



# The NCEA: The work continues

*Prepared by Executive*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Since the early 1990s barely a single year has passed without an Annual Conference paper on qualifications. In fact, PPTA has a history of papers on qualifications dating back to at least the mid-1960s.
- 1.2. It might have been thought that by the fifth year of implementation of the NCEA, it would be possible to do without such a paper. However, the Executive believes that there are still many qualifications issues that need to be considered by members. This is not out of a sense of current crisis; it is more that any major reform must evolve in the light of experience, and the NCEA is no exception to this, hence the title of this paper.
- 1.3. The paper is organised around the two 2005 Annual Conference resolutions. These were 'That PPTA continue to give a high priority to advocating improvements to the design and implementation of the NCEA' and 'That PPTA support the goal of a high quality publicly funded qualifications system for New Zealand students, and oppose the offering of Cambridge International Examinations in New Zealand schools'.
- 1.4. The paper reports on progress on both these resolutions. In the context of the first resolution, it raises issues that members should begin to think about as design changes take a higher profile in discussions at national level, now that immediate implementation problems have moved somewhat into the background.

## 2. IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES

- 2.1 In early 2005, the Leaders' Forum, for some years the main consultative body on the NCEA, established a small subgroup called the Leaders' Forum Qualifications Group (LFQG). This group of six sector representatives plus officials meets more frequently than the Forum (approximately monthly) and is tasked with monitoring the NCEA more closely and providing timely advice on both implementation and more future-focused work. PPTA (including our Secondary Principals' Council) has three representatives on the LFQG and nine on the Leaders' Forum.
- 2.2 Priority issues identified by the Forum and LFQG for work in 2005 were variation in external assessment, external moderation, professional development and communication. Work on these continues in 2006. In addition work is being done on student motivation, consistency between standards (both discussed in the section 'Design Issues'), and improving and updating resource material for internal assessment.

## **2.3 Variation**

- 2.3.1 For Scholarship, two external advisory groups, the Scholarship Technical Advisory Group and the Scholarship Processes Advisory Group were established. The Technical Group provided invaluable advice to NZQA on the re-shaping of Scholarship to avoid year-to-year and subject-to-subject variation, and a similar group is now also providing advice on minimising variation in the NCEA. In 2005 NZQA refined its NCEA marking processes and developed Profiles of Expected Performance, resulting in the 2005 exam round producing more acceptable levels of variation, but there is still progress to be made in this area.
- 2.3.2 Variation can result from a number of factors independent of the exam setting and marking process: changes in the standard, changes in the size or nature of the cohort entered for the standard, for example, and no exam system ever eliminates variation. The goal must be to find an acceptable level of variation that ensures credibility for the qualification.

## **2.4 External Moderation**

- 2.4.1 In 2005 the moderation report form was revised to ensure moderators provided more guidance to teachers about where the problems lay, and to encourage teachers to formally appeal moderations if they were dissatisfied. This new form is now in use in 2006. Teachers have been very unhappy about moderation reports that left them none the wiser about where they went wrong. The low level of appeals, combined with a high level of anecdotes about dissatisfaction with moderators' judgements, has been of concern to NZQA.
- 2.4.2 There is still a need to re-educate some school leaders to recognise that teachers are being asked to send in work that is on the borderlines, not work whose grade level is clear, so that the moderation process becomes an opportunity for professional learning by refining teachers' understanding of those grey areas. Disagreement by the moderator with judgements made by a teacher is not an indicator of problem teachers, but of teachers engaging fully in a professional learning process.

## **2.5 Professional Development**

- 2.5.1 PPTA expressed the view, based on its own research, that teachers still wanted further professional development for the NCEA, not the 'jumbo days' of the early implementation years, but much more needs-based. The previous Minister authorised two half-days within the financial year July 1 2005 to June 30 2006 for this purpose. An excellent kit was produced for schools to do a 'needs analysis' with teachers. School Support Services staff supported schools with the needs analysis and helped match them to the professional development needed. Money was also allocated to an evaluation of this model of professional development.



- 2.5.2 PPTA was very unhappy about a number of aspects of this. The amount of money per school was considerably less than we had sought; we had asked for two full days, as in previous years, not two half-days, and we argued that schools should have to complete the needs analysis process and develop a plan before they could pick up the money, because we predicted that some schools would simply impose school-wide professional development on teachers, or worse, use the money for other purposes.
- 2.5.3 The evaluation is yet to be published at the time of writing, but early indications are that all of PPTA's predictions have been borne out. There appear to be many teachers who were completely unaware that this professional development money was made available. There has been no Budget allocation for a similar exercise in the 2006/ 2007 year.
- 2.5.4 However, the Budget did contain an allocation for the first tranche of Senior Subject Advisor positions to begin in 2007, and this will begin to meet the need for 'just in time' professional development for teachers involved in teaching and assessing senior subjects, as well as proving a useful career pathway opportunity for our members. Further, there has been a seven per cent increase in School Support Services funding, the first for some years, which should help make advisory support more available to secondary schools.

## **2.6 Communication**

- 2.6.1 NZQA placed a lot of emphasis in 2005 on quality communications about the revised Scholarship, sending material to students and parents, publishing in *Tearaway Magazine*, and through press releases. NZQA has also created two new circulars for teachers: *Assessment Matters* and *Scholarship*. The Forum has repeatedly advised the agencies that communications need to be very specifically targeted to the different audiences.

## **2.7 Enhancing Resources for Internal Assessment:**

- 2.7.1 The Ministry of Education has been working with contractors (usually subject associations) to improve the quality and quantity of the online resources that support the internally assessed standards. Gradual, if overdue, improvements to these are being made.

## **3. DESIGN ISSUES – THE PROBLEMS**

- 3.1 The 2005 paper was the first to float the question of whether there are changes needed to the design of the NCEA to enable it to meet the eight criteria set in 1997 by the Qualifications Framework Inquiry. In particular, it suggested that there was emerging evidence that the 80 credit certificate at each level was de-motivating for many students, encouraging them to set their goals too low.



- 3.2 Further, it suggested that consideration should be given to adjusting the relative credit values of standards, introduction of a Merit level in unit standards, and providing a greater range of grade levels in achievement standards. It also suggested that the problem of year-to-year inconsistencies between success rates of individual standards might be solved by design changes.
- 3.3 Some of these issues, and others, were signalled before the NCEA began, in the report by Professor Paul Black of the School of Education, King's College, London<sup>1</sup>. Black was commissioned by the Ministry of Education to evaluate the NCEA proposals from policy documents supplied to him. While he described the NCEA as “an ambitious attempt to set up a truly unified national system”, he also warned “... it has significant deficiencies which will have to be tackled in time”. He warned, for example, that the Ministry of Education had given insufficient thought to issues of reliability. The short time allocated to the assessment of each external standard, the impact on reliability of the small numbers likely to be achieving at the Merit and Excellence grades, and the difficulties for markers in making holistic judgements would all cause problems under implementation. This was to prove all too true.
- 3.4 Black also aired a concern about the implications of dividing up subjects into separate elements if these elements were to be assessed in isolation from each other, and suggested that users of the results might draw conclusions from these results that they were not able, in fact, to indicate. He said that only a holistic task could indicate whether a student had “the power to inter-relate, to integrate, to use across contexts” and that this could not be inferred from “an atomised array”. This is an issue on which Maths teachers, in particular, have been very vocal, because many of them see their subject as having lost its inter-relationships under the NCEA.
- 3.5 Black criticised the plan to award National Certificates at each level to students on attainment of a set number of credits. He wrote: “Why give a particular cachet to (say) 80 credits which (say) 75 does not deserve, and to which 90 will be seen to add little?” He suggested that while it might set useful targets for students, it might also lead weaker students to fear failure and be discouraged when they did not attain the number. In fact, the evidence appears to be more that middle ability students in particular set their goal as 80 credits, no more, which is also a problem.<sup>2</sup>
- 3.6 Black also feared that each student’s particular aggregation of standards to achieve the 80 credits might have little meaning, “except that the person had

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<sup>1</sup> Black, P. (2000) Report to the Qualifications Development Group, Ministry of Education, New Zealand on the proposals for development of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, downloaded from <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/index.cfm?layout=document&documentid=5591&data=1>

<sup>2</sup> Alison, J. (2005) *Teachers talk about NCEA*, Wellington: NZPPTA; Hipkins, R., Vaughan, K., Beals, F., Ferral, H. & Gardiner, B. (2005), *Shaping our futures: Meeting secondary students' learning needs in a time of evolving qualifications: Final report of the Learning Curves project*, Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

succeeded at a particular number of tasks chosen freely from a very diverse menu". This is supported by growing evidence that the 80 credit Certificates have led to some 'credit shopping' by students (and possibly by some teachers under pressure to maximise student 'success') where they search for standards that deliver the most credits for the least effort.

- 3.7 Black warned of the danger that any assessment system will drive learning, rather than the other way round: "Teachers' classroom practices are strongly driven by the need to secure good examination results – they owe it to their students even when they believe that 'teaching to the test' is educationally unjustified, and they owe it to themselves and to their schools. Any change in the system will affect the ways in which teachers will explore and exploit the means for maximum reward, and change might enhance or diminish the negative effects of high-stakes assessment on learning practices." The PPTA focus group research reported that teachers are very concerned that assessment is 'occupying the driving seat' rather than learning, and they are keen to find solutions to this problem.<sup>3</sup>
- 3.8 Not identified by Black, but a related issue, is the question of whether it is motivating for students that achieving a standard at the Merit or Excellence level gains them no more credits than an Achieved.
- 3.9 Black also criticised the intention to report in percentiles (as in the bars on the current Interim Results Notice), saying that in a standards-based system, the only meaningful information is the grade itself, not some pretence at ranking, because in theory at least, the grade is "an indicator with explicit meaning, independent of the variations in entry cohort".
- 3.10 Finally, he warned that any reform of this kind needed to be carefully evaluated through research and through consultation with teachers. It is encouraging that this warning is now being heeded and the Ministry has let a contract for research on student motivation and also funded NZCER's excellent longitudinal *Learning Curves* research. NZQA's research output has also increased but there is room for more research to support the identification of issues and solutions.

#### 4. DESIGN ISSUES – SEEKING SOLUTIONS

- 4.1 Since the 2005 Conference, Government has taken the following steps:
- The Ministry has contracted Victoria University to research student motivation under the NCEA, a key recommendation of PPTA's own research *Teachers talk about NCEA*<sup>4</sup>. The results of the first phase of this research were released at Massey University's 'Assessment Supporting Learning' conference, 3-4 July. The research makes it clear that many students see the 80 credits for the certificates, the fact that Excellence and Merit are worth no

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



more credits than Achieved, and the fact that only three levels of achievement are recognised as de-motivating.

- The Ministry has begun work on issues around defining the curriculum for senior subjects, to address the issues of curriculum coherence and the lack of guidance on what constitutes appropriate course design since the demise of the previous system. This is extraordinarily complex because there are so many different levels of existing curriculum definition for different subjects, ranging from national curricula, reasonably recent senior curricula, outdated exam prescriptions, or just de facto curricula in the form of suites of achievement standards. Further there are subjects commonly taught in schools that are assessed by unit standards that have never had any form of curriculum. It is expected that a consultation process with teachers on these issues will take place in late 2006 or early 2007.
- The LFQG has devoted time to considering design issues, as part of which it has had meetings with a number of key academics to hear their proposals for change, for example Professor Terry Crooks and Professor Cedric Hall.
- A Consistency Review has been undertaken by the Ministry of Education to establish whether there are achievement standards whose credit values are inconsistent with similar standards in other subjects. There was consultation with schools during Term 1 and 2, followed by cross-curricular meetings of subject experts and by meetings of subject experts in learning area groupings.

4.2 Despite the consultation's emphasis on achievement standards, it is pleasing to note that issues about unit standards have come through strongly in the feedback from schools and the expert groups convened to consider that feedback. There were difficulties in getting the Review to be more all-encompassing, because of the different 'ownership' of achievement and unit standards: the Ministry of Education is responsible for developing and re-developing achievement standards, subject to NZQA registering them, while NZQA holds sole responsibility for unit standards.

4.3 A solution that might be popular would be for the Ministry to take responsibility for developing and resourcing unit standards in 'conventional' subjects. The feedback on unit standards was largely those in subjects also covered by achievement standards; there is also a need for a review of unit standards in 'non-conventional' subjects that are commonly taught in schools, however these are developed by Industry Training Organisations, not NZQA, and although they ostensibly allocate credits according to the NZQA formula of 1 credit = 10 hours learning time, it is in this area that there are most complaints of credits being absurdly easy to acquire.

## **5. PPTA'S APPROACH**

5.1 PPTA's consistent position is that the union is opposed to substantial change to the design of the NCEA without extensive consultation with teachers and robust research (see Recommendation 2 below). It will be really important for teachers to participate actively in such consultation, and the union will, as always, push for appropriate timeframes and release time for developing responses.

5.2 On the other hand, there appears to be a consensus in the profession that there is room for further refinement of the NCEA in a number of areas. PPTA representatives on the Leaders' Forum and the LFQG have identified the following key design issues that require consideration during the next few months:

- Whether there should be a Leaving Certificate that summarises the student's achievements over the senior school, rather than certificates at each level with a somewhat arbitrary 80-credit requirement. (The Record of Learning would of course be available at any stage once the student had begun to achieve standards, and can be distributed annually, and some type of summary statement that might in fact be more useful to employers and others could accompany this.)
- Whether that Leaving Certificate, or the current level certificates, should be able to be granted at Merit and/or Excellence level, reflecting the number of standards or credits achieved at the higher levels.
- Whether there needs to be full-scale qualifications assessment for all students at all of Year 11, 12 and 13, given the high retention rates of students to Year 12 and 13.
- Whether a way should be found for students to demonstrate an ability to integrate knowledge and skills across a subject at all levels of the NCEA (rather than solely at Scholarship level). This might be in the form of an externally assessed 'integrating standard'.
- Whether there should be a shift from the current 24-credit suite of achievement standards that usually constitute a subject's assessment to a wider menu of achievement standards in each subject, or even across a whole learning area, e.g. Sciences. This would, in many ways, simply reflect what is emerging as current practice: that many teachers are selecting from a menu that includes both achievement standards and unit standards, where they are available, in order to construct courses that best meet the needs of their students.
- Whether the current unit standards in 'conventional' subjects should become achievement standards, stated more holistically and with Merit and Excellence. This would resolve some of the issues about inconsistencies of credit value between achievement and unit standards, and meet the desire of some teachers to have a Merit level in unit standards.
- Whether standards that are registered at Framework Level 1 but in fact reflect curriculum objectives well below Curriculum Level 6 should be assigned a different level (e.g. Foundation) or named in such a way that they are clearly distinguished from standards that link to the national curriculum.
- How the growing evidence that the current three grade bands (Achieved, Merit and Excellence) are insufficient to motivate students should be addressed.

5.3 Feedback from schools through the Consistency Review has highlighted many of these same issues as requiring attention.



## 6. CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMS

- 6.1 The 2005 resolution opposing the offering of Cambridge International exams in state secondary schools has been useful in giving the union a clear policy position on the matter. The union has been encouraging the new Minister to 'get tough' on state schools offering Cambridge, on the grounds that the government should be clearly articulating the position that the indigenous qualifications, the NCEA and Scholarship, are robust, credible and capable of meeting the needs of the full range of students.
- 6.2 The Minister's response in late 2005 was that a trouble-free examinations round would embolden him to take such a stance. NZQA could be viewed as having delivered that, and the Minister should be given credit for taking an increasingly tough stance on Cambridge.
- 6.3 As at August 2006, 24 state and integrated secondary schools had some students participating in Cambridge International exams at some level, although in no case has Cambridge replaced the NCEA.<sup>5</sup> In the end, though, the pressure to offer Cambridge International exams will fade as the NCEA and Scholarship gain the confidence of the New Zealand public and the profession.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

- 7.1 This paper demonstrates clearly that the NCEA continues to be a work in progress, and that it is not yet time for the Association to stop considering papers on the NCEA at its Annual Conference. Qualifications have preoccupied secondary teachers for a long time, because of the huge implications that they have for teaching and learning throughout secondary schools. They will continue to do so for some time yet. Recommendation 3 recognises this, in calling for a further report on progress to the 2007 Annual Conference.

### ~~Recommendations:~~

- ~~1. That the report be received.~~
- ~~2. That PPTA's support for proposals for change to the design of NCEA be contingent on their being underpinned by robust research and extensive consultation with the profession.~~
- ~~3. That there be a further report on progress to the 2007 Annual Conference.~~

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<sup>5</sup> There is a noticeable trend for boys' schools to offer the exams, and in some cases a cluster of schools in the same general area are signed up, possibly indicating that competitive pressure is at work. The list can be checked at the The Association of Cambridge Schools of New Zealand's website: [www.acsnz.org.nz](http://www.acsnz.org.nz).



## 2006 Annual Conference Minutes

Minutes of the Annual Conference of the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (Inc) held at the Brentwood Hotel, Kilbirnie, Wellington, commencing at 9.45 a.m. on Tuesday 26 September 2006, continuing at 9.00 a.m. on Wednesday 27 September and Thursday 28 September 2006.

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2. THAT PPTA's support for proposals for change to the design of NCEA be contingent on their being underpinned by robust research and extensive consultation with the profession.

Carried

3. THAT there be a further report on progress to the 2007 Annual Conference.

Carried

4. THAT PPTA urge NZQA to provide on the NCEA site the following for all internally assessed achievement standards and unit standards in conventional subjects:

- A range, continually updated, of valid tasks that meet all moderation requirements;
- Exemplars at NA/A/M/E levels for achievement standards and at NA/A for unit standards with accompanying judgement statements;
- This material is to be teacher-only accessed.

Carried

5. THAT PPTA urge NZQA to provide exemplars of student performance along with the examiners reports and judgement statements for all externally assessed achievement standards.

Carried (Unanimously)