

NCEA | Taumata Mātauranga ā-Motu Kua Taea

NCEA Review 2018

Over-assessment and its impact on students and teachers

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NZQA requires each qualification registered on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework to be regularly reviewed so that the qualification remains useful and relevant and continues to meet the needs of the learners, industry and stakeholders for which it was developed. NCEA is scheduled to be reviewed by December 2018.

This paper describes the precursors, developments and ongoing improvements to NCEA | Taumata Mātauranga ā-Motu Kua Taea.¹ It is a critical starting point for the review.

Focusing question

How can we use the flexibility of the NCEA system to avoid over-assessment while maintaining the integrity of the qualification?

Background

Since NCEA was introduced in 2002, students, parents and educators have raised concerns with over-assessment. This paper looks at the issues and recommendations from recent reports by the Education Review Office², NZCER³ and the Secondary Teacher Workload Working Group.⁴

It considers the impact of NCEA workload on well-being and the impact on curriculum and assessment design and assessment practices.

“Workload can impact on teacher satisfaction, retention and well-being and this has a flow-on effect to student learning and well-being.”⁵

NZCER has surveyed secondary schools/kura every three years since 2003. The latest survey was done in July and August 2015 and found the following:

- 65% of principals thought that NCEA workload was a major issue facing their schools/kura (an increase from 49% in 2012 and 39% in 2009). This may suggest that school leaders are more aware of the workload issues related to NCEA practices in their schools/kura.
- 51% of teachers felt this was a major issue – a slight drop from 2012 when NCEA and The New Zealand Curriculum were being aligned but more than in 2009 (46%).

The reports highlight four areas for consideration.

¹ Taumata Mātauranga ā-Motu Kua Taea is the Māori name for NCEA. “NCEA” is inclusive of both Māori and English medium.

² ERO, *Wellbeing for Young People’s Success at Secondary School*, 2015.

³ NZCER national survey findings, *Secondary Schools in 2015*, 2015.

⁴ *Secondary Teacher Workload Working Group report*, 2016.

⁵ *ibid.*



Over-assessment and its impact on student well-being

The well-being of students is seen as “central to their success as confident lifelong learners”. (ERO, 2015)

The ERO report and the recent OECD PISA report⁶ on student well-being looked at schoolwork-related anxiety and the ways schools/kura can promote well-being.

ERO’s report stated that:

“The key finding from this evaluation was that students in all schools were experiencing a very assessment-driven curriculum and assessment anxiety. Achieving academic success is a part of well-being but is not the only factor.”

The PISA report found that schoolwork-related anxiety is common among 15-year-olds and is negatively related to performance at school and to life satisfaction.

There is no accurate measure of the levels of anxiety being experienced by year 11 to 13 students. However, ERO has highlighted that schools/kura need to be proactive, so that the effects of assessment-related workload do not have a negative impact on academic and social outcomes for students.

While the effects of assessment-related overload can contribute to assessment anxiety, other factors are also relevant and any changes must also take these into account. For example:

- the socio-economic status or decile of schools/kura
- the mix of internal and external assessment
- student confidence levels
- how students perceive assessments and how the practices and communications of teachers around assessments can influence this perception
- parental understanding and support of NCEA.

ERO recommends that schools/kura actively promote a supportive and positive learning environment.

The design of assessment programmes in schools and kura

More qualifications are offered at schools in New Zealand than most other countries. Traditionally there has been high stakes assessment in the last three years of secondary school in New Zealand. Most OECD countries have only two consecutive years of high stakes assessment.

⁶ OECD, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students’ Well-being*, 2015.



Prior to 2002, New Zealand students could gain three different qualifications in the last three years of school: School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and the University Entrance award and Bursary/Scholarship.

The purpose of introducing three levels of NCEA certificate was to create a more flexible and unified set of qualifications, which recognised a wider range of learning that supported pathways into tertiary learning and employment.

It is important to consider whether the issues around workload arise directly from the design of NCEA or from a school's curriculum and assessment programme.

In 2016, 86.5% of the participating year 11 cohort gained NCEA level 1.⁷ Teachers have a significant workload in managing the assessment and moderation to achieve this result.

The Secondary Teacher Workload Working Group recommended considering the advantages of reducing the number of credits required to achieve NCEA level 1 and that schools/kura focus on NCEA assessment in the second and third years of secondary school.

Not all students benefit from NCEA level 1. Some students need to staircase into NCEA level 2 by completing NCEA level 1, but this is not required for all students. For example, one school/kura has opted out of NCEA level 1, while another is using level 1 achievement as part of a two-year pathway towards level 2. These are relatively recent changes in assessment programmes, both at new schools/kura who are establishing new structures and programmes. More resistance and obstacles are encountered at schools/kura with well-established teaching and learning and assessment programmes. The Ministry's collaborative approach through the formation of Communities of Learning | Kāhui Ako can provide opportunities for innovative thinking around this issue.

It is important to look at the proportion of learners who have left school/kura with NCEA level 1 as their highest qualification.

- In 2016, 9% of all school leavers left with NCEA level 1 as their highest qualification (compared with 26% with level 2, 13% with level 3 and 41% with University Entrance).
- Māori and Pasifika students are more likely to leave school/kura with NCEA level 1 as their highest attainment (14% and 12% respectively).

Figure 1 (page 5) shows that the proportion of all students leaving school/kura with NCEA level 1 as their highest qualification dropped four percentage points between 2009 and 2016. If NCEA level 1 was removed, how could the lack of any qualification for this group be mitigated?

⁷ Participating cohort: students whose entries suggest they are candidates for NCEA level 1.

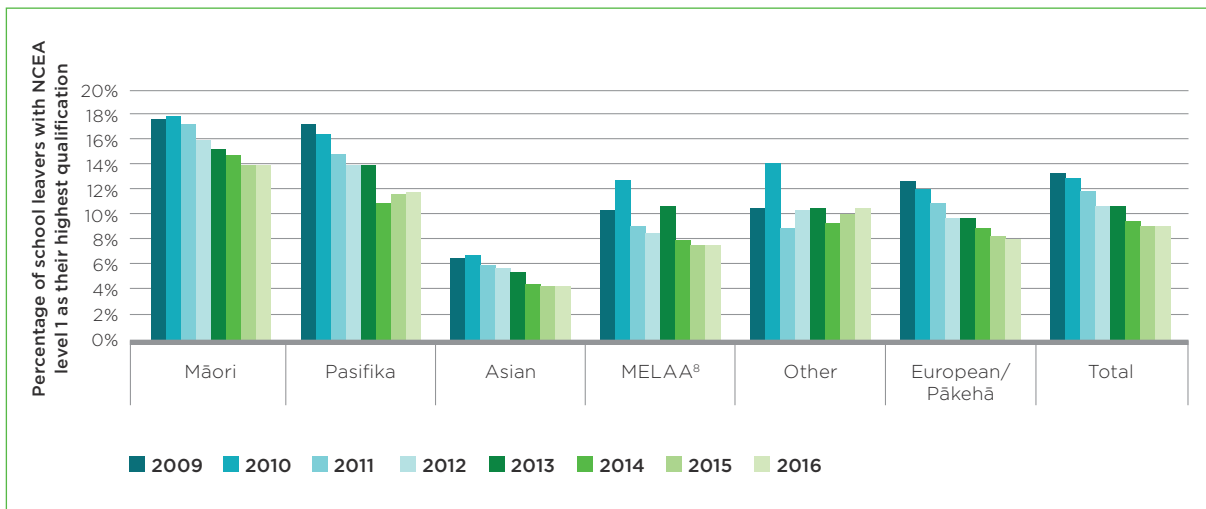


Figure 1: School leavers with NCEA level 1 as their highest qualification, by ethnic group, 2009-2016

Assessment-driven curriculum practices

Figure 2 (below) shows the average number of credits entered and attained by year 11 students. The credits entered have declined gradually and seem to be stabilising. Interestingly, the number of credits attained has increased. However, it is hard to draw the conclusion that the decrease in credits entered has had a significant impact on attainment.

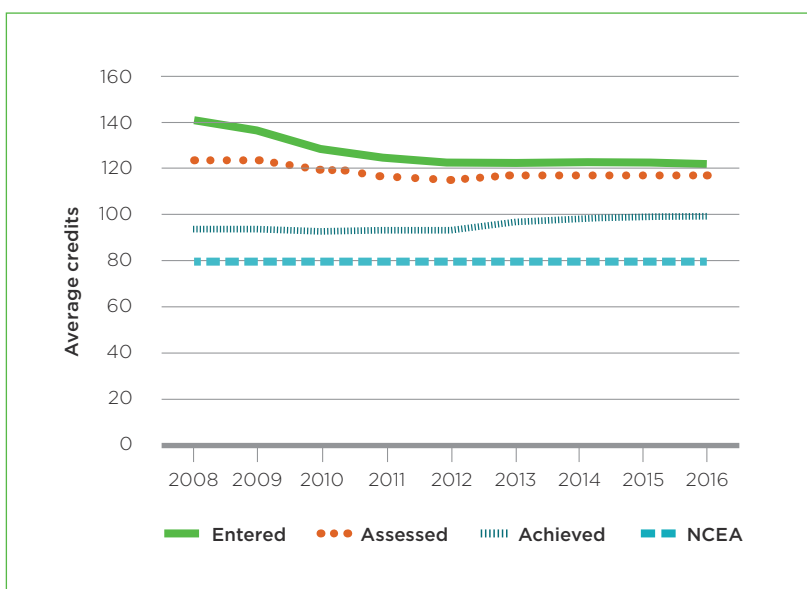


Figure 2: Average credits entered and attained by year 11 students, 2008-2016

⁸ Middle Eastern, Latin American and African.

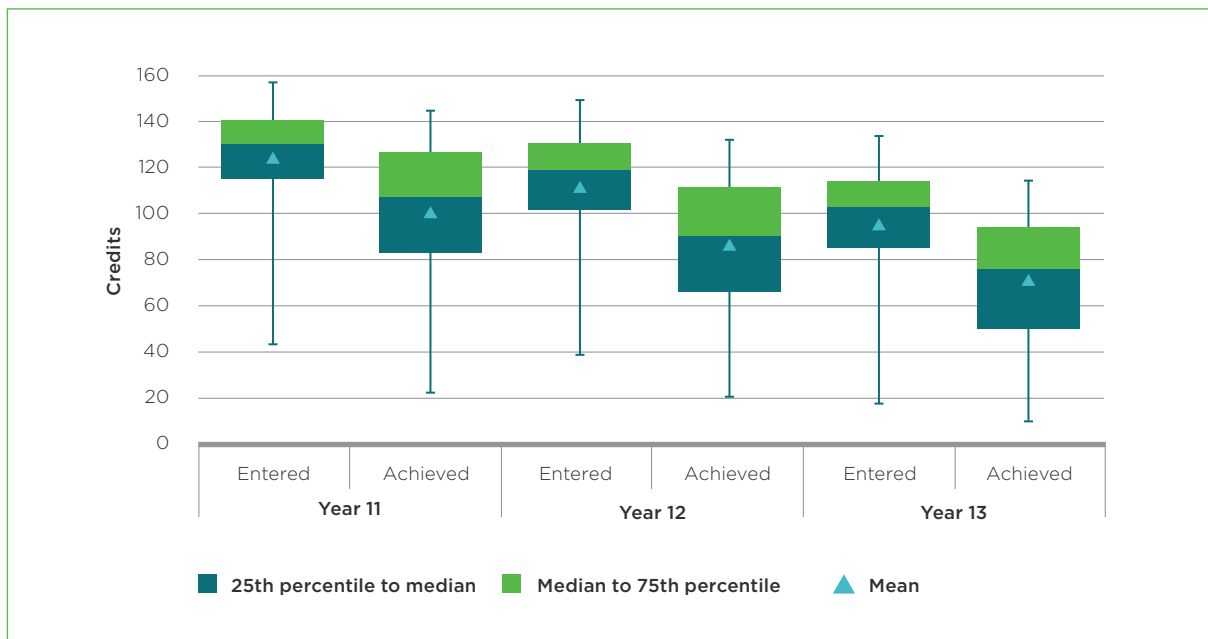
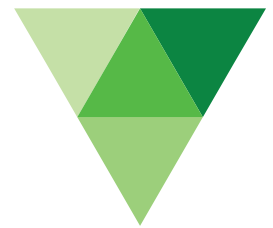


Figure 3: Distribution of credits entered and attained, by student year level, 2016

Approximately two thirds of NCEA assessment standards are internally assessed. This includes unit standards. The paper “Trends in NCEA” highlights an increasing use of internally-assessed achievement standards and a downward trend in using external standards at NCEA level 3. While these trends are not as obvious at levels 1 and 2, it is important to look at the proportion of standards achieved by students at different levels, through both internal and external assessment.

In 2016, internal assessments were at the following levels for completed standards:

- level 1: 73%
- level 2: 78%
- level 3: 75%.

What are the implications of this in terms of student and teacher workload?

Some schools/kura are limiting the number of credits available for levels 1 and 2 to 80.

Actions that schools/kura could consider include:

- reviewing their assessment programmes (in particular the number of credits available for each year)
- setting a maximum number of credits achievable annually to reduce over-assessment (supported by messaging to family, whānau and community that NCEA over-assessment is not conducive to high-quality learning)
- ensuring that the teaching time available is balanced against the notion that one credit equals 10 hours of teaching and learning time, including assessment
- taking more collaborative, cross-curricula and integrated approaches to assessment task design



- lifting teachers' thinking about the curriculum by exploring the intent of NCEA and The New Zealand Curriculum (with the senior secondary guidelines) and developing a curriculum that is underpinned by the vision and principles of these documents.

Over-engineering of assessment and moderation practices

The New Zealand Curriculum provides strong guidance on over-assessment. “Not all aspects of the curriculum need to be formally assessed, and excessive high-stakes assessment in years 11-13 is to be avoided.” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 41) However, not all schools follow this direction.

Reports found that some schools/kura are “over-engineering” practices around NCEA. This means schools are expecting teachers to do more moderation than is needed to comply with NZQA requirements.

Recommendations from the Secondary Teacher Workload Working Group report in 2016, include that:

- NZQA and the Ministry discourage excessive NCEA assessment and moderation practices and clarify and quantify expectations and requirements for NCEA moderation and assessment
- NZQA use Managing National Assessment reports to indicate where schools/kura are over-engineering
- schools/kura and the Ministry continue giving clear messages to family, whānau and community that NCEA over-assessment is not conducive to high-quality learning.

ERO's *Wellbeing for Young People's Success at Secondary School* report in 2015 recommended that NZQA work with school leaders and teachers to promote meaningful and innovative assessment practices that will reduce teacher and student assessment workload.

Secondary curriculum planning needs to consider ways to credit the learning of two or more standards through a single assessment task within or across subjects, and to emphasise the quality, rather than quantity, of evidence required to achieve.

Question for consideration

How can we use the flexibility of the NCEA system to avoid over-assessment while maintaining the integrity of the qualification?