

#6 NCEA provides flexibility so that the needs of all students can be met

Introduction

Schools can use the flexibility of NCEA to engage and motivate all students. Together, the achievement standards and unit standards used by schools cover all curriculum subjects as well as many vocational areas – but as they are all separate standards, they can be used in any combination.

Schools are finding many ways to use the flexibility of NCEA. Of course, a lot depends on a school’s resources, the number of students it has and how flexible it can make its timetable.

- Schools can offer whole ‘subjects’ in the traditional way – or they can develop courses to suit the needs of their students. In either case they can select relevant standards for assessing their courses.
- Schools can vary the amount of content covered by a course, and adjust the assessment load accordingly. There are no centrally prescribed constraints.
- At each level in each curriculum subject, a course will be assessed using a mix of standards that total between 18 to 24 credits – but schools can and do run courses that cover any number of credits.
- Completion of an NCEA qualification is not constrained by a one-year timeframe. More able students can complete an NCEA qualification in less than a year, while other students may need more than a year to obtain a qualification.

Multi-leveling

More able students can be assessed against higher level standards. In English, for example, the teacher could set a writing task and assess students against Level 1, or 2 standards, depending on their ability. More able students who work at a faster pace can earn credits at higher levels. In mathematics, for example, students can complete their study (and internal assessments) for Level 1 standards, and then make a start on some Level 2 standards.

Comments from the sector

“ Kaitiāia College has introduced two different approaches – one has grouped standards across subject areas; the other uses an historical context to assess students against standards from several subject areas. For example, if Apartheid is being studied in History there are standards available in Social Studies, Information Management and English that could be assessed as a “bundle.” ”

“ Head of History and Year 11 Dean, Michael Withiel says the courses emerged when he identified some overlap with assessment in different subjects. Mr Withiel says the combined courses are making a very big impact on the students. “All together, these factors will make a very big difference to the success that students will want to achieve and will dovetail to give impetus to aspire to higher attainment. This will give students more chance of gaining entrance to the tertiary courses of their choice.” ”

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Multi-leveling CONT.

There is no need for students to study at the same level in each of their subjects. A student who is very good at mathematics but not so good at English could be in courses that offer Level 2 credits in mathematics and Level 1 credits in English.

Many schools also provide opportunities for able students to complete university papers alongside their NCEA assessments while still at school.

Breadth and style of learning

Exploring new subjects can help students make connections between disciplines – this can be especially beneficial for highly able students. Learning skills in different contexts can stimulate learning, and breadth of learning can open pathways beyond school.

Students who work quickly and successfully in history, for example, could extend their studies to aspects of art history or classical studies and earn credits in those areas.

Schools can be even more innovative. They can integrate content across subjects – for example, film with literature, history with geography. They can teach and assess some skills in relevant contexts – writing in the context of history, or statistics in economics, or some aspects of mathematics in technology.

In 2007, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) asked 194 schools about course innovation in the senior secondary curriculum. 94% gave examples of some sort of innovation.

For example, using achievement standards from different levels in the same subject, or mixing standards across traditional subject boundaries.

- 67% used achievement standards from the same learning area but from different NCEA levels within courses. Examples covered every curriculum learning area.
- 11% mixed achievement standards from different learning areas for assessment within courses.
- 75% of schools ran at least one course assessed by standards (some including unit standards) from more than one level, most commonly English and Level 1 and 2 mathematics.

The NZCER report stressed that innovative course design is important for students at all ability levels:

“It is important not to assume that such course innovation is only for “less able” students. This snapshot provides evidence that the needs of high achievers are also being catered for in many instances of course innovation...”

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Comments from the sector

“Our family absolutely loved the NCEA approach. The workload in regular classes wasn’t unreasonable and our son was challenged appropriately. He likes to show up as being smart so he had to work hard - but his results really do reflect his actual achievements, not a whole lot of other factors. The whole NCEA experience prepared my son for what came next in a way that a foreign examination would not have done. I’m a big proponent of NCEA - it makes happier adults.”

Jonny Newbre, mother of Alex Hayashi - left Rangitoto College in 2007 and, later accepted at University of California, Berkeley

Breadth and style of learning CONT.

“*Designing context-rich courses often means a degree of curriculum integration because the real world does not conform neatly to historical subject divisions. For example, a course called “Writing for Publication”... models the integration of achievement standards from different learning areas to combine aspects of traditional subjects that logically come together in a highly relevant context with strong links to real-world settings.*”

Course innovation in the senior secondary curriculum: A snapshot taken in July 2007.
Rose Hipkins, New Zealand Council for Educational Research

The learning experience

“*NCEA enables our more able students to multi-level, which allows them to be challenged at a higher level in subjects that they have significant ability in. One of the benefits of students being able to multi-level is that by the end of year 13 they can have studied seven or eight subjects to Level 3 and in some cases to Scholarship level. Recently one student was able to achieve outstanding Level 3 results in two subjects, plus gain two Scholarships in year 12, and then in year 13 was very successful in five more subjects and gained six further Scholarships.*”

Michael Williams, Principal, Pakuranga College

“*There could well be no two kids doing the same thing at any time throughout a year. It's much closer to that concept of individualised learning.*”

Tony Guilliland, Principal, Westland High School

“*I got to know that Bridget was a singer when she was in the school production... and then she and Tessa approached me and talked about doing maybe some of the performance parts of Level 1 Music in year 10. Instead of having the whole of year 11 music she can just do the bits of it that fit in with her timetable – and she can do the other parts next year when she does Music as a subject.*”

Keri Spence, Music teacher, Westland High School

“*Girls at Diocesan are predominantly entered into the NCEA and most make a conscious decision to enter for that based on the wide subject choice, the ability to multi-level across their senior years, even combining with University papers in year 13, and the mix of the internal and external assessments.*”

Margaret van Meeuwen, Assistant Principal, Diocesan School for Girls, Auckland

“*When I was in form three I found classes really boring and not interesting at all... I was quite naughty back then... I was put in a higher level class and I was allowed to discuss deeper concepts that I'd always wanted to discuss when I was at a younger age. When I was in form 5 (year 11) I actually did subjects at three levels. And I also did a Scholarship for Stats.*”

Joe Tsai, former Pakuranga College student

“*Otahuhu College is totally committed to NCEA because of its flexibility which enables students to build qualifications over more than one year. Credits gained can be carried forward and added to which is far better than in the past where failure just meant more of the same. This has been reflected in a significant rise in our retention levels in the senior school where now about 90% of our students are now staying until the end of year 13.*”

Gil Laursen, Principal Otahuhu College