

Strong Criticism of New Qualification, NCEA

Mr John Morris, acting chairman of the Education Forum and headmaster at Auckland Grammar School, recently released three reports on the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), all of which are highly critical of this new school qualification.

The first report, by Education Forum consultant Dr Kevin Donnelly, Executive Director, Education Strategies, Melbourne, shows that the NCEA is based on a form of assessment that is inherently flawed and, from an international perspective, sub-standard.

Dr Donnelly found no clear international precedent for the NCEA and reports that in important respects it diverges significantly from arrangements employed by educationally successful countries. "It is incomprehensible," said Mr Morris, "that education officials are promoting a well-documented model of failure rather than one followed by successful countries. Their claim that the NCEA 'combines the best assessment practices, here and overseas, of the last 20 years' is without foundation."

The second report, prepared by the Education Forum, draws on an analysis of the NCEA supplied by Professor Alan Smithers of Liverpool University and emphasises the consequences of a wholesale shift to a form of standards-based assessment and the breaking up of each subject into several Achievement Standards. "This is a rerun of unit standards with many of their problems", said Mr Morris. "In

most senior school subjects it is simply not possible to specify clear unambiguous standards and, consequently, under the NCEA teaching and learning will reflect a restricted, narrow view of education concentrating on what can be marked by ticking boxes while omitting or trivialising higher-order aspects."

The third report is a short summary drawing on these two main reports as well as on local academic research. These reports may be found on the following websites: www.nzbr.org.nz; www.ags.school.nz; and www.kingscollege.school.nz.¹

The Education Forum comprises people from primary, secondary

and tertiary sectors of education, as well as business people. Some educators say the inclusion of business people compromises the Forum's objectivity. In other words, they are biased. But so is the PPTA. And the Principals' Federation. And the NZQA. Everyone is biased. It's one of those things that happens everytime you express an opinion.

Education Secretary Howard Fancy has defended the NCEA, saying it was as credible as the current qualifications and would challenge superior students.

Still, frustration levels seem to be escalating. The Canterbury-based lobby group, Concerned Teachers, actually gate-crashed the Post Primary Teachers' Association conference in Wellington on Thursday 28 September in the infamous "guinea pig" affair.

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Gaining Access to the Schools' Resources

An issue which comes up quite regularly in discussions among home education support groups around the country is whether home educated students have access to the educational, sporting and social activities provided by the local schools.

The Home Education Foundation wrote to the New Zealand School Trustees Association for their perspective on the issue

The letter stated in part: "There are times when home educators would like to take advantage of certain specialist resources often available at high schools, such as chemistry and physics laboratories or wood/metal shop, etc. How would the NZSTA advise home educators as a group

to proceed? Is it an issue that can be mandated in an across-the-board policy, or is it more properly dealt with at the local school board level through personal negotiations?"

NZSTA President Chris France sent the following reply dated 6 September 2000:

I can advise that as each of New Zealand's schools is self-governing, it would be inappropriate for this association, or any other body, to direct boards across the country to adopt a particular policy. It would therefore be necessary for members of your group to take up each request directly with the school involved, and for that school to make an independent decision.

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National organiser for the anti-NCEA group Maggie Lovekin, who dumped the animals on the floor in the middle of a speech by Minister of Education Trevor Mallard said, "We didn't want the conference to become a rubber stamp for the NCEA when there is such concern out there among teachers. We are sick of being used as guinea pigs." And although many teachers acknowledged that the NCEA improved the present assessment structure, they also said it had too many flaws in certain subject areas, and would increase teachers' workloads and stress.²

From 2002 it is intended that a new National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) should become the main secondary school qualification in New Zealand. The NCEA will be based largely on so-called Achievement Standards. It is untried and a radically different form of senior school certification for which there is no successful precedent anywhere in the world. It will be introduced over three years, progressively replacing School Certificate, Sixth Form

Certificate and Bursary. The present third form cohort will, in 2002, be the first to work towards level 1. Level 2 is to be introduced in 2003 and level 3 in 2004. So the present third formers will be an experimental group throughout their three years of senior secondary schooling.

Academic analyses have been highly critical of what is proposed. Professor Cedric Hall of Victoria University of Wellington has concluded that the Achievement Standards will lack reliability and public credibility. Dr Terry Locke of the University of Waikato has severely criticised the lack of content in Achievement Standards and the method of grading and reporting. Dr Lydia Austin of the University of Auckland has pointed out the damage to education that will be caused by the fragmentation of subjects into Achievement Standards and their likely lack of challenge to able students.

Will the NCEA lead to sound teaching and learning?

No, because:

Decomposing subjects into between five and eight fragments at each of the three levels for separate assessment and reporting will undermine subject coherence and the importance of integrating understanding.

The approach adopted by the NCEA starts from the false assumption that all senior school education can be broken up in the same way and the bits then linked through levels and credits without loss of educational integrity. Administrative coherence has been given priority over the coherence of subjects.

It is simply not possible to express all senior school learning

in unambiguous, clear "standards" against which work can be assessed, and to differentiate clearly the levels and grades. Clear standards can be set for readily definable repetitive skills (eg typing, reading a thermometer), but this is not possible for measuring understanding where large bodies of knowledge are involved, or students' ability to use generic skills in areas requiring a large knowledge base.

While it is true that students will be able to choose from a vast range of subject fragments, the Achievement and Unit Standards, the combinations chosen may not be educationally sound. The notion of educationally coherent programmes is largely lost.

Will the NCEA add to the workload of teachers and schools?

Yes, because:

Dividing up subjects into several Achievement Standards will cause very significant additional work in recording and reporting assessments and will further erode teaching time. Instead of 30 or so subjects on offer at any one level there will be some 200 Achievement Standards as well as Unit Standards. Instead of taking six or so subjects a student could take some 40 Achievement Standards each year or 120 over three years in the senior school.

Will the NCEA provide useful information about students and differentiate sufficiently between them?

No, because:

It will be impossible to discriminate between students who gained credits at the first attempt from those who had to make two or more attempts. There are no national rules about how often an Achievement or Unit Standard may be attempted and reassessed and at what intervals.

Achievement Standards will not, as claimed, tell users "exactly" what the holders know and can do. Many of the Achievement Standards could apply to 11-year-olds just as well

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Hear, my son, your father's
instruction, and reject not your

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Trading Post



Attention:

Could Home Educator from Brookby who wanted this book please contact me again as I've lost your details!
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as to 16-year-olds.³

While students will be able to select learning elements from a vast range of Achievement Standards and some Unit Standards, and can "mix and match" academic and vocational standards, the selections will be individual and may make little overall educational sense. The notion of a coherent programme or course of learning is largely lost. Thus the educational incoherence produced by the fragmentation of subjects may well be exacerbated by the particular combinations of subject "bits" chosen. This "cafeteria" approach is not at all like the "pathways" approach usually employed by educationally successful continental European and Asian countries.⁴

Of itself, the proposed NCEA is at too high a level of generality to be useful to the universities and employers in the decisions they have to take. They will be looking to the subjects studied and courses followed, and how well the applicant has done in them. Universities are likely to set prerequisites for entry or to adopt some scaling device to ensure that inappropriate Achievement or Unit Standards are not unfairly recognised for entry. Students will be pursuing different combinations of courses and programmes according to their abilities, interests and aspirations, and these need to be denoted in some way.

Somewhat surprisingly in view of the numerous criticisms of Unit Standards, the Ministry has settled on Achievement Standards as the building blocks of the new framework. Achievement Standards seem to differ from Unit Standards in only three ways – there are fewer, they are stated somewhat differently and an attempt is made to define three levels of performance – credit, merit and excellence.

For the subject history, for example, there were 13 Unit Standards (NZQA, 1996a) at

Level 1, and six Achievement Standards are now proposed. Five of the Unit Standards, however, are in essence the same, one has been dropped, and the other seven have been conflated into one, "describe the identity of people(s) in New Zealand historical settings". In physics (NZQA, 1996b), there were 12 Unit Standards and six Achievement Standards are proposed. One of the Unit Standards has been retained but the others (which seemed almost designed to break up old notions of physics) have been redrawn to restore some of the normally accepted areas – mechanics, light and waves, electricity and magnetism, and heat transfer and nuclear physics.

Consider the verbal contortions that have to go into stating the grades for the first Achievement Standard in English – "produce developed creative writing". At Level 2, the four criteria for merit differ from the four criteria for credit only in the addition of the six words in italics: "develop idea (s) *convincingly* with detail, *showing mature thought*, in a piece of creative writing"; "use a *controlled* writing style to create effects appropriate to audience, purpose and text type"; and "structure material *clearly* in a way that is appropriate to audience, purpose and text type". The fourth criterion is the same: "*use writing conventions accurately*". The four criteria for excellence rely on the addition of six further words: "*and which commands attention*" is added to the second criterion and "*and effectively*" is added after "clearly" in the third. A similar exercise is gone through for each Achievement Standard at each level with excellence, merit and credit being distinguished usually by the addition of just a few words.⁵

Notes:

1. From Press Release by the Education Forum, 4 September 2000.
2. From Christchurch Press article by Tara Ross, Friday 29 September 2000.

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3. From Education Forum's Report "What Teachers and Parents Should Know About the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)".

4. "New Zealand's National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA): An International Perspective", by Dr Kevin Donnelly, p. 20.

5. From "Policy Direction for School Qualification: A Report on the National Certificate of Educational Achievement" by Education Forum, Aug 2000, pp. 21-23.

Why Are School Qualifications Important?

This question was asked and answered within the Education Forum's own report "What Teachers and Parents Should Know About the NCEA". To many home educators the answer seems fairly shallow and makes one wonder what this huge expensive schooling edifice is really all about. (The report's words are in *italics*.)

School qualifications are very important because they assist tertiary institutions and employers in candidate selection. Thus, for students, qualifications open or close doors to tertiary places and job opportunities. [There is a bit of a contradiction here. Qualifications are said to only "assist" in selection, but then said to "open or close doors". A rapidly growing number of home educated young people are discovering that they need no paper qualifications at all to get into university or secure a job. Tertiary institutions offer provisional enrolments and bosses offer jobs to people who can successfully market themselves in personal interviews.] *They mainly attest to intellectual abilities.* [Many studies have shown that employers are looking for a lot more than this. And tertiary admissions officers can get all they need to know of one's intellectual ability to handle a first year course during the interview.] *Information on students' other important personal attributes is*

often sought by employers and tertiary institutions from records of participation in extra-curricular activities, from referees and by interview. [Again, home educated individuals will not neglect to mention all their other activities, to show their character references and portfolio of work/achievements or to polish their interpersonal skills for the interview. So why ARE school qualifications so important when we can provide these things mentioned so easily ourselves?]

Ministerial Working Party on Home Schooling

This has turned into a "hurry up and wait" scenario. A letter from Sandra Murray of the Ministry's National Operations dated 2 October said, "Consideration is still being given to the establishment of the Working Party, and I anticipate that final decisions are still a few weeks away." In addition, the Home Schooling Federation has pulled out of the Working Party, saying in its letter declaring its non-participation, "The way the Ministry has conducted itself means that we do not think that they can be trusted in a Working Party context. As discussed above, for a Working Party to be effective, all its members have to behave with integrity, and there can be no Working Party without the Ministry being involved." It is sincerely hoped that the Ministry will not perceive these actions and attitudes as in any way characteristic or prevalent among home educators in general.

Singaporean Home Educators

Schooling is not compulsory in Singapore! But it will be when the new Compulsory Education Act is due to be passed in their Parliament by end of this year. Our correspondent, Paul Chong, says the small group of Singaporean home educators are now rejoicing in the news that the 14-member Committee on Compulsory Education, formed in October last year after Prime

Minister Goh Chok Tong suggested introducing compulsory education, has indicated that exemptions will be given to certain groups, including themselves. These exemptions, however, will not be freely given out but will have certain, as yet unspecified, conditions attached. The compulsory requirements only apply to primary students and are set to come into effect in 2005.

Behaviour Problems Escalating

In the year to July there were 5000 suspensions and 16,000 children stood down from school, according to an Education Ministry report. This accounts for 110 suspensions or stand-downs each school day, significantly greater than the 79 per day in the quarterly report released by the Ministry in September last year.

Suspensions are defined as formal removal from the school pending a board of trustees' decision about expulsion or exclusions. Stand-downs are the formal removal of students for specified periods. Only students 16 years and over can be expelled.

The ministry report shows the most common reasons for suspensions were drugs (1506 cases), continual disobedience (1091), and physical assault on students (767 cases).

The highest rates of stand-downs and suspensions were on the West Coast, where 14.6 students in every 1000 were suspended and 48.5 in every 1000 stood down, compared with only 12 and 17.5 in Christchurch.

Home Educators Score Well on ACT Tests

The ACT (American College Testing) Program released figures last August showing that while the average composite score of American high school students was 21, home-schooled teens scored 22.8 on the scale of 36. The scores on the 3 1/2 hour, 215 multiple-choice questions on four subjects test are accepted by virtually all U.S. universities.