

New Zealand dumbs down its senior school

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Competition, striving for excellence and being the best in the world – in sport, such things are taken for granted. Whether in the America's Cup, the forthcoming Sydney Olympics or the tri-nations rugby crown, New Zealanders and Australians love to outdo one another and to come first.



Can the same be said for the curriculum and assessment regimes being forced on New Zealand schools? Unfortunately, judging by the new and quite radical National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), the answer is 'no'.

Instead of recognising and rewarding academic excellence, the NCEA promotes mediocrity and 'dumbs down' the school curriculum. Instead of 'benchmarking', or comparing, the certificate against the best senior school certificates around the world, the designers of the NCEA are happy to ignore 'best-practice' and to simply go it alone.

The reality is that overseas countries whose students perform best in international tests, such as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), have highly competitive

examination systems which clearly differentiate between the interests and abilities of different students.

In countries like Singapore, Japan and the Netherlands, for example, students follow quite separate vocational or academic streams. This is unlike the NCEA, where all students will have to complete the one certificate in the mistaken belief that 'one size fits all'.

The world's best senior school certificates also put the stress on external, objective examinations to ensure consistency of marking and comparability of grades. Once again, the NCEA does the opposite by emphasising school-based assessment where individual teachers will grade assessment projects often completed outside the classroom.

As shown so graphically by the failed Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which was introduced in Victoria, Australia, in 1990, the problem is that the approach adopted by the NCEA cannot guarantee that students do their own work.

Once the NCEA is implemented, apparently without being properly trialed, it will also be impossible to ensure that grades across schools are comparable or that the levels of stress and workload on students and teachers can be properly contained.

Of course, those who designed the NCEA will argue that a process will be put in place to ensure things do not

go wrong and that students are not unfairly disadvantaged. As shown by the continued changes and modifications to the VCE, the fact is that strategies like school-based moderation do not work.

Indeed, such has been the public outcry against the VCE that the most recent in a long series of reviews, that have taken place almost annually since the certificate was first introduced, recommends returning to an emphasis on external examinations and reducing the place of internal assessment.

Those responsible for the NCEA proudly claim that by adopting what is termed a 'standards' approach to curriculum and assessment the new certificate "combines the best assessment practices, here and overseas, of the last 20 years...". Once again, the facts tell a totally different story.

The one education system that has most experience with implementing a 'standards' approach (standards focus on learning outcomes and detail what students should know and be able to do) is the United States. Over the last 10 to 15 years in America there has been a raging public debate about whether 'standards' are academically sound.

The consensus is that 'standards', or what the Americans sometimes call 'outcomes', are often so vague, nebulous and academically weak that, if implemented, they would 'dumb-down' the curriculum and put generations of students at risk.

The American Federation of Teachers has gone so far as to rank the various state-based 'standards' documents and has argued that good standards must be based on academic subjects, be specific and measurable, demanding and related to specific year levels. Unfortunately, the majority of 'standards' documents fail to meet the criteria.

No comparable education system in the world has successfully enacted a 'standards-based' approach to senior school

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certification, yet this is what New Zealand is about to do. In fact, those certificates generally admired, such as the English 'A' Levels, adopt the opposite approach.

In an increasingly competitive and challenging international environment all agree that countries, if they are to survive and prosper, must embrace the so-called 'knowledge-based economy'.

Ireland's success in becoming one of the world's leading information technology centres graphically demonstrates the vital contribution of a strong and vigorous education system – one that promotes and rewards academic excellence and ensures strong public trust and confidence.

Unfortunately, the NCEA fails in this regard. Not only does the certificate embrace an inherently flawed and sub-standard form of curriculum and assessment, both in theory and in practice, but it also represents a leap of faith in a largely untested system.

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