

#8 Why are some achievement standards externally assessed, and some internally assessed?

Introduction

Subject and assessment experts decide the most appropriate way to assess the knowledge and skills in the various achievement standards.

A number of factors are considered:

- With internal assessment schools can assess the actual skills and knowledge described in a standard. They can make sure the assessment situation itself does not interfere too much with the validity of the assessment (as in the English writing example below).
- Often internal assessment is the only valid way to assess particular skills and knowledge – for example, where students are required to create a sculpture, make a speech, perform a dance, carry out a historical investigation, or conduct a science experiment.
- Internal assessment provides an authentic way to assess – schools can assess a full range of skills in fairly realistic situations (as in the statistics example below).
- Internal assessment provides a fair way to assess students – schools can make sure everyone has the opportunity to show what they can achieve. Students work in familiar surroundings and usually have ample time to show what they can achieve. Teachers are given guidance by NZQA (by providing [assessment schedules](#) and [examples of student work](#)) to help them design and conduct the assessment.

Of course, internal assessment that is truly valid and authentic can be time-consuming. This is just one of the reasons there is external assessment in NCEA. Other advantages in having some external assessment in NCEA include:

- External assessment ensures we get a nationally consistent snapshot of student achievement in a subject – everyone does the same task at the same time under very similar conditions. This also provides one basis for checking the consistency of internal assessment.
- Students can show their ability to work under pressure and recall important concepts and facts.

Comments from the sector

“ Standards based assessment places the emphasis on student outcomes – what people need to learn in order to move on. That’s really what the huge transformation in education since the late 1980s has been all about. Teachers and learners now know in advance what students need to learn, and their results describe what they have learned. It’s quite fundamental. It’s recognising what people can actually do, what they know and their cognitive abilities. Learning is not about setting a test and seeing whether people pass or not. This change in thinking has impacted on all education and training – secondary schooling, industry training, polytechnic programmes and throughout our universities. ”

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

Internal and external assessment in summary:

- Internal assessment is flexible. Schools can design fair, valid and authentic assessment tasks that suit actual teaching programmes. Assessment takes place closer to teaching and learning, and schools can take into account other activities in the school when deciding when to assess. Internal assessment also provides the sort of assessment students will face in tertiary study.
- External assessment examinations are held on fixed dates at the end of the year, and students work within a given time frame. Results from external assessments provide a consistent snapshot of student achievement nationally and allow students to show how well they can work under pressure to recall important concepts and facts. External assessment results also provide NZQA with a measure of student ability that is used to monitor the quality of each school's internal assessment processes and judgements.

Is it harder to get Merit and Excellence grades in external assessment than in internal assessment?

Regardless of whether an achievement standard is assessed internally or externally, the criteria for Achievement with Merit and Achievement with Excellence are set down in the standard. Examination questions and internal assessment activities must be designed so that Achievement, Merit and Excellence grades are available for all students.

Only those students who meet the criteria for Merit or Excellence get those grades. There is no predetermined distribution of grades.

The table below shows distribution of internal and external results nationally in 2010.

	Not Achieved	Achievement	Merit	Excellence
Externally assessed Achievement Standards	29%	41%	22%	8%
Internally assessed Achievement Standards	20%	38%	25%	17%

A learning perspective

“ One of the key strengths of NCEA has always been the ability to use the appropriate assessment method for a particular skill or piece of learning. A simple example is in English where the ability to deliver a speech is an important skill that students learn. In exam based systems you can assess students' ability to write a speech, you can even assess knowledge of the characteristics of a good speech, but you can't assess the ability to deliver a speech. Likewise in practical subjects, like the sciences, you need to have an internal aspect of the assessment to assess the critical practical skills that have been taught. ”

Michael Williams, Principal, Pakuranaga College

Figures aggregate results across all levels and are rounded to whole numbers. Results for unit standards not included. Internal results as reported by schools, external results for candidates who sat examinations or submitted work for assessment. The numbers of results from external and internal assessments were about the same: 49.5% assessed externally and 51.5% internally. The differences for Achievement and Merit are statistically significant but not large.

Is it harder to get Merit and Excellence grades in external assessment than in internal assessment? CONT.

The difference in the result profiles from internal and external assessment is largely because of the different assessment conditions.

- External examinations are almost all held on fixed dates at the end of the year. Students have limited time to show what they know and can do in a pressured and stressful environment.
- For internal assessment, schools can design or adapt assessment tasks to suit their teaching programmes. Assessment takes place closer in time to the teaching and learning itself, and schools can take into account other activities in the school in deciding when to assess. Students work in familiar surroundings and usually have more time to show what they can achieve.

Internal and external assessment are both important and are used as appropriate in NCEA.

Internal assessment – some examples:

- A Level 2 mathematics standard requires students to “simulate probability situations and apply the normal distribution” – so students need to design a simulation method, carry it out and then analyse the data. Being given data to analyse in an examination would not assess all the skills and knowledge described in the standard, so internal assessment is needed. ([View this standard on the NZQA website](#)).
- A Level 2 writing standard in English requires “drafting, reworking, and presenting writing” – so students must show they can work through each of these stages. This takes time – a one-off examination would not provide valid assessment of the standard. ([View this standard on the NZQA website](#)).

In both of these examples, a well-designed internal assessment task will be fair, valid and authentic. All students will have the opportunity to demonstrate all of the skills and knowledge described in the standard. Students can be assessed a situation that is similar to what they would face in the real world.

A learning perspective

“We think that the achievement expectations for Merit and Excellence are pitched correctly. We regard the expectations for Excellence as correctly requiring a demanding level of accomplishment in a standard. The level of difficulty, the standard expected for the grade, is the same across internally and externally assessed standards. There are more Merit and Excellence grades awarded in internal assessment because the conditions of assessment are different. External assessment is generally a once only, at a specific date, assessment. Internally assessed standards can offer the chance for resubmission and reassessment.”

John Grant, Principal, Kaipara College

External assessment – some examples:

- A Level 3 accounting standard requires students to “process financial information for partnerships and companies”. The examination paper provides relevant information about an invented partnership and company. Students have to use this information to answer questions about concepts like goodwill and prepare a range of accounting records. ([View this standard on the NZQA website](#)).
- A Level 3 history standard requires students to “analyse and evaluate evidence in historical sources”. The examination paper includes a resource booklet, and students have to use evidence from the resources provided along with their own knowledge to explain historical ideas. ([View this standard on the NZQA website](#)).

In both of these examples, students are given a set amount of time to process a set of information, drawing on their own knowledge of underlying principles. This is a fair assessment because students are all given the same initial resources and similar examination conditions. It is valid in that it does test what the standard requires: the ability to process, analyse and evaluate.