

# The NCEA: A pathway to the future

*A paper to the PPTA Annual Conference from the Executive*

## 1. Introduction

An Annual Conference of PPTA would not be the same without an NCEA paper for delegates to consider. Successive – almost annual – papers since the early 1990s provide an opportunity to track the union’s evolving approach to standards-based assessment for qualifications, something that PPTA has supported in principle since the late 1960s. The reality, as distinct from the position of principle, always presents much more complex questions, and the union has struggled since the early 1990s to find a comfortable stance that can be supported by the vast majority of members.

While the trials of achievement-based assessment in the late 1980s and early 1990s were relatively non-controversial, the replacement of that form of assessment with unit standards in the mid-1990s, and then with the achievement standards of the NCEA since 2002, have been less well-received by teachers. As recently as 2006, in the NZCER national survey of secondary schools, only 59 per cent of secondary teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I am supportive of NCEA.”

Clearly there is room for further work to ensure that New Zealand has an indigenous qualification that the profession supports and that has credibility with the wider community.

This 2008 paper is largely a forward-looking paper, seeking to identify possible ways forward in terms largely of the design of the NCEA. The fact that the paper focuses on design issues does not ignore the fact that there are longstanding issues around government implementation and resourcing of the NCEA that continue to cause members significant annoyance; however, as noted below, there is an unprecedented opportunity now to address some design issues to the long-term benefit of the qualification and the students whose achievement it seeks to recognise.

## 2. Regional seminars and branch meetings

During Term 2 2008, all PPTA regions convened an all-day seminar for representatives from every secondary and area school to discuss a range of issues around NCEA. Total attendance at these seminars was 364 members, from 227 secondary and area school branches.

Before the seminars, participants were asked to consult with their branches about key issues that should be discussed, and after the seminars participants were asked to report to their branches and conduct further discussions. Data from the seminars and the post-seminar branch meetings has been collated and analysed by PPTA.

This programme of seminars and branch meetings was occasioned largely by the commencement of the Standards Review, a government project that has three major goals: to align the achievement standards and curriculum-based unit standards with the new curriculum by 2010; to address issues of duplication; and to seek to achieve credit parity.

This wide-ranging review has been supported by PPTA as an opportunity to make progress on refining the design and implementation of NCEA. It was essential that PPTA had thoroughly up-to-date information about where members stood on some of the options that might eventuate through the Standards Review.

The key questions for the seminars and branch discussions were:

- How can we move to assessment following, rather than driving, learning, in the context of the NCEA and the new curriculum?
- How can teachers reduce the amount of summative assessment they do?
- How might greater credibility of internal assessment for the NCEA be achieved?
- What constitutes quality assessment in a standards-based qualifications system?

### **3. Background**

PPTA's 2006 Annual Conference paper 'NCEA: The Work Continues' identified some key design issues that warranted consideration. The paper did not, however, make any recommendations as to whether any of these changes should be proceeded with or not, recognising that they were strongly interrelated and complex.

The kinds of ideas discussed in the 2006 paper included a move to a leaving certificate rather than separate level certificates, reducing the years at which full qualifications assessment is done, developing standards that integrate learning across a subject, moving from the current 'set menu' of achievement standards to a 'smorgasbord' of standards from which teachers would select the most appropriate standards for their class, abolition of the distinction between achievement and unit standards, eligibility for the NCEA of some of the Level 1 standards that reflect the fact that Framework Level 1 is 'flexible downwards', and whether the NCEA has sufficient numbers of grade bands.

However, as the 2007 Annual Conference paper 'NCEA: Nothing Endures but Change...' noted, political panic at the beginning of 2007 led, not to measured consideration of these ideas, but instead to the announcement of a series of policy measures that left key design issues unaddressed.

Some of the 2007 changes were valuable, such as the introduction of full-time moderators, something PPTA had been seeking for some years. Others were in the 'probably necessary' category, such as the move to random sampling for moderation. Others, such as reintroducing the reporting of Not Achieved and the move to subject endorsement, were unacceptable to PPTA, as

evidenced by resolutions moved from the floor and passed with large majorities at Annual Conference 2007.

Now, in 2008, the opportunity of the Standards Review raises the prospect of more considered and less politically-motivated change. This paper proposes for members' consideration some of the changes that discussions at the regional seminars and in branches suggest as a way forward. The headings of the paper follow the key questions discussed at the regional seminars and subsequent branch meetings.

#### **4. Putting learning back into the driving seat**

Of the 364 members who attended the regional seminars, 352 said they felt that they were 'assessment-driven' in the senior secondary school, and that this was a huge problem. The factors driving this include:

- pressure exerted on schools by league tables and by competition between schools for students
- pressure from principals and senior managers on departments and individual teachers to meet targets stated in the form of numbers of credits
- a perception that teachers are judged largely by the achievement (as seen in NCEA results) of their students
- a tendency to design courses around the availability of relevant standards that are achievable by students
- the drive to offer further opportunities for assessment to maximise student success in terms of numbers of credits and grade levels achieved
- the sheer pressure of time, in terms of coverage of planned assessments and the class time required for conducting assessments in secure conditions
- a perceived 'credit-shopping' orientation of students, which is reinforced by many teachers as a way of motivating them.

Members are clear that this central focus on summative assessment results is taking their attention away from student learning. It is at the expense of depth of learning, richness of the learning environment, and students developing a sense of enjoyment of learning for its own sake.

Members see the current Standards Review, occasioned by the need to align standards with the new curriculum, as being also a long-overdue opportunity to address issues of duplication and credit parity, and to make some refinements to the NCEA that would assist in shifting the focus from summative assessment to student learning.

## 5. School leaver documentation

Members have suggested that the highly productive work on nationally standardised school leaver documentation that was being done by a number of pilot schools in the late 1980s, but was overtaken by the introduction of the Qualifications Framework, should be restarted and developed for the 21st century context.

The goal of such work would be to ensure that schools and students focus on a much wider range of student achievements than those reflected in standards gained as listed in a Record of Achievement. A nationally-standardised format would be developed so that there was consistency between schools about the range of achievements being reported on. These could include leadership, sporting and cultural achievements, learning dispositions, work habits and so on – the kind of qualities that are reflected in schools' testimonials, only in a more standardised and informative format (see recommendation 2).

## 6. Integrative standards

Further, it has been suggested by some members that new, more integrative, standards should be developed for all subjects, beginning at Level 1. These standards, by the nature of what was being assessed, would encourage teachers who chose to use them to focus in their teaching on the development of students' key competencies, for example thinking, using language, symbols and texts, managing self, relating to others, and participating and contributing.

The proposal is that these standards would be in addition to those currently available and an option for teachers who wish to try a different approach.

To enable these standards to be named 'achievement standards', while the current distinction still applies, there would need to be a policy shift to allow achievement standards totalling more than 24 credits per subject per level to be registered. This would recognise what is, in fact, currently the practice for many subjects: by accessing unit standards as well as achievement standards teachers are drawing from a 'smorgasbord' rather than a 'set menu' of standards.

The intention here is not for the key competencies themselves to be assessed in isolation; it is to guide teachers away from a focus on content to a focus on learning capabilities. These standards would need to be developed by subject experts with a specific brief that is not currently part of the Standards Review process, and would need to be supported with high-quality sample assessment tasks and exemplars (see recommendation 3).

## 7. Reducing the quantity of summative assessment

One of the best ways to shift the focus from summative assessment to learning would be to reduce the **quantity** and improve the **quality** of summative assessment that is done in the senior school.

### 7.1. *The 24 credit formula*

Many seminar participants were surprised to learn that the formula used across the whole Qualifications Framework for assigning credit values to standards is that, for an average learner, one credit should reflect 10 hours of learning time in a combination of structured tuition, independent learning and practice, gathering and providing evidence for assessment, and performance in actual assessment tasks, both initial and further opportunities. They compared this formula with the number of credits being offered in their courses and were often shocked at the degree of over-assessment they appeared to be doing.

In development of the NCEA, a different formula was used, one that assumed that a 'subject' would constitute standards to a total of 24 credits. When trying to reconcile these two different formulae, participants could see that, for a course of 24 credits, students should have available 240 hours of learning time as described above. Assuming that an average number of school hours available for teaching, given the number of interruptions, is probably at most 25 hours x 34 weeks = 850 hours, and most schools' senior timetables contain six lines, this leaves only about 141.66 hours per subject. Teachers are unlikely to expect nearly as many hours of homework as class time, and therefore a 24-credit course is almost certainly too large. Yet some courses described at the seminars offer as many as 35 credits in the year.

Seminar participants strongly supported abolishing NCEA's 24-credit per subject formula, and making widely known to teachers the 10 hours per credit formula. Abolition of the 24-credit formula would also give official recognition to the 'smorgasbord' approach to standards that is in fact how teachers now generally behave (see above).

### 7.2 *Curriculum guidance*

A caution must be expressed about this 'smorgasbord' approach, however. Teachers should not be left to make decisions 'blind' about which standards to offer their students, as is currently the case. The absence, since the inception of the NCEA, of clear guidance about which standards are critical for students aiming towards particular career or tertiary destinations has been one of the major causes of excessive summative assessment, because teachers feel insecure about leaving out of their courses some of the standards offered in the original 24-credit 'set menus' offered for each subject at each level.

Comprehensive and regularly updated guidance needs to be made available to teachers as they personalise their courses for the students in front of them. This is very much a 21st century approach to curriculum at the senior level; while particular aspects of a subject are not mandated, teachers would make decisions in full possession of high-quality information about the consequences of their choices. Students, also, would be able to view the information, and this should help to ensure that in managing their own assessment loads they do not make wrong choices about what to give their attention to.

PPTA is happy to hear that the Ministry of Education is making good progress on senior subject-specific resources to support the implementation of the new curriculum. We are not at all happy to learn that it is intended to produce these only for subjects not strongly reflected in the curriculum document, such as Media Studies, Accounting, History and Geography. PPTA will continue to demand that these resources be produced for all senior subjects.

### *7.3 The achievement/unit standard distinction*

On learning that the guidelines for the Standards Review open up all standards on the Framework to the possibility of having merit and excellence grade levels, so long as qualitatively different levels of achievement within the Framework level of the standard can be identified, many members are wondering why there would then continue to be a distinction made between achievement and unit standards.

Recommendation 4 proposes that this distinction be abandoned, and that all Framework standards be called 'assessment standards'. This could reduce the status differential that appears to privilege achievement standards, even though unit standards in curriculum-related subjects can in fact be more difficult to achieve because of the need to be successful against every element and performance criterion.

Members would be keen to see ITOs giving consideration to the introduction of merit and excellence into their standards as they come up for review. They are also interested in the potential for curriculum-related unit standards to be given merit and excellence grades where appropriate, and perhaps to be reshaped into the more holistic format of achievement standards.

### *7.4 Reducing assessment at Level 1*

The regional seminars also focused on ways that the NCEA certificate requirements could be altered, both to reduce the quantity of summative assessment and to improve the credibility of the qualification, especially at Level 1.

In terms of the quantity of assessment, New Zealand is unusual internationally in having qualifications assessment at each of the three final years of schooling. In the United States and Canada, for example, qualifications assessment is done only in the final year, the graduating year.

In considering whether there is a level at which less qualifications assessment could be done, far more seminar participants focused on Level 1 than on any other level. While few supported the idea of abolishing the Level 1 achievement standards and certificate altogether, many were keen to see fewer credits required at Level 1.

The current requirement for students to achieve 80 credits for the Level 1 certificate, but in effect only 60 credits for the higher certificates because they are able to carry over 20 credits from the previous year, does not make a lot of sense to teachers, students or the public anyway.

Recommendation 5(a) aims to rationalise this by making all certificates the same – 60 credits – and making only credits earned at the level of the certificate, or a higher level, eligible for the certificate. This would serve both an assessment reduction purpose at Level 1 and a credibility purpose at Levels 2 and 3.

## 8. Improving the credibility of the NCEA

While the topic for discussion at the seminars and branch meetings was improving the credibility of only internal assessment, a number of ideas that emerged about certification would contribute to improving the credibility of the NCEA certificates overall.

### 8.1 *Ensuring breadth of learning*

One credibility issue at the certification level is that it is possible for a student to amass so many credits in some subjects, through ITO-owned unit standards, that they can gain a Level 2 certificate with standards from only one or two domains. The NCEA is a Certificate of **Educational** Achievement, which implies that it reflects learning across curriculum areas rather than being a specialist certificate reflecting learning in very limited areas.

Members would like to see this anomaly addressed, and the simplest approach appears to be to set a **maximum** number of credits per domain that can contribute to the certificate, so that a student would not be able to gain a certificate through only one or two subjects. Recommendation 5(b) suggests that this maximum be 24, to be consistent with the original NCEA design where achievement standards to a total credit value of 24 were written for each subject.

It is important to note that surplus credits would still be able to be recognised on a student's Record of Achievement. Recommendation 5(d), discussed further below, which calls for the introduction of literacy and numeracy requirements at Level 2, would also ensure that students would not be able to gain a certificate in only one or two areas.

This change in certificate requirements would also help to reduce the current competition for students that sometimes exists between subjects within a school, where a subject offering a large number of credits, perhaps as many as 35, can attract students more than other subjects, particularly where the credits are perceived to be relatively easily achieved.

### 8.2 *Literacy and numeracy requirements*

Recommendations 5(c) and 5(d) address literacy and numeracy requirements. Members are concerned that some of the standards that can be credited towards the numeracy requirements at Level 1 reflect a very low level of achievement, and are not likely to match the community's expectation of numeracy at Year 11. As an example, a number of the 8000 series of Mathematics standards are considered by teachers to reflect Level 4 of the curriculum, at best. In addition, the fact that some of the literacy standards require minimal reading and writing, for example the

English static image and speech standards, probably does not reflect the community's expectations about what constitutes literacy.

Members are also concerned that there are currently no literacy or numeracy requirements for Level 2. This has enabled some students to gain a Level 2 certificate without having met the literacy and numeracy requirements for a Level 1 certificate.

Members would like to see a review of these requirements, with a view to developing, for Levels 1 and 2, specific literacy and numeracy standards to a total of eight credits for each area. These would be available as an alternative to English and Maths standards at these levels. They could be focused on essential life skills and work skills literacy and numeracy.

The Level 1 literacy and numeracy standards could be at Level 5 of the curriculum, and the Level 2 standards could be at Level 5 or 6 of the curriculum, enabling access to them for most students by the end of their schooling.

## **9. Other quality improvements**

### *9.1 Phased implementation*

In its submission on the draft curriculum, PPTA argued that implementation should be phased over a significant number of years. The previous national curricula were implemented one learning area at a time, over quite long timeframes. In contrast, schools are being expected to implement the whole of the new curriculum within two years.

This is a huge workload issue for secondary schools, as it also means that the revised assessment standards are expected to all come into use in one year. This does not make sense, especially in subjects such as Maths and Science where there has been relatively significant change in the curriculum that will be reflected in the revised standards. Year 11 students in 2010 will have been taught in accordance with the previous curriculum, but under the current timeframes would have to be assessed by standards that match the new curriculum. This is clearly unfair.

Recommendation 6 calls for phased implementation of the new curriculum and the related assessment standards, with Years 7–10, the years before qualifications assessment, shifting to the new curriculum in 2010, but Year 11 making the move to the new curriculum and standards a year later, in 2011; Year 12 in 2012; and Year 13 in 2013.

A further benefit of this phased implementation would be that more time could be given to the Standards Review process for school standards. The current timelines are extremely tight, and contracting subject associations are concerned that they cannot do a good enough job under such conditions. It is better to take a little longer to do a good job, rather than do a poor job in an inadequate timeframe, and then have to revisit it soon after to remedy defects caused by the rush.

## 9.2 *Inadequate support for implementation*

Not surprisingly, a huge number of current concerns about support for NCEA implementation have also emerged from seminars and branch discussions. Many of these are issues that PPTA has been highlighting for as long as the NCEA has been in place – or longer – and the database of concerns generated by the seminars and branch meetings will prove an invaluable resource for continued lobbying by the union.

The lack of adequate support for NCEA implementation has been a significant cause of excessive secondary teacher workload since at least 2002, and it has also contributed to considerable anxiety among teachers about whether they are ‘doing the right thing’ in a vacuum caused by lack of guidance. The concerns highlighted in recommendation 7 are those that would most significantly and immediately increase the credibility of the NCEA and the manageability of assessment.

Members are particularly concerned at the continued existence of a ‘school down the road’ syndrome, where teachers are largely confident about the assessment practices in their own department and school, but not confident that these are being reflected consistently on a national scale. This worries teachers immensely, and it endangers the credibility of the qualification in the public eye.

Through the Standards Review, significant progress will be made towards better consistency. Every standard will have a section entitled ‘Conditions of Assessment’ in which there will be guidelines regarding appropriate ways to collect evidence of achievement, the number of assessment opportunities that it would be appropriate to make available to students, and the strategies needed to ensure that the work is authentically the student’s own. Furthermore, NZQA plans to publish a set of national guidelines about further opportunities for assessment across the NCEA.

Members are keen to see these improvements happen, so long as they do not overly reduce teacher flexibility or increase teachers’ assessment workloads.

Recommendation 7 brings together a number of well-known implementation concerns that teachers are still waiting to see addressed. The areas they cover are no surprise: improvement in professional development; improvements in the assessment resources on TKI; introduction of a service providing advice on assessment tasks before they are used in schools; staffing improvements to give teachers time to do the assessment work they must do and still have time to develop engaging and productive learning opportunities for students; and time for Principals’ Nominees to carry out their vital leadership and compliance role.

## 10. Conclusions

At a time when there is a real prospect of significant refinement of the NCEA, PPTA is in a very strong position because it has in-depth knowledge of what NCEA improvements its members would like to see happen, both in the short-term and in the medium-term future.

The recommendations in this paper provide a pathway forward that has the support of PPTA members. The government would be unwise to ignore the signs erected here to guide it on that pathway.

### Recommendations

1. That the report be received.
2. That PPTA encourage work to be done on the development of a nationally standardised leaver profile that recognises a wider range of student achievements than those reflected in their Record of Achievement.
3. That new internally assessed standards be developed for each subject at Level 1 that encourage teachers to focus on the development of students' key competencies within the particular subject.
4. That PPTA work towards the elimination of the Framework terminologies 'unit standards' and 'achievement standards', and replacing them with the term 'assessment standards' for all Framework standards, regardless of their ownership or the number of grade levels they offer.
5. That PPTA's policy position on NCEA certification include the following changes:
  - a. the NCEA certificate credit requirement be 60 credits at or above the level for Levels 1–3
  - b. introduction of a maximum number of 24 credits per domain that can be credited towards an NCEA certificate at any level
  - c. development of new literacy and numeracy standards (8 credits each) that reflect a minimum of Level 5 of the curriculum, to be available as an alternative to Level 1 English and Maths standards to meet the literacy/numeracy requirements of the Level 1 certificate.
  - d. introduction of new literacy and numeracy requirements (8 credits each) for the Level 2 certificate, and that the options at this level include purpose-designed literacy and numeracy standards for students unlikely to succeed in Level 2 English and Maths standards.

6. That PPTA demand that at secondary level the ministry stage the mandating of implementation of the NZ Curriculum, with Years 7–10 in 2010, Year 11 in 2011, Year 12 in 2012, and Year 13 in 2013, and that revised assessment standards be registered for use in accordance with that timeline.
7. That PPTA reiterates its demand for adequate support for the NCEA in terms of:
  - a. reintroduction of the senior subject advisory service, with advisors available for all curriculum-related senior subjects
  - b. significant improvements in the quality, quantity, range and accessibility of professional development to support the NCEA, including for specific target groups such as new, returning and overseas teachers, HODs and teachers in isolated situations
  - c. use of full-time moderators and subject specialists to radically improve the quantity and quality of sample assessment resources and exemplars of student work available on TKI
  - d. investigation of options for providing a secure website for assessment resources and exemplars
  - e. investigation of options for offering pre-moderation or subject expert guidance for teacher-developed assessment tasks
  - f. staffing improvements to provide time for teachers to develop assessment tasks and carry out internal moderation processes
  - g. targeted staffing improvements to provide time for Principal's Nominees to carry out their responsibilities.