiness was also criticised by teachers.



The researcher asked teachers whether they would consider appealing moderator judgements they were dissatisfied with, but it appears that there is little awareness of any appeal process, and little faith that it would be worth making use of. Furthermore, the lack of faith about appealing can mean teachers will 'play safe' next time by sending only pieces of work about which they feel confident in their judgements.

PPTA has always argued that the moderation process should include an advisory function, and that this would necessitate teachers being able to communicate with the moderator. Teachers know that this would be a more expensive system, probably requiring full-time moderators, but it clearly needs to be re-visited if the system is to be perceived by teachers to be supportive. Teachers want to receive helpful advice about how they can improve assessments deemed to be unsatisfactory, and the invisibility of the moderators and the inability to go back to them for assistance bothers a lot of teachers.

Teachers in the groups who were or had been moderators themselves also expressed some negative views about the system, including the fact that they are not allowed to give advice to teachers, that they were trying to do the job on top of their full-time teaching positions, and that they had been told that there would no longer be national meetings of moderators to ensure that standards were consistent.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The moderation system needs to be urgently reviewed. If it doesn't have credibility with teachers, it won't have credibility with students or with the general public. The current model of practising teachers doing moderation work in their 'spare' time, and being under strict instructions to not communicate with colleagues whose work they are moderating to help them remedy defects found in their assessment, is simply not working.

The idea of building a moderation service that is properly staffed and which combines the functions of moderation and support needs to be revisited by the government in consultation with the profession, hence the recommendation that such a proposal be referred to the Career Pathways working party established under the Secondary Teachers' Collective Agreement, to work in consultation with NZQA. It is likely that if moderation became a highly regarded task, done either full-time or part-time and properly resourced and with a professional support element to the work, it would be competed for by the best subject specialists in the profession, and the quality issues raised here by teachers would disappear. It is also clear that until the external moderation system is believed in by teachers, students and the general public, there should be no proposals to make a level of the NCEA entirely internally assessed.

*(See Recommendation 5 and 7)*

## **11. EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT**

While no-one in any focus group expressed a wish for the NCEA to become an entirely internally assessed system, there were huge concerns about the quality and reliability of external assessment. These were such that the credibility of the externally assessed part of the qualification is under serious threat. Teachers talked about the unpredictability of the external assessments under the NCEA. In a range of subjects there had been unsignalled changes to exams. Many teachers felt that exams had been pitched at too high a level or had presented unnecessary difficulties for students, while on

the other hand there were issues about how the exams were going to identify the different levels of achievement, such as a Science teacher saying that questions did not always provide opportunities to demonstrate Excellence. Two Science teachers were concerned about scientific inaccuracies reflected in their exams or judgement statements.

The lack of comparability of difficulty level of external assessments between standards within a subject, between subjects, and from year to year, were commented on in five of the nine schools. Teachers expressed the view that within a subject, the proportion of students achieving at the different levels ought to be reasonably consistent between the various external assessments, and that this was not happening. Year to year comparability within a subject was also an expectation that was not always being met and this was of great concern. Teachers across a range of subjects commented on inconsistencies between Level 1 results for 2002 and 2003.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As the recent controversy over the Scholarship results and criticism about comparability of results at other levels have demonstrated, the public and the profession wish this qualifications system to be able to provide high quality and appropriate external assessments which deliver an acceptable level of comparability of results from year to year, standard to standard and subject to subject. At this point in time, the NCEA is not delivering that. The fact that the previous norm-referenced system did not deliver year to year comparability either is irrelevant, because there was the back-up mechanism of scaling available to ensure results were perceived to be fair, at least at the very high-stakes level of Bursary.

A search for the mechanisms that will restore faith in the external assessment of the NCEA must be pursued with urgency. It would be wrong to suggest that finding these mechanisms will be easy, however. There is a need to access expertise from outside NZQA, perhaps from within New Zealand or perhaps from another country, given that so far NZQA appears not to have found adequate solutions to what are very complex problems to solve within a standards-based model of assessment.

*(See Recommendation 1)*

## **12. GENERAL ASSESSMENT ISSUES**

A number of issues at the level of the design of the qualification system were discussed in the focus groups. Teachers argued that a standards-based system was simply fairer to students than the previous one for a number of reasons. Firstly, the previous Sixth Form Certificate was seen as unfair because of its moderation by School Certificate results the previous year, and the system of moderation used for some internally assessed School Certificate subjects had also posed difficulties. Secondly, students now need only become accustomed to one way of assessing, rather than three different qualifications, and can build their qualification throughout their senior years. Thirdly, their performance in internal assessments is no longer moderated against performance in external exams, so areas where students are weak do not stop them gaining credit for their strengths.

In addition, teachers say assessing students against a standard rather than against each other is fairer, and they see standards-based assessment as delivering more useful information about what a student's strengths are, and providing more clarity about what is required and about the increasing levels of challenge in a subject. They also see it as

more valid because skills which do not lend themselves to assessment in a written exam can be assessed appropriately.

Under NCEA, internal assessment is part of every subject and delivers credits without reference to external assessment results. Many teachers believe that internal assessment suits many students better, and allows them to achieve success that they would not have achieved in exams. It also rewards persistence and hard work over a period of time, something that should be valued.

Some teachers talked about the stress of exams for students, and ways that they had been able to ameliorate that under the new system. They also talked about the disadvantages of exams, such as that a student can be having a bad day, that students tend to cram rather than retain the knowledge, and the unpredictability of what might be in the exam. There was a fear expressed, however, that government had intentions to make Level 1 internally assessed, and teachers who mentioned this felt it would have a disastrous effect on teacher workloads.

For some teachers, a downside of internal assessment is how it has changed their relationship with students from teacher to final assessor. Formative assessment is something they are happy to do, but summative assessment, where they feel they have students' futures in their hands, is less appealing.

The focus groups raised concerns that each level of achievement, especially Achieved at Level 1, covered a very broad spectrum of student achievement, and therefore did not provide adequate information to students about their progress or reward them for achieving at a 'high Achieved', i.e. just before Merit. Some teachers thought marking would be easier and students more motivated if there were more grades to allocate. They suggested a range of possible scales, such as a 1 to 9, Plus and Minus within each current level, and so on. Some teachers said that they already thought, and in some cases talked, in terms of more than four levels of achievement, and it was noted that in Art, teachers are already being asked to provide judgements beyond the normal four levels when they send work away for external marking. But others were becoming reconciled to the current grade levels, and believed that more levels of achievement would only make marking harder because there would be more boundaries on which to make judgements.

Teachers made a strong call for more consistency of credit values between standards in relation to the amount of work required. They worried that students were opting for subjects which were perceived to deliver them credits with less effort. A group of HODs in the Low Decile Urban Co-ed compared notes about the number of credits allocated to research projects at Level 3 in their various subjects, and were astonished at the disparities between Geography, History, English and Music.

Teachers in six schools raised issues around the use of assessment results for monitoring achievement and for 'league tables'. Teachers saw the tables produced by the media as largely meaningless but despite that able to impact negatively on the popularity of their school.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Most teachers believe that the NCEA has, in a number of ways, the potential to be a much fairer assessment system than the previous mix of norm-referenced qualifications. However, they are not ready to shift to an entirely internally assessed system at one or more levels at this point in the development of the qualification. Besides the huge manageability concerns that this would raise, there are still concerns about the robustness of the external moderation system and these would need to be resolved first.

In addition, not all teachers are comfortable with the extent to which their role has become that of an assessor for a national qualification.

Because a significant number of teachers are not totally reconciled to the current number of levels of achievement, and would like more levels, perhaps between Achieved and Merit, this question merits further investigation, hence the recommendation that this matter be reviewed by the Ministry of Education and NZQA, in consultation with the profession.

There is also a clear need for an exercise to be done to achieve greater consistency across subjects in the number of credits generated by similar amounts of work, if the NCEA is to be seen by teachers and students as fair.

***(See Recommendations 1, 4 and 7)***

### **13. STUDENT PATHWAYS ISSUES**

Focus groups discussed at length the new pathways opening up for students since the arrival of the NCEA, and it is clear that the NCEA has brought a whole new level of complexity to the work of secondary schools and teachers. In some of the schools, whole new programmes are being developed, combining courses into packages such as a Gateway course or an Academy, but a more common area of new pathways is changes within the current subject areas. Teachers talked about the alterations they were making to existing courses in order to better meet students' needs by selecting standards from different subjects, or by mixing unit and achievement standards to cover aspects that would capture students' interests.

Subject departments are also beginning to offer a very diverse range of Certificates or parts of Certificates other than the NCEA, many of which are linked to Industry Training Organisations. The range of what is being offered is in fact quite dizzying, including in the nine sample schools National Certificates in Maths, Employment Skills, Elementary Construction Skills, Performing Arts, Supported Learning, Computing, Travel and Tourism, Hospitality, and even Equine Studies.

One of the goals of the NCEA is to give 'parity of esteem' to a wide range of types of learning, rather than to privilege 'academic' learning. Subjects often mentioned as having enhanced status under the NCEA include Physical Education, Outdoor Education, Health, Drama, Dance, Media Studies, Graphics, and Technology, and there is evidence that increasing numbers of more able students are taking these subjects in some schools.

Multi-level study, in the form of an individual student being enrolled in subjects at a variety of different levels for a variety of different qualifications, has probably been increasing in secondary schools ever since single-subject passes were introduced for School Certificate and later for University Bursaries. This appears to be accelerating with the NCEA, and is relatively easy to timetable. However it appears that there is also more pressure on teachers to offer 'composite' classes and to assess students within a given class against standards at more than one level, and this can be problematic.

Teachers talked about the staffing challenges posed by the proliferation of courses under the NCEA. Allocating secondary school staffing fairly has always been a huge headache, but the expectations of choice created by the NCEA appear to have made

decision-making in this area tougher still. In some subjects small class sizes were just not viable because of the staffing they soaked up, but schools still tried to find ways to cater for students' needs, such as the use of the Correspondence School or by offering composite classes.

Another challenge is resolving the issue of what, if any, pre-requisites to set so that students move up the year levels into courses in which they are able to achieve success, but this is not easy and it raises issues about predicting numbers and scheduling of classes, when students may have achieved a wide range of standards at the previous level. Some schools had simply set a raw number of credits, e.g. 14 from the previous level for entry into the next level. Others had specified particular standards as pre-requisites, however there were dangers seen in this, where for instance a student had achieved 21 out of 24 but the one they missed was one of the pre-requisites. One school had chosen not to set pre-requisites, but there were filtering mechanisms in place nevertheless, such as giving guidelines and counselling students and so on.

A system as complex as the NCEA offers a huge range of choices to students, but it also increases the chances of students making wrong choices and places increased responsibilities on all teachers to contribute to the guidance of students. Schools and teachers had set up systems to guide students, and these included giving every Year 13 student a staff mentor, establishing new positions as qualifications managers, developing tracking sheets to help students monitor their progress, and regular meetings with individual senior students, all hugely demanding on staff.

There was a feeling expressed by some teachers that the universities were continuing to place limitations on how schools designed courses, through their entrance requirements. Ensuring students understand what they may need to do to gain tertiary entrance is also a challenge for teachers, especially if as a general rule the school has tried to put the focus on credits from standards, to give 'parity of esteem' to unit standards, but for those wanting entrance into limited entry courses, the number of Merits and Excellences they attain is what matters. In addition, some teachers worried that the tertiary sector was not yet familiar enough with the NCEA to be able to sort students for entry to courses, but others were confident the tertiary sector would cope.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

An enormous amount of time and energy is obviously being expended by schools to ensure that they provide the maximum amount of choice to students so that learning programmes are available to them which as closely as possible meet their individual learning needs. This is likely to be contributing very positively to student motivation. On the other hand, providing all this choice is extremely demanding on staff, particularly heads of departments who have already been very stretched by other aspects of the implementation process. There has been no recognition of this in terms of extra time for curriculum leaders in middle or senior management. It is not surprising that these positions in schools have been increasingly hard to fill in recent years.

The vastly increased complexity of choices and curriculum breadth which the NCEA has engendered has also not been recognised by government in the increases in staffing which have been provided in recent years. These have been fully committed to meeting the guaranteed minimum contact time negotiated under the Secondary Teachers' Collective Agreements 2002 and 2004, and have not been available to provide extra flexibility in staffing the curriculum. This report makes a clear case for improved staffing to enable schools to make full use of the flexibilities available under the NCEA, and for this reason it is recommended that the Teacher Workload working party established under the Secondary Teachers' Collective Agreement give consideration to the issues. There are also increased costs to schools in broadening the choices for students, in

terms of providing specialised equipment, hiring support staff and so on, hence the recommendation for a review of Operations Grant funding.

There has been little support provided to schools to assist them to develop policies and processes about things like course pre-requisites or systems for guidance of students. Models of a range of systems which schools have found to work need to be disseminated so that every school does not have to re-invent the wheel, and this could be part of the ongoing professional development recommended by this report.

***(See Recommendations 2, 4, 5 and 6)***

## **14. GENERATORS OF WORKLOAD**

The vast majority of people in the teaching profession and in the government agencies responsible for implementing the qualifications changes would agree that there have been consequent increases in teacher workload. Whether these are permanent or short-term, the exact extent of the increases, and what the specific generators of that extra workload are, has been less clear. The focus group research helps to provide a clearer picture of the multiple factors contributing to this increased workload.

Teachers talked about the huge range of tasks required of them as they implemented the new qualifications system. These included developing new or revised courses, building resources, developing assessment tasks and checking them with others and then doing it all over again when the standards were changed, teaching new teachers how to assess against the standards, organising material for moderation, entering results, checking results lists for accuracy, and more. Heads of Department were particularly vocal about the impact on their workloads, but classroom teachers had also seen big increases, particularly in marking, moderation and administration, and some of them commented on the negative impact of this on the pastoral care and extra-curricular work of the school, and on professional and social interaction between staff. A lack of resourcing in small schools adds to the burden, because of shortages of support staff, inadequate computing and copying equipment, and lack of other teachers to whom to delegate tasks.

Teachers longed for some kind of stability after all the constant change, but could see no let-up, with Level 2 standards changes to implement in 2005 and Level 3 changes in 2006. They doubted whether things would get easier in the foreseeable future.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

There are no simple solutions to address the extra workload generated by this much more complex qualifications system, but it is clear that solutions must be found. The findings of this report in relation to teacher workload need to be given detailed consideration in the context of the Teacher Workload working party established under the Secondary Teachers' Collective Agreement. The special resourcing requirements of small schools need to be given urgent consideration, if situations are to be avoided where teachers in small schools have no ancillary support for their work in relation to the qualification system, hence the recommendation that Operations Grant funding be reviewed. There are aspects of teacher workload which might be alleviated as a result of professionals sharing ideas for the management of assessment, providing a further reason for the ongoing provision of professional development.

***(See Recommendations 4, 5, 6 and 7)***

## 15. RESOURCING ISSUES

PPTA has kept up a continuous call for increased resourcing for NCEA implementation over a number of years, but what has been provided has never been enough. It is clear from the data obtained from the focus groups that concerns about resourcing still remain, and the areas in which they are evident are consistent with the areas PPTA has been highlighting.

Teachers believe that NZQA has given insufficient guidance about what students should expect in the external exams. At the end of the third year of implementation, teachers were feeling that they now had a reasonably clear idea about what to expect in the Level 1 exams, and some idea about what to expect in the Level 2 exams, but while they recognised that over the years successive exams would begin to establish a pattern, at this stage unpleasant surprises were still possible, such as exams which did not match exemplars provided. Of particular concern to teachers was that they had seen no exemplars of work that would meet the Excellence level at Level 3, or would meet the Scholarship level. In some subjects, teachers wondered whether there had ever been any questions at Excellence level in the past Bursary exams they had been told to consult for an indication of levels, and it is quite possible that there have not been, since high marks under the old system could be achieved simply by performing consistently well over a range of lower level questions.

The quality of the sample assessment resources for the internal achievement standards has clearly not been adequate to meet teachers' needs. In some cases, teachers had bought resources from subject associations, school support services, or colleagues because the quality of the resources on the Internet was inadequate.

There was an overwhelming view that there should be sample assessment activities available which are high quality and in sufficient quantity for teachers to be able to select what is most appropriate for them and use them 'off the shelf', and that this requirement had not so far been met in most subject areas. Teachers also want to see new resources continuing to be produced, but they said that the quantity and quality of resources had actually declined with each new level. The experience of teachers of using an assessment activity off the website only to find that it does not pass moderation is an intense irritant, and many personal experiences of this were described.

Unit standards, both in 'conventional' and 'non-conventional' subjects, are being used quite extensively in schools, more than was probably expected at the time that the NCEA was being developed. Some teachers commented on the disparity between the resourcing for achievement standards and the resourcing for unit standards. Resources that were produced for the trials of unit standards in 'conventional' subjects in the 1990's are now somewhat out of date, because the standards have been revised. This needs addressing.

Teachers are convinced that there is an ongoing need for professional development to assist them with the implementation of the NCEA. School Support Services appear to be meeting some of the needs, as are formal and informal subject networks, but there is still a perception that something akin to the 'jumbo days' of the implementation years continues to be needed.

Schools have constantly complained that there are numerous ways in which the NCEA has increased costs to schools, and that schools have not been recompensed for these. The focus groups provide evidence of some of this. Some costs are in the area of administration of entries and results; others are in the area of the assessment process.

Administration of entries and the sending of results has become a vastly more complex process than under the previous examination system. Extra staff have had to be employed to input and check data, and teachers spend a lot of time on such processes also. Furthermore, by making the entry and results submission processes Web-based, the burden has shifted to schools to produce printouts for checking which in the past were produced by NZQA. New equipment, texts, photocopying and computer support for the assessment process have also added substantially to school costs. HODs in an area school talked passionately about their struggle with the lack of economies of scale for these extra costs, and staff in another small rural school were really feeling the pinch after a roll drop which had led the Board of Trustees to reduce ancillary staffing for curriculum to make the budget balance.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It may have been expected by government that the clamour for more resources for NCEA implementation at school level would fade once the qualification was fully implemented, however this research shows that resourcing is, and will continue to be, a huge issue for schools. There are no surprises, except perhaps the pleas for sample assessment resources for unit standards, in the concerns expressed here. Availability of sample assessment activities and exemplars for external standards is probably the one area which time will fix, because a body of actual exams will be built up over the next few years now that all levels have had at least one year. Sample assessment activities and exemplars for internally assessed achievement standards and for unit standards are still required by teachers, not just the original sets, modified as the standards are revised, but also additions to the bank of sample assessments so that schools have a wider choice to either use as they are or on which to model their own, and so that those who are depending on the Web-based resources do not end up using the same resources year after year.

Professional development is still needed. Teachers feel a need to access the experts in their subjects and to share ideas with their colleagues in other schools. If it is genuinely believed by government that NCEA implementation is not over at the end of the first three years but is a process which will continue for at least another three years, then the professional development which was provided in the first years needs to continue to be provided for some years yet. There are some really good things happening in some schools, and they need to be shared with other schools.

The increased costs to schools are demonstrated here, and need to be recognised in the form of increases in secondary and area schools' operations grants. In developing a formula for this, the lack of economies of scale for small schools needs to be taken into account.

***(See Recommendations 3, 4 and 6)***

## **16. NZQA/MOE ADMINISTRATION**

Teachers showed very little awareness of the different roles of NZQA and the Ministry of Education in relation to the NCEA, using the agency names interchangeably, hence the title of this chapter refers to both central agencies. They had a number of concerns about shortcomings in the services provided by both agencies.



The biggest area of concern for teachers in terms of NZQA administration is a lack of effective change management. There are timing issues around marking schedules and exams, examiners' reports, notification of revisions of standards, and notification of revisions of sample assessment tasks. One teacher seemed to put the concept of management of change in a nutshell: "If they just have a little bit more control in the way they programme to change things. And okay, changes need to be made, but let's stick them all in a timeline".

Teachers could not see why the exams and their marking schedules could not be available on the NCEA website pretty much as soon as the marking process was completed, and the time it took to get to see examiners' reports also irritated teachers who wanted to see the feedback to guide the next year's teaching. They accepted the necessity to revise the new standards after they had been used for a year, but they felt very stressed about the late notification of the final revised standards, which meant that they were scrambling at the last minute to get organised for the new year.

The difficulties of keeping up to date with changes in achievement standards and their sample assessment tasks and with changes in unit standards were mentioned in many schools, and one group of HODs talked about their efforts, successful and unsuccessful, to register to be advised of updates. The Maths Association came in for praise again, this time for notifying teachers about changes.

There was surprisingly little complaint about administration of entries and submission of results, even though there were a number of Principals' Nominees and senior managers in the focus groups. It would appear that many of the concerns which were endemic in the early years of NCEA have now been resolved. The teachers in the Low Decile Urban school were the only ones who raised the subject of student fees. They thought the reduction to \$75 in 2005 would help, but it was still a challenge to get students to complete the paperwork to get financial assistance, and their school had low entries as a result.

The issue which generated the most discussion in this area was the identification of standards, both in terms of version numbers and of standard numbers. There was also some discussion about difficulties navigating the NCEA website but this appears not to be a major problem. In the one group which talked about it, it was described variously as not easy to manipulate, not user-friendly, and taking users round in circles rather than to where they wanted to go.

Teachers believe that more communications work needs to be done to inform parents and the wider community about how NCEA works and what it can offer, and to 'share the good news' about NCEA to counter the bad press it is getting. Participants in many schools expressed a belief that employers did not yet fully understand the NCEA, and that it was NZQA's job to remedy this. There was a particular fear that employers would place more faith in the externally assessed standards. Parents, also, were believed to be struggling with understanding the new system, but some teachers felt it was just a matter of time and the understanding would be there.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The effective management of change appears to be the key issue here, and it is where the central agencies have fallen short. It is absolutely unreasonable to expect overloaded teachers to respond instantly to last-minute changes to standards, or to be aware of changes in their subjects unless they are directly notified that a change relevant to them has been made. Furthermore, a major change of this kind needs really effective communication systems to all who are affected: teachers, parents, employers, the tertiary sector, and the wider public. While some teachers expressed a sense of optimism that

understanding and valuing of the NCEA would improve over time, the events of early 2005 tend to contradict that optimism. NZQA and the Ministry of Education need to urgently direct their attention to improving their change management and their communications systems.

Teachers complained that much of the administrative burden of assessment for qualifications had been transferred from NZQA to schools, but there had been minimal addition to school Operations Grant funding in recognition of this. The management of a much more complex entries and results system requires additional support staff and computer software and hardware, and these have had to be covered at a cost to other school activities. Recommendation 6 advocates an urgent increase in secondary and area school Operations Grant funding.

An increase in secondary school expertise on the NZQA Board would also help to ensure that the issues for secondary schools are properly heard at that level. At this point there is only one Board member with a current secondary teaching background.

*(See Recommendation 1, 6 and 8)*

## **17. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This research provides an invaluable window into the thinking of secondary school teachers about one of the most major reform projects with which they have had to engage for many years. It is well understood by experts on education policy and educational change that no bright idea in the mind of a politician or a government official will ever be translated into a reality without the co-operation and effort of classroom teachers. The NCEA story is one of teachers toiling unceasingly over the past five years to turn a bright idea into a classroom reality which works for their students. They have not been helped by poor change management by the government agencies, nor by under-resourcing in terms of funding, materials and time. The lack of robustness in the systems which are required to provide quality assurance for the new qualification, such as the delivery of consistently high quality external assessments and effective external moderation systems, has also been problematic for them.

Nevertheless most teachers see the NCEA as a definite improvement on the previous qualifications system and believe that schools are developing effective systems for the assessment of their students. This is testimony to the dedication of teachers, who will always endeavour to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse if that is what is required to meet the needs of the students who face them in their classrooms.