



# Spoiled by choice

## How NCEA hampers education, and what it needs to succeed

Briar Lipson

Education is about learning. However, as assessment expert Alison Wolf explains:

...formal education is also, and intrinsically, about selection and certification... ~ Wolf, A. (2008)

This is why national assessments exist. New Zealand's is NCEA – the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. It was introduced in 2002-04.

Born out of discontent with the old university-dominated system, NCEA was not designed to enable selection. Rather it was designed to be inclusive, through affording vast flexibility. It achieves this by dividing all subjects into multiple, smaller 'standards' – a process known as 'chunking.' All subjects are valued equally, and most standards are internally assessed.

The logic is to empower schools and teachers to develop cross-curricular courses and bespoke assessments. This way students can gain qualifications in specific skills or knowledge without needing to master whole subjects. The hope is that this way schooling becomes more child-centred, practical, relevant and engaging to the full spectrum of students.

Such was NCEA's promise: but its flexibility has been bought at unquantified cost.

### Costs to students

Ministry data shows that between 2001 and 2016 the difference between the percentage of Māori and All students achieving Level 3 (or its equivalent) has narrowed. However, in the more meaningful benchmark of *University Entrance*, the gap has grown even wider.

International PISA data shows that since testing began in 2002, New Zealand's educational equity has worsened and

our 15-year-olds' reading, maths and science scores have almost constantly declined. This contrasts starkly with the same period's NCEA data, which shows ever-improving performance and rising equity.

If NCEA data can paint a picture of constant improvement, while almost all other measures expose decline, there is reason to believe we have a problem.

Added to this, 2014 research by the Tertiary Education Commission found that within a sample of 800 Year 12 students with NCEA Level 2, 40% failed an international test of functional reading and 42% failed it in numeracy. How can students be succeeding in NCEA when they lack basic skills in reading and maths?

In pursuit of flexibility and inclusion, NCEA all but abandoned the idea of a core curriculum requirement. Instead, nowadays, students need only ten loosely defined Level 1 credits in literacy and in numeracy. Beyond this, all subjects – from meat processing to mathematics – are valued equally.

This means well-advised or motivated students can still achieve a broad and valuable education. However, for poorly-advised or less motivated students, NCEA also offers a plethora of 'safer' alternatives. These will maximise NCEA success by avoiding academically challenging content. With pressure on teachers and schools to drive up NCEA pass rates, some students may even be *encouraged* towards these safer choices.

This way, NCEA's flexibility ensures almost all students achieve a qualification, and creates glowing headline figures for government and schools. However, the downside is that NCEA also masks huge variation in students' achievements; it widens disadvantage while hiding it behind an alluring facade.

## Costs to teachers and teaching

NCEA exerts unintended negative consequences on the most important interaction in schooling: that between teacher and student.

For example, although chunking enables course flexibility, it also increases assessment volume. And because most assessment now happens internally, NCEA increases teachers' workloads.

'Teaching to the test' describes the practice of coaching students in the detail of exam questions and selected content, to boost their short-term performance in assessments rather than their long-term learning. Some teaching to the test is inevitable with any high stakes assessment. However, at least three features of NCEA's flexible design exacerbate the practice.

## Costs to end-users

Many employers are vexed by NCEA's complexity and disappointed by school leavers' skills. Although *University Entrance* restricts NCEA's flexibility, too many students miss out because they fail to realise the implications of their choices. Universities also reverse-engineer NCEA data to create crude, yet life-defining rankings.

## Recommendations

The recommendations in this report will raise expectations and equity by creating a safety-net of core subjects all students must master. They will reduce teachers' workloads and the volume of assessment, reduce the opportunities and incentives to teach to the test, and improve teaching and learning.

**Recommendation 1: Raise English (and Te Reo) and maths requirements:** The government should amend NCEA so that achievement at Level 1 or higher requires a minimum number of Level 1 credits in the core subjects of English (or Te Reo) and maths. This new list of eligible standards should replace the current literacy and numeracy requirements. It should also demand levels of mastery that ensure all students with NCEA also meet international benchmarks for functional literacy and numeracy.

**Recommendation 2: Expect a broader core of subjects:** The government should signal higher expectations of the breadth of core subjects all students must master in school (two suggestions as to how this might be achieved are given in the final chapter).

## Recommendation 3: Reduce the number of standards:

The government should reduce the number of standards so that within a particular subject there is minimal to no choice and each standard covers a bigger and broader set of skills and knowledge (there is far less 'chunking down'). The optimal size and number of standards may vary for different subjects, to be determined by subject and assessment experts. However, broadly the ambition might be set to reduce the number of standards in a subject at each level from 6-8 to 1-3.

## Recommendation 4: Make it harder to teach to the test:

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) should rely more heavily on the reassurance provided by elements of norm-referencing (e.g. PEPs and the cut score procedure during grade score marking) to move away from such close matching of external assessment to past assessments and specifications. Instead, they should inject elements of 'surprise' that encourage teachers to teach the breadth of their subject's curriculum, rather than to its assessments. Reference tests could also be deployed to help examiners identify national level changes in students' performance over time.

**Recommendation 5: Reduce reliance on internal assessment:** The government should reduce NCEA's reliance on internal assessment, so it is used only where external assessments cannot capture performance in essential areas.

**Recommendation 6: Use Comparative Judgement software:** NZQA should use Comparative Judgement (CJ) software to improve the reliability and efficiency of the processes available to judge external and internal assessments. CJ would also better capture genuine quality in essay-type assessments, and equip assessors to ask more open-ended and creative questions.

**Recommendation 7: Commission independent analysis:** The Ministry of Education should openly evaluate NCEA's effects by commissioning and publishing independent analysis (various suggestions are given in the final chapter).

Recommendations 1-5 trade some of NCEA's flexibility for higher equity and standards. In the short term, they may generate a *drop* in NCEA achievement. However, in the longer-term, these recommendations will raise expectations, equity and outcomes across the board.

This report is published to coincide with the launch of the Ministry of Education's statutory review of NCEA. It will be followed in due course by a sequel on the New Zealand Curriculum.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Briar Lipson** is a Research Fellow specialising in education. Before joining the Initiative she was a maths teacher and Assistant Principal in London, where she also co-founded the Floreat family of primary schools. Briar has worked for International Education Trust CfBT, and the Westminster think tank Policy Exchange. She holds a Masters Degree in Economics from the University of Edinburgh.