

The future of NCEA. Detailed submission from Universities New Zealand's Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) Subcommittee on University Entrance.

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CUAP's Subcommittee on University Entrance provides information on the administration of discretionary entrance, coordinates the evaluation of overseas qualifications presented for the purposes of admission, evaluates university foundation programmes offered by non-university providers in New Zealand, and offers policy advice on matters related to the secondary-tertiary interface.

Response from CUAP UE Subcommittee to NCEA Review Focus Questions

While this is a response on behalf of a university quality assurance subcommittee, it is not written with only universities or those who will attend universities in mind. NCEA is part of a system of education in New Zealand that prepares young people to play an active role in their communities and to make the most of life-long learning opportunities. This response reflects a desire to see that system of education working as effectively as it can for all young people.

Introduction – Access to Rich Learning

Members of CUAP's University Entrance Subcommittee regard the NCEA Review as being timely. Introductory comments included the suggestion that while NCEA was not "broken" it did need some modifications. In its current form it was often fragmented, complex, assessment driven, and liable to generate huge workloads for teachers as well as students. Many schools appeared unable to offer their students a wide range of existing subjects and credits, and some of the proposals in the document could both exacerbate this problem and add even greater complexity. The international portability of the qualification is in doubt.

There was no benchmarking of fundamentals of literacy and numeracy, and there were significant concerns about equity across the system. OECD Education Working Paper Number 167 *Academic Resilience* points out that 2006-2015 PISA data shows New Zealand falling even further behind other countries in our ability to create academically resilient students, i.e. those from disadvantaged backgrounds able to perform well in "reading, mathematics, and science in a way that enables them to play an active role in their communities and prepare them to make the most of lifelong-learning opportunities". While PISA is measured before most students have finished NCEA Level 1, the review did not seem to address possible ways of improving the academic resilience of New Zealand students as they move through the NCEA levels.

What is the purpose of NCEA?

The intended purpose of NCEA is presumably as a certificate issued at each of the levels specifying the educational achievement of the holder. It can provide information to potential employers, potential providers of further education, and to holders and their families and whānau. It is a source of information about the disciplinary knowledge of the

holders and their standards of literacy, numeracy, and it establishes an expectation of their ability to learn.

In one sense NCEA is an assessment of chosen aspects of the curriculum; in another it both specifies (and frequently narrows) the curriculum and drives learning behaviours. While achievement standards are assigned to subjects such as English, Physics, Chemistry, etc most subjects have more achievement standards at each level than are likely to be studied by a student in one year, and it is individual achievement standards, rather than subjects, that a student achieves or does not achieve. It can be argued that this feature of NCEA has contributed to fragmentation of learning, over-assessment, intensification of teacher workload, complexity, and the “I don’t understand NCEA” comment from an employer highlighted in the discussion paper.

What are our expectations for graduates with an NCEA?

It very much depends on what is in the specific NCEA. Because there is no benchmarked standard of literacy and numeracy at the different levels, and because there is no specified curriculum for individual students, or specified achievement standards, it is difficult to have any generalised expectations of an NCEA graduate. Ideally, each level of NCEA should provide an accurate explanation of the student’s abilities assessed at that level.

Universities have expectations that a student with subject-achievements at any level has a credible level of knowledge and skills in that subject, and that a student with University Entrance will be numerate and literate to a level that allows for success at university.

Big Opportunity 1 – Creating space at NCEA Level 1 for powerful learning

The proposal is for 20 credits of literacy and numeracy, and 20 credits for project work. While we are told that this “wouldn’t replace the wide range of courses currently offered” it isn’t clear whether the award of 20 credits for literacy and numeracy would follow success in some kind of standardised assessment required of all students in year 11, and/or whether the 20 credits for project work would be assessed from a project undertaken by a student as part of any one of that “wide range of courses currently offered”. How a project might be assessed, and by whom, is also unclear.

Given that most students stay on at school after Level 1 it needs to be clear how Level 1 builds on the curriculum in previous years and will support the curriculum in subsequent years. Without better information on these links it is hard to judge the worth of the proposal. For some universities Level 1 is important as it gives practice and builds towards Level 2 results. It is Level 2 results that can be important for evaluating students for a place in a residential college and the basis for awarding scholarships. Level 3 is required for UE but can be a more broadening year for the student.

If the proposal is that all year 11 students undertake a broad, general curriculum which builds on the curriculum of previous years and which includes subjects such as English (or Māori), mathematics, and science so that students are not precluded from, or barriers created for, study at higher levels then this would probably be good. It might encourage academic resilience. If the assessment of numeracy and literacy could be done by standardised testing, and the project linked to or arise from aspects of the general curriculum this might both restore confidence in the qualification and help to reduce teacher workload. The possibility that the project might narrow opportunities and exacerbate problems with equity should be carefully assessed.

What might projects look like?

A problem with projects is that they could require more time than teachers reasonably have available, and their assessment might not be easily moderated. Projects would probably be best to arise from the general curriculum provided in year 11 and be in a form that would allow moderated assessment. Otherwise, the reputation and credibility of NCEA could be damaged.

Project-based work could be encouraged but the purpose behind standardisation of projects and their assessment needs to be better explained. We question the value of interdisciplinary courses or projects at a point where students have not studied a discipline in any depth.

What would need to change to make this work for you?

Assessment of literacy and numeracy would need to be benchmarked and standardised in a way that minimised teacher workload. Schools should certify that year 11 students were studying a broad, general curriculum that included English (or Māori), mathematics, and general science maximising their future chances of study. The teaching of the curriculum should emphasise to the students its relevance to playing an “active role in their communities and [preparing] them to make the most of lifelong-learning opportunities”.

How much specialisation should NCEA encourage at Year 11?

Specialisation at year 11 should generally be minimised. Certainly, students should be discouraged (or prevented) from dropping subjects such as English (or Māori), mathematics, and science which are vital for trades, for many professions, for a lot of higher-level future study, and for taking an active role in the community. The risk of early specialisation in year 11 is that the chances for further study may be seriously reduced, particularly for those already at risk of lower achievement.

Big Opportunity 2 – Strengthening literacy and numeracy

We are asked whether literacy and numeracy should be restricted to reading, writing, and mathematics, or should encompass such elements as digital, financial, or civic literacy. The review document describes the current assessment system which is based on selected achievement standards and unit standards. Many of these standards “belong” to subjects rather than having been established for the specific purpose of setting a standard for and assessing literacy or numeracy.

The document points out that international tests such as PISA and PIRLS show that NCEA follows a decline in achievement lower down the education system. Asking NCEA to fix problems that have become entrenched lower in the education system is unrealistic. Ideally, the curriculum offered lower in the school system and in year 11 would provide good opportunities for all students to become literate and numerate, and this would include digital, financial, and civic literacy. However, the review document seems to be operating in the belief that specifying literacy and numeracy implies establishing and then teaching achievement standards for literacy and numeracy. This may be an error and separating the assessment of literacy and numeracy from the curriculum that provides the opportunities for and teaches the students to become literate and numerate might be an idea worth exploring. It could reduce teachers’ workload and free them to teach creatively and innovatively.

Should literacy and numeracy requirements get tougher for each level of NCEA?

They should get tougher, but this may not be the right question. Those graduating with NCEA Level 2 or Level 3 should be literate and/or numerate at a level that is consonant with the subjects they have achieved and have been required to study. If students can abandon mathematics at Level 2, then it may make little sense to require them to be numerate at Level 2. Those who are studying economics at Level 3 need to be able to read and write in appropriate, increasingly specialised language for that study.

It might be more sensible, as well as more equitable to ensure that subject-based achievement standards included clear expectations of literacy and/or numeracy built into those standards, with those expectations increasing in “toughness” with the level of study.

What should we include when we assess literacy and numeracy (e.g. digital literacy)?

There are obviously good arguments for financial and digital literacy being desirable outcomes of secondary education in New Zealand. However, careful thought needs to be given to where we might expect students to acquire the skills to become digitally literate, and that has implications for where it is best assessed. If digital literacy is taught as part, say, of the English subject curriculum then it should be assessed there. The risk of simply including such items as digital literacy into the assessment of general literacy and numeracy is that the standards required for ‘normal’ literacy and numeracy may be diluted.

Big Opportunity 3 – Ensuring NCEA Levels 2 and 3 support good connections beyond schooling

The proposal is to require at least 20 credits “to be based on new pathways opportunities” in NCEA Level 2 and 3. Pathways might include a revised NZ Scholarship for “learners who prefer a traditional, academic approach to have pathways opportunities”.

What might different pathways opportunities be?

It is hard to see how the Scholarship idea would work, given that results are not normally available before university courses begin. Clearer signals of what is required for direct entry to university courses are a good idea (and universities could be more consistent in providing them), but these do not require “pathways opportunities”.

The examples of pathways provided are unimpressive. They include an activity that looks to breach the Privacy Act, activities that would require substantial input and time from people who look very busy in their own occupations, and a Level 3 programme that appears to acknowledge that Level 1 literacy has not been achieved. This is not to deny the obvious success of several of the current initiatives that involve work experience, concurrent secondary-tertiary study, and Trade Academies. These are existing forms of flexible, student-centred pathways. However, force fitting these into a 20-credit achievement/unit standard framework may be unhelpful.

Should they be compulsory?

It is hard to see the justification for this, but if a student is planning to enter trade training then mechanisms need to be found to support this as a valid choice.

How can we make sure that every learner gets access to great, personalised pathways opportunities?

Already many schools are complaining that they cannot offer a full range of subjects – a core curriculum – to their students. We understand that this problem is particularly acute in rural or less populated areas. This could possibly be addressed by better use of Te Kura

and provision of digital resources and teaching. Until this is done, any ideas of personalised pathways may be premature.

Big Opportunity 4 – Making it easier for teachers, schools, and kura to refocus on learning

How could we support teachers and school leaders to feel empowered and supported to practise this way?

NCEA is assessment driven. By breaking subjects into achievement standards that are assessed in isolation from the subject teachers are forced into spending far more time on assessment and moderation of assessment than would be necessary with a whole subject, core curriculum approach. Internally assessed standards were seen as unreliable, and this has resulted in a moderation “industry” that hasn’t provided reliability but that demands huge teacher resource and time.

A focus on learning implies an evidence-based approach to teaching that may not require an official curriculum that varies across schools, but will require a careful assessment of students who are needing extra help or guidance to understand content. Providing teachers with the space to explore innovative ways of helping their students see the relevance of and understand content may be more successful than expecting them to develop new courses that cherry pick achievement standards.

Perverse incentives for schools to steer less academically students into “easy” courses that may not lead on to further education or employment should be avoided.

Should all courses be quality assured?

If schools can provide courses that are quite different from those in other schools then courses should be quality assured if NCEA is to achieve public credibility. However, quality assurance is a time-consuming and resource-intensive process. This may not be the best use of teacher time and expertise.

How could we help the wider community feel more comfortable getting involved with senior secondary education?

Simplify the core curriculum and its assessment, ensure all schools can cover a good range of subjects, avoid gaps at some schools, and ensure coherence and qualification portability between schools. The wider community clearly does not understand the NCEA-driven senior secondary curriculum. It needs to be understandable before more involvement can be expected.

Big Opportunity 5 – Ensure the Record of Achievement tells us about learners’ capabilities

How should NZQA and learner-made content be balanced?

The current system of listing all the achievement standards a student has achieved (with any endorsements) seems largely incomprehensible to employers. Tertiary providers can look for specific standards they regard as essential for enrolment in a particular programme or course, but the Record as a whole seems not to have met its objective of effective communication of a student’s “smarts”. However, it is an official record and any “learner-made content” would need to be carefully checked for authenticity before it could be added.

What could help the Record of Achievement communicate what learners can do?

A recognised system of Badges could work well as long as these could not be “gamed”. Schools commonly provide testimonials which include reference to achievement in extra-curricular areas. The idea that these would be incorporated into the Record of Achievement needs greater thought.

Big Opportunity 6 – Dismantling barriers to NCEA

What other barriers do we need to lower?

Students at all schools should have access to a core curriculum, and this is not currently the case. More effective use of Te Kura’s digital resources might be one solution.

Should we remove all NCEA fees?

Yes.

How can we help low-decile schools access Special Assessment Conditions?

There needs to be greater access to public resources which can be used for SAC. At present access to SAC seems to be heavily reliant on a student’s socio-economic status.

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