



The NCEA: Nothing endures but change...

(Heraclitus, 540-480BC)

A report prepared by Executive

1. Introduction

The 2006 NCEA conference paper drew members' attention to increasing interest at government policy-making level in making design changes, and invited members to give consideration to potential changes. Possible changes being mooted were in the following areas: certification, including endorsement of certificates at merit and excellence; assessing integration of learning within subjects; the number of years of high-stakes assessment; reviewing the range of standards available within subjects; the place of unit standards in the qualification; and the number of achievement grades available.

At the time of writing that conference paper, PPTA was reasonably optimistic that the Ministry of Education and NZQA understood the necessity for discussions to be wide-ranging, to recognise the interrelationships between the various possible changes, and to be thorough about predicting possible negative consequences of changes. Conference resolved "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", and at the time it seemed reasonable to expect that such research and consultation would be part of the change process. The primary consultative body for the NCEA, the Leaders' Forum, on which PPTA is well represented, was meeting regularly and having reasonably robust discussion. The subgroup of the Leaders' Forum, the Leaders' Forum Qualifications Group (LFQG), had also been meeting regularly and doing some quite useful exploratory work in partnership with government.

2. The 'crisis' emerges

From the beginning of 2007, all that changed. There was a further attack on the NCEA, launched largely from a small number of schools in Auckland and supported by the Auckland media and *North and South* magazine. Government went into protection mode. The LFQG was not convened again, and the Leaders' Forum meeting scheduled for mid-March was cancelled. PPTA was advised that there were change proposals being developed, and that until these had been further refined they would not be discussed with the sector. PPTA protested about the channels of communication being closed, but to no avail.

In mid-April, the Leaders' Forum was suddenly called together for a short meeting at which its members were advised of a set of proposals for NCEA change that were being developed into a Cabinet paper. The changes were



justified as being necessary to ensure the survival of the qualification in the face of the sustained attack on it that had been launched. The issue of design changes had become intensely political.

The Forum was bound to confidentiality so consultation beyond its membership was not allowed. A short period of time was given for responses to the proposals. PPTA wrote a comprehensive response which was published on the members' side of the PPTA website, once the confidentiality requirement was lifted. This response was largely ignored by the Ministry of Education in its final paper to Cabinet, a copy of which can be located on the Ministry of Education website at http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/downloadable/dl12037_v1/cabinet-paper---changes-to-ncea.pdf.

At the end of May the changes became public. Cabinet had made few alterations to the Ministry's proposals, although it took till late July for PPTA to be able to obtain, under the Official Information Act, the Cabinet minute that confirmed the decisions. The major changes were endorsement at both certificate and subject level, recording Not Achieved for internal standards on the Interim Results Notice, renaming the Record of Learning a 'Record of Achievement', stepping up external moderation including appointment of full-time moderators, and providing students with an end-of-schooling summary of results.

Other implementation work signalled included a review of achievement and unit standards "to consider issues such as duplication of content, and the relative level of difficulty of achievement and unit standards in similar areas", following up schools where there is a significant mismatch between their external and internal assessment results, publication of schools' Managing National Assessment reports, more exemplars, and further professional learning opportunities (not specified).

The PPTA response in April to the proposed changes had expressed concerns that the proposals were being rushed and not being dealt with in an integrated fashion. It said that endorsement, especially at subject level, was problematic. It advised against reporting of non-achievement for internal standards on the grounds that it had been done before and had been shown to be fraught with difficulties, and on top of that is contrary to the principle underpinning standards-based assessment that it recognises achievement rather than failure. It supported the proposed review of standards, but sought a really comprehensive review that would take into account all the relevant issues rather than just skimming over the surface as the 2006 Consistency Review had done. It sought a national approach and models of best practice in any consideration of the balance of assessment between internal and external standards. It applauded the intention to appoint full-time moderators, and was circumspect about giving a "We told you so" message about that! At the same time, PPTA sought further support for teachers: extension of the



number of Senior Subject Advisers, more and higher quality resources on the NCEA website, Operations Grant funding for NCEA, staffing, and so on.

3. The review of Level 1 achievement standards

In early May, PPTA became aware that the Ministry of Education had launched into a review of Level 1 achievement standards, sticking blindly to its regular schedule of level-by-level reviews without recognising how nonsensical this one was, given the design changes in the wind, the much more comprehensive review of all standards being mooted behind the scenes, and the imminent publication of a new curriculum which would itself necessitate further changes at all levels.

The President protested vigorously to the Ministry of Education, and asked branches to desist from making submissions on the review, pending a decision at the May executive meeting,. The May executive meeting resolved that that there should be no changes to Level 1 standards for 2008 and that branches should be advised “to oppose change because of the continued absence of extra staffing or resourcing to support NCEA changes, and to include these concerns under the heading ‘Not Now’ in their feedback on the Level 1 achievement standards”.

The Ministry of Education quite readily accepted the wisdom of not making any major changes, but countered that there were some very small clarifications that were non-contentious or even widely supported by subject specialists, unlikely to be overtaken by the curriculum changes, and would be helpful to teachers. PPTA representatives were invited to a meeting with Ministry and NZQA officials in mid-July to consider these few small changes, and agreed after careful consideration to most of them proceeding.

4. Refinement of design and implementation changes

Since the announcement of the Cabinet decisions at the end of May, it is fair to say that the Ministry of Education has shown greater willingness to involve PPTA in the ongoing work. Monthly LFQG meetings have been scheduled to the end of 2007. An extra Leaders’ Forum meeting in early August was scheduled.

At the time of writing this paper, there has been one LFQG meeting and two full Leaders’ Forum meetings. At these meetings, there has been productive discussion about the best ways to implement the Cabinet decisions, particularly the reporting of Not Achieved, the introduction of full-time moderators, the review of standards, and subject endorsement.

On the other hand, in a situation where Cabinet has made the decisions and is closely monitoring the agencies’ implementation of them, there is little room to manoeuvre for such consultative groups. There is a danger that sector groups represented at these meetings could begin to feel that they are just



being called in to rubber stamp the work, or that their views are not being taken into account by Cabinet.

Despite efforts by sector representatives and officials to find the most educationally sound ways to implement the Cabinet decisions, PPTA members will still be concerned about the direction of some of these changes and the negative effects they may have on our students.

4.1 Reporting Not Achieved

At the beginning of the NCEA, it was intended that failure to achieve an internally assessed standard would be reported, however it soon became clear that some really inconsistent patterns of behaviour were being demonstrated by schools. Some schools enrolled their students in all the standards offered in a course and did not offer them an opportunity to withdraw if they had not attempted or not achieved particular standards. Other schools encouraged their students to withdraw if they appeared to be heading for failure, or did not enrol them until it was evident that they would achieve or already had achieved them. One of the driving forces for this was the media interest in developing league tables, which forced schools that were competing for students to ensure that their results appeared as favourable as possible. In the first few years of the NCEA the situation was exacerbated by the fact that students were charged different entry fees according to how many standards they were entered for, which was an encouragement to less advantaged students to enter for only the standards they were sure to achieve. Furthermore, many schools were committed to the philosophy underpinning standards-based assessment, that it should report achievement, not failure.

However, schools' differing decisions about what and how to report led to inconsistencies that were obvious but whose causes were poorly understood, and to an inability to generalise about national or school data.

In 2004 NZQA consulted around some options to redress this situation, including reporting on the interim results notice only those standards that had been achieved. PPTA supported this option for both internal and external standards, consistent with the principle that standards-based assessment is more motivating for students in that it focuses on achievement rather than on failure. In the end, NZQA adopted the position that non-achievement of external standards should be recorded only on the list of standards on the reconsideration notice. This was to give a student assurance that all their papers had reached markers and been processed, and to prompt them to consider whether to apply for a reconsideration for a standard not achieved. PPTA was not uncomfortable with that position, but had expressed a concern that this course might lead to a credibility issue for internal assessment if the two types of standard were seen as being treated differently. It is partly this credibility issue that eventually led to pressure to return to the original arrangements in the thick of this year's 'crisis' around the qualification.



It is a tragedy that the university sector, plus a small group of conservative educators and the media that listen to them, have managed to persuade government to force a return to a focus on failure and to a system that was fraught with difficulties. One of the major reasons for PPTA's advocacy, dating back as far as the early 1970's, for new forms of assessment, was that the norm-referenced system condemned a huge proportion of students to failure, and that this was de-motivating and led to students leaving school prematurely without having developed a perception of themselves as successful learners who were able to continue to learn throughout their lives. A few decades ago there were at least unskilled work options for such school leavers; today, with the loss of much unskilled work, the options are not there.

A small comfort is that Not Achieved will be recorded only on the interim results notice, and the Record of Learning, renamed as a Record of Achievement, will record only standards gained.

4.2 Endorsement at Certificate and Subject Level

A related issue is the government decision to endorse the certificates of students who gain a defined number of credits at Merit or Excellence at a level or in an individual 'subject'. Certificate endorsement appears to be quite widely supported as a way of motivating students who might otherwise aim only to achieve the standards, rather than to aim for Merit or Excellence. However it is highly problematic that if a student's course includes significant numbers of unit standards, almost none of which offer Merit, let alone Excellence, or if it includes one or more subjects at tertiary level, their ability to gain an endorsed certificate will be restricted. Courses such as Computing, which have no achievement standards available to them, may struggle to get students in future. Teachers will feel forced to review the number of unit standards that they are using in 'conventional' subjects, to maximise the opportunities for students to achieve Merit and Excellence.

Some schools that are using the potential of the Qualifications Framework to its fullest are very concerned about this move. They do not want to restrict the flexibility they offer their students, but they also do not want to disadvantage them. There is also much concern from the ITOs and polytechnics that work closely with secondary schools assisting students to embark, while still at school, on valuable pathways into tertiary study and employment.

Subject endorsement is even more problematic. Quite apart from the issues posed by certificate endorsement, there is the very vexed problem of defining a 'subject', at just the time that some schools are starting to be very innovative about creating exciting new courses that draw together learning from across disciplines, e.g. environmental studies or performing arts courses. There is a danger that initially at least, subject definition problems will be resolved by offering endorsement only to subjects that form part of the university entrance 'canon', perhaps only at Level 3, or more widely only to 'subjects' that are represented in the New Zealand curriculum, or slightly more widely to those



that have had achievement standards written for them. There is discussion of how courses created by schools that combine standards from two or more domains might be recognised, but this will be far from simple.

It would give quite the wrong messages for the traditional subjects to have endorsement available to them first, and for the newer courses to trail along later, as 'second-class offerings'. This is not a small problem; early signs from an NZCER study of subject diversity are that many schools have availed themselves of the opportunities offered by the NCEA to develop new subjects to meet the needs of their particular students. It would be quite contradictory for government to stifle such creativity at NCEA level, when the new curriculum gives so much encouragement to school-based curriculum development.

Furthermore, even if endorsement for traditional and newer subjects that use achievement standards is implemented in a way that does not entrench a disparity of status between subjects, the problem of how to affirm the value of subjects that rely largely or wholly on unit standards will remain. PPTA understands that some ITOs are considering whether they might introduce Merit and/or Excellence into some of their unit standards, but such discussions are at a very early stage. Subject endorsement cuts right across some basic principles of the NCEA: according parity of esteem to different kinds of learning, offering a good range of choices, and giving schools the flexibility to develop the courses that best suit their students.

PPTA has expressed concern to the Minister and at the Leaders' Forum and LFQG about the indecent haste with which government appears to be implementing subject endorsement when there are so many questions still to answer. The policy could stop innovation with the NCEA rather than encourage it, and is pandering to schools that are taking a conservative approach to the qualification and not exploiting its potential to address inequity. Discussion at the August Leaders' Forum of a draft paper to Cabinet on subject endorsement demonstrated that PPTA's position has wide support across the sector. It is to be hoped that Cabinet will heed our advice.

At the very least, subject endorsement must not be implemented until the problems identified here have been solved. If we have learned nothing else through the NCEA years, we have surely learned this!

4.3 Other changes

This paper would be unbalanced if it did not acknowledge that some of the implementation changes will be welcomed by PPTA members:

- The appointment of full-time moderators in many subjects should deliver better and more consistent moderation, and more assistance for teachers struggling to understand the logic of external moderators' judgements.
- The increase in the number of standards moderated each year will also help to improve the credibility of the moderation system. PPTA has been assured that this will only minimally increase current teacher workload,



because all schools are expected to keep, each year, eight representative samples of assessed student work for every standard. However, should the piloting of random sampling at Level 3 in the September 2007 moderation round indicate that it is an improvement on the current system, PPTA will certainly argue again for new resourcing to support its extension across all standards because this will be an added burden for schools. On the other hand, teachers have expressed concerns about the moderation system¹, and random sampling will increase the credibility of the process. (NZQA was advised in 2001 that a random sample of eight would deliver the most robust system, but until now has not heeded that advice.)²

- The review of achievement and unit standards is long overdue, and there are positive signs that, unlike the 2006 Consistency Review, it will have the comprehensive nature that it needs to have.
- The promised further increase in the availability of high quality exemplars for internally and externally assessed standards will also be welcomed, if it eventuates. (PPTA's past experience of this has been a lot of promising and little delivering, however.)

5. Criteria for a high quality qualifications system

PPTA's Qualifications Framework Inquiry report *Te Tiro Hou*³ in 1997 set out eight criteria by which any qualifications system should be judged. Those criteria were that a qualification must be: fair, inclusive, cumulative, clear, motivating, coherent, constructive and manageable. These were confirmed by Annual Conference in 1997, highlighted again in the 2005 NCEA conference paper, and continue to serve as a valuable guide for PPTA.

Union representatives at the June 2007 Leaders' Forum reminded that group of these criteria, and highlighted the ways in which some of the proposals for change failed to measure up to these criteria, in particular to inclusiveness. Further, they highlighted some of the original government goals for the NCEA that also appeared to be contradicted by the latest changes, especially parity of esteem, flexibility, allowing students to build on their strengths, and better access to success for groups of students currently under-achieving, e.g. Maori and Pasifika students.

Recommendation 2 confirms that the QFI's eight criteria should continue to serve the union as a basis for judging the acceptability of proposals for change in the NCEA.

¹ Alison, J. (2005) *Teachers talk about NCEA*, Wellington: NZPPTA

² Rhoades, D.A. (2001) *Review of NCEA Moderation Model*, prepared for New Zealand Qualifications Authority.

³ Allen P., Crooks T., Hearn S. & Irwin K. (1997) *Te Tiro Hou: Report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry*, Wellington: NZPPTA



6. Conclusions

PPTA representatives will continue to use every opportunity to warn of the dangers inherent in some of the recent changes, to seek to have them implemented in ways that minimise the damage, and to network with groups sympathetic to our cause. However, PPTA's chances of reversing those changes it deems to be negative are not high, because the push for change has become intensely political. Nevertheless we must continue to highlight the union's concerns to ensure that policy makers can hear the voice from the classroom loud and clear and will have no excuses to fall back on should they refuse to heed it. As the title of this paper signals, there is nothing new about any of this.

Recommendations

1. That the report be received.
2. That PPTA representatives continue to oppose any changes to the NCEA that conflict with the union's eight criteria for a high quality qualifications system.