

Shambles of NCEA fully predictable

by John Morris

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Over the past year I have deliberately stayed out of the public debate surrounding the NCEA, preferring instead to focus on ensuring its successful implementation at Auckland Grammar School and also concentrating on ensuring our students were well prepared for the Cambridge University International Examinations.



But all the publicity about inconsistent results in level 4 Scholarship and, in fact, at all other levels of the qualification warrants comment.

All the problems and issues have been well signposted by several practising educators for many years. As part of the principals' lead group in the 1990s set up to debate qualifications reform, I became familiar with the options being discussed and, in particular, with the seemingly doctrinaire commitment of Qualifications Authority and Ministry of Education officials to a standards-based assessment system.

In a perfect world there is probably a place for both the traditional, exam-based, norm-referenced assessment system which, in essence, reports results of a student in comparison to other students, and the alternative standards-based system, which essentially entails reporting results in terms of judgments about how much students should know.

These systems are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Nevertheless, when we are forced to rely absolutely on a standards-based system that has been proved overseas to be unsuitable for conventional academic subjects, the whole credibility of our previously well-regarded qualifications system is put in doubt.

In Britain, educational assessment experts like Alison Wolf have thoroughly researched this whole area of assessment. Her conclusion: standards-based assessment practices "have already reached the highwater-mark and will fade from some areas but will probably survive in the areas for which it is designed – the trades and vocational education".

In the United States, educationists Candy and Harris went even further: "Standards-based assessment has had a chequered career ... most educators find its approach excessively mechanistic; others criticise it for focusing on observable and frequently trivial learning outcomes; others arguing that knowledge is simply not amenable to such rigid compartmentalisation."

The frustration in all this is that the Qualifications Authority consistently refused to accept that standards-based assessment alone would not give fair or transparent results consistently. It believed that it was possible to devise a system which was valid and reliable, the two cornerstones of any reputable qualifications system, this despite copious evidence to the contrary.

I have made numerous submissions over the years on these matters, predicting that the introduction of a standards-based assessment system would:

- Undermine the coherence of individual subjects and the importance of integrating understanding.
- Increase teacher and student workloads as a result of the introduction of a significant proportion of internal assessment in all subjects.
- Encourage plagiarism, copying, excessive parental help and use of internet sites that supply students with ready-made assignments and essays because of the increased emphasis on internal assessment.
- Remove comparability between schools.
- Remove a consistent national standard and benchmark.
- Complicate reporting to students, parents and employers.
- Create uncertainty in university entrance qualifications.

All these have unfortunately come to fruition and the consequence is that our students are being subjected to an artificial and inappropriate way to assess many subjects, particularly academic ones.

Moreover, the assessment dog is wagging the syllabus tail to a far greater extent than under previous qualifications.

But worse than this, the methodology of standards-based assessment continues to throw up anomalous and inconsistent results that are blatantly unfair to students. Children unfortunately have to rely for their qualifications on a fundamentally flawed assessment system that is neither valid, reliable nor manageable.

While Auckland Grammar School offers both national and international qualifications I am still bitterly disappointed that our education masters in the ministry and the authority did not have the wisdom to see that standards-based assessment is neither a fair nor transparent system.

My recollection of our many meetings in Wellington in the 1990s was the perceived need to bring some equity to qualification aggregation, and the standards-based assessment methodology was seen as the way to achieve this; that is, the way for all learners to succeed. In authority-speak there are no learner failures, only programme failures.

Karl Stead said it all in an article he wrote in 1992: "You cannot create equality by legislation; you can only

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create opportunity and let time and individuals do their work. Equality of opportunity is the moral principle. Inequality of talent, energy, commitment, intelligence, strength of purpose and will is the fact of life."

This is not meant to undermine the efforts being made to provide a wide range of students in increasingly philosophically diverse schools with appropriate and challenging courses. But surely everyone deserves from their efforts a qualification that is valid and meaningful.

Good assessment is vital to improving education. Any qualifications system must acknowledge the principle that good assessment enhances learning; is valid and reliable; is fair, ethical and consistent; uses multiple methods; and is efficient and feasible.

The last word should go to Catherine Taylor, another American academic with a bent towards alternative assessment. Having researched and analysed the different forms of assessment she observed: "Large-scale assessments (viz, external exams) currently serve two important assessment needs – they provide accountability information about schools and districts, and they establish a consistent standard of measurement for students."

Her belief is that the standards-based model is not able to meet these needs and, therefore, can never successfully replace the norm-referenced model of assessment.

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the Education Forum

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