

#1 The development of NCEA

Introduction

National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) were introduced as New Zealand’s main secondary school qualifications between 2002 and 2004. They grew out of a long-term intention to establish standards for national qualifications and recognise a wider range of skills and knowledge. A new set of qualifications was needed to reflect the more flexible learning environments in our schools.

NCEA was designed to challenge all students, including the most able and highly motivated. It was also designed to give schools the flexibility to develop a range of programmes to suit the specific needs of their students.

NCEA has been reviewed and refined since its initial implementation in 2002. NCEA results now show a rich and accurate picture of a students’ skills and knowledge.

Transparency

In NCEA, New Zealand has one of the most open and transparent school qualifications systems in the world:

- Students, teachers, parents, employers and tertiary providers have access to all NCEA assessment information.
- New Zealand is the only country in the world that returns all marked examination papers to candidates. Candidates can review their marked work and, if they wish, apply for a review or reconsideration of their results.
- National statistics from internal and external assessments, including qualifications completed and school by school comparisons, are published annually on the NZQA website and analysed in an annual report (view [Annual Report on NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Data and Statistics \(2010\)](#)).
- Reports on the quality of internal assessment at every school are published on the NZQA website. These are called ‘[Managing National Assessment](#)’ reports.

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The learning experience

“NCEA is hugely challenging for students. To achieve Excellence is far more demanding than a high mark was in the previous exam system. But the good thing is NCEA is utterly transparent – everyone knows what you have to do to get good grades.”

Julia Davidson, Principal of Wellington Girls’ College and Chair of New Zealand Principals’ Council

“Less able students who would lack motivation if they were only assessed in a one off external exam, such as School Certificate, are engaged with NCEA as it provides opportunities to be assessed throughout the year.”

Principal, Lincoln High School

“The NCEA has been designed as a unique New Zealand Qualification System which meets well the diverse learning needs of students.

It is academically robust, internationally recognised and equips students for tertiary study and the world of work.”

Patrick Walsh, President of the Secondary Principals’ Association of New Zealand (SPANZ)

Transparency CONT.

- The standards that teachers and examination markers use to assess student work are publicly available on the NZQA website ([search NCEA standards](#)). Additional material is published for each achievement standard to help everyone understand the standards and the levels of student performance required to meet them.
- For internally assessed standards, examples of student work that meet the standards,

for all grades along with commentary from moderators are available on the NZQA website. Pre-approved assessment tasks are also available online.

- For externally assessed standards, examination papers, marking schedules and samples of marked examination scripts from previous years are available on the NZQA website.

(View [NCEA subject resource page](#) to access all internal and external resources for each subject).

Comments from the sector

“One of the more exciting developments in New Zealand has been the introduction of the NCEA. This method, despite its many hiccups in implementation, is fundamentally sound and a model for many other countries.”

Notwithstanding all the details, the major reform related to identifying many standards within a subject, asking students and teachers to make or choose a mix of internal and external assessments, grading on a criterion or standards-based scoring rubric, and accumulating successes over a variety of experiences during the last three years of high school.

This is contrary to the former method which was studying for the last years, and then having a one-shot on one-day at one-examination and accumulating results across subjects (with or without “scaling”).”

Professor John Hattie, 2009, [The Black Box of Tertiary Assessment: An Impending Revolution](#), University of Auckland.

“Learners are entitled to know in advance what they have to achieve to gain a qualification. That is absolutely basic, but that’s not how it works in traditional course-based qualifications systems that produce a single mark or grade. In a standards based system, learners can see exactly what they have to do to succeed. The transparency of NCEA is central to its positive impact on teaching and learning.”

Emeritus Professor Gary Hawke. Senior Fellow, New Zealand Institute of Economic Research. Formerly Head of the School of Government and Professor of Economic History, Victoria University of Wellington.

“One of the major features of the implementation of the new (NCEA) system has been the transparency in the results, such that many of the problems of comparability, measurement, equivalence, and especially performance of sub-groups of students are well-known and debated. While this has led to the use of this transparency to criticise the new system, it has also led to healthy debates about social equity, and there is no doubt that the problem will not go away by ignoring the problem (as was so often the case in less transparent systems).”

Shulruf, Hattie & Tumen, 2009 [New Zealand's standard-based assessment for secondary schools \(NCEA\): Implications for policy makers](#). University of Auckland.

“It’s a chance for a young person to show their competency in whatever they are competent at.”

Business New Zealand Chief Executive Phil O’Reilly, Dominion Post, 17 January 2011.