

NCEA | Taumata Mātauranga ā-Motu Kua Taea

NCEA Review 2018

Course coherence in NCEA

1. A brief history of NCEA
2. Themes in NCEA literature
3. Purpose and outcome statements for NCEA
4. Trends in NCEA
5. Levels of NCEA
6. Connections with pathways into further education and/or employment
- 7. Course coherence in NCEA**
8. Non-standards based learning and NCEA
9. Māori medium and NCEA
10. Literacy and numeracy requirements for NCEA
11. Accessing NCEA
12. Over-assessment and its impact on students and teachers
13. NCEA online
14. How NCEA is recognised overseas
15. Quality assurance in NCEA



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 provides information about course coherence and how it relates to NCEA | Taumata Mātauranga ā-Motu Kua Taea.¹ It also raises questions for further consideration.

Focusing question

How can NCEA encourage coherent course design?

What is course coherence?

Course coherence is about how effectively a course offers learners the core knowledge, skills, capabilities and attitudes required to succeed in further education, employment and life in general. A coherent course ensures that every student receives the most powerful learning relevant to the course, it complements the learner's aspirations, interests and other learning experiences and it avoids repetition. In a coherent course, the parts of the course contribute to a unified whole.

Coherence does not necessarily mean learning about just one subject or one context. Sometimes, a coherent course might focus on a single subject; but in other cases, it might focus on a profession, such as an engineering course that combines physics, calculus and materials technology, or in a context important to the learner such as an environmental course that looks at subjects across the curriculum in an environmental context.

How does course coherence relate to NCEA?

An NCEA can include credits from any of the assessment standards listed in the Directory of Assessment Standards (DAS). This includes achievement standards (learning based on the national curriculum) and unit standards (learning based on other bodies of knowledge, eg, industry knowledge).

In line with this, secondary schools/kura have significant flexibility in designing courses for year 11 to 13 students. These courses ought to draw on the “front half” of the national curriculum, which sets out the deep competencies needed for learners to succeed on any pathway, such as critical thinking, textual interpretation and interpersonal skills.

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



However, these courses don't need to teach the subject-specific content from the “back half” of the curriculum – although we know that most courses taught in secondary schools/kura do use this content.

This flexibility is a significant strength and feature of NCEA, because it means that no two learners need to receive the same NCEA and each can pursue a qualification that supports their interests, aspirations and pathways. One learner might follow a programme based around achievement standards leading from secondary school/kura into university/wānanga; another learner might have a programme built around a mix of achievement and unit standards focused on an industry context that prepares them for trades training. Every young person can leave school with an NCEA that responds to their needs.

The trade-off from this flexibility is that the NCEA system does not prescribe how schools/kura and other providers should construct NCEA courses. NCEA does not discriminate between a highly coherent course that teaches deep subject knowledge, makes logical sense to learners, and uses relevant contexts and one that is incoherent, which does not teach deep knowledge and simply delivers an unconnected group of assessment standards.

What do we know about the coherence of NCEA courses?

The Ministry encourages schools/kura and tertiary providers offering NCEA to design meaningful programmes of learning that make links and integrate learning across different parts of the curriculum. This especially applies to schools/kura, in which learning is traditionally done on a subject-by-subject basis, which often doesn't reflect how learners will experience the world once they leave school.

Many courses that award an NCEA (or credits towards one) are designed around the achievement standards that will be used to credential the relevant learning. This approach is simpler than starting with the national curriculum, because assessment resources are readily available and it neatly compartmentalises the learning included in the course. However, this often encourages incoherent courses because deep subject learning, cross-curricular capabilities and relevant contexts can become an afterthought, and it can be difficult to link these achievement standards in a coherent way.

Traditional subject-based courses are common in schools/kura. Some of these courses may be taught coherently. Other schools/kura have developed alternative courses that integrate knowledge from different learning areas, but are often designed as “vocational” courses for students not planning to study at university/wānanga and are considered less valuable than subject-based courses. These courses may also lack coherence if deep learning from the “front half” of the curriculum is not integrated with the relevant industry or vocational content.

There are also examples of highly coherent course design: schools/kura that design from the national curriculum first, make use of project or interest-based learning to teach across learning areas and focus on developing learners' critical thinking or collaboration skills alongside subject-specific content. It is important that these examples become common practice in schools/kura for coherent NCEA outcomes.



How can NCEA encourage coherent course design?

As noted above, an NCEA can be comprised of any assessment standards listed on the DAS, but some mechanisms can encourage coherent courses, including course endorsements, which were introduced in 2011. Course endorsements recognise learner achievement across a course. Learners can gain an endorsement for a course if, in a single year, they achieve 14 or more Merit or Excellence credits (with at least three credits from both internal and external assessment). This may help identify courses that are incoherent if key blocks of assessment are missing.

However, course coherence is about the underlying curriculum as well as assessment, teaching and learning. This means that even course endorsements may be a poor substitute for understanding the coherence of a course – it may be difficult to identify the extent to which deep subject learning is delivered and the connections between different components of the course.

For example, a course that is assessed using five physics standards may appear to be more coherent than one assessed using one biology, two geography and two education for sustainability standards. Without knowing the purpose of each course, how it is taught and what other learning is involved, it is difficult to meaningfully understand which is more coherent.

Question for consideration

What are the barriers/limitations to creative course and programme design?