

7. Experiences and views of NCEA

NCEA began in 2002, three years before the students in this study reached Year 11. We were interested in finding out what students, teachers and parents thought of this sometimes controversial new qualification.

Some critics argue that NCEA encourages students to take the so-called ‘easy route’. They say that:

- NCEA encourages students to do only the minimum amount of work required to gain the credits they need to achieve each of the three levels
- NCEA allows students to opt for what the critics describe as ‘easy’ unit standards rather than the more ‘challenging’ achievement standards
- NCEA puts too much emphasis on internal assessment, and in particular the opportunity for re-assessment. The critics argue that this means students will do a minimal amount of work the first time they are assessed, knowing they will get feedback which will help them improve on the second try.

We wanted to find out whether there was any evidence to support these claims. It is important to note that we carried out our research before the introduction of excellence and merit endorsements on NCEA certificates. These were first used for students who had completed NCEA requirements by the end of 2007. The endorsements were introduced as a way of countering criticisms that NCEA results were reported in a way that did not reward high-performing students.

We were also interested in finding out how NCEA results compared with the results of more traditional methods of testing, and what parents and teachers thought of the new qualification.

DO STUDENTS OPT FOR THE ‘EASY ROUTE’?

We found little evidence that students were taking the easy route to NCEA by doing the minimum amount of work necessary. In fact, the more academically inclined students gained far more than the 80 credits they need to achieve NCEA Level 1, with many gaining 138 credits or more.

Nor was there any evidence that students were opting for unit standards over achievement standards. Assuming that unit standards are easier than achievement standards (and this is not necessarily the case), we found that students had little say over what type of standard is used to assess their learning. That decision is usually made by the school or the individual teacher when the course is designed.

Far fewer students took up reassessment opportunities than the criticism would suggest. While the majority of teachers said they offered the chance to be reassessed, just 6 percent of the students said they had taken up this opportunity.

There was also little evidence that skipping assessments is a common practice. The highest rate of skipping was in English, where 10 percent skipped internal assessments and 13 percent skipped external assessments. As might be expected, rates of skipping assessments were very low in the students’ most-enjoyed classes, but they were only marginally higher in their least-enjoyed ones.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN NCEA AND THE COMPETENCIES

We found that the students who scored well in our cognitive competency tests also did well in NCEA. Similarly, students who did less well in our cognitive competency tests had less success with NCEA. In other words, it appears that NCEA gives much the same broad picture of student performance as more traditional forms of assessment.

Attitudinal competency is also important. Students with high cognitive and attitudinal competency not only gained more NCEA credits, they were also more likely to achieve those credits with merit or excellence. The one exception was the attitudinal competency, social skills. We found that a student's social skills were unrelated to their NCEA performance.

Individual student performance in NCEA was also closely related to their cognitive and attitudinal competency at age 14. This indicates the importance of previous experience and habits for subsequent performance.

Students who enjoyed reading between the ages of 8 and 14 also performed better in NCEA than those who did not enjoy reading between the ages of 8 and 14. This is consistent with the fact that success at secondary school is dependent on having good reading skills.

PARENTS' VIEWS OF NCEA

In 2006, when we collected this information, there was still considerable uncertainty among parents about whether NCEA was a 'good thing' or not. Only 49 percent of parents thought NCEA was definitely better than the previous system, with 24 percent saying it was not better than the old system and another 24 percent saying they were not sure.

On the other hand, most parents (69 percent) thought their children had a generally positive attitude towards NCEA, and all but a few said their

child coped well with any assessment pressures. Just over half of parents thought their child would work hard regardless of whether a topic was being assessed or not, and 42 percent thought their child would always strive for excellence.

Parents who were happy with the new system saw it as a good way to chart progress and accumulate credits across the year. They also said it gave students more chance to succeed, and helped improve their work and study habits.

Parents who were unhappy with the new system thought it was less demanding and less motivating than the old one, and that it did not reward effort.

As a general rule, parents who were happy with their child's progress at school were more likely to be happy with NCEA, and those who were unhappy with their child's progress at school were less happy with NCEA. In other words, it is possible that for some parents, NCEA has become a 'lightning rod' for their dissatisfaction with other aspects of the education system.

TEACHERS' VIEWS OF HOW STUDENTS APPROACH NCEA

Most teachers thought their students had a positive attitude to NCEA. This is particularly true for the teachers whose students enjoyed their classes. The teachers of students' most-enjoyed classes were more likely to think that students could cope with the pressure of internal assessment, and were realistic about their likely success, than the teachers of students' least-enjoyed classes.

Only 15 percent of teachers of the most-enjoyed classes said that students in the study were not interested in work that would not lead to any credits, compared with 26 percent of the teachers of the least-enjoyed classes.