

#9 Are there gender differences in achievement rates?

Introduction

In New Zealand, as in most countries, girls perform better than boys in national school qualifications. NCEA results at each level reflect gender-related differences that run right through schooling in New Zealand.

Gender differences in favour of girls existed long before NCEA was introduced in 2002. There were similar patterns in School Certificate and Bursary results. For example, in School Certificate girls earned greater percentages of passing grades across all subjects than boys. Gender differences in reading tend to decrease during secondary schooling. Gender differences are also smaller for high achieving students.

- Overall, girls perform better than boys in NCEA. Girls generally outperform boys both in external and internal assessment and at all three Levels of NCEA, and in University Entrance. Girls attain more Merit and Excellence certificate endorsement at all levels, although the gap narrows at higher NCEA levels.
- This trend is also consistent with international data: New Zealand takes part in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Girls had higher reading levels than boys in all 57 countries that took part in PISA – the difference in New Zealand was very close to the difference across all OECD countries.
- The situation is similar in the United Kingdom: “Recent GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) results show girls doing better than boys in nearly all subjects. Even in a traditionally male area like resistant materials, girls have overtaken the boys at GCSE. Now, it is only in mathematics and science that boys achieve broadly as well as girls.” *Boys’ achievement in secondary schools*
- Girls and boys perform almost equally in New Zealand Scholarship. In recent years girls have performed slightly better than boys in gaining Scholarship awards, but girls and boys performed roughly equally at Scholarship level in the 2010 assessments. At the Outstanding Scholarship level, boys tend to outperform girls very slightly, though the performance gap in favour of boys was larger in 2010 than in previous years.

For further details, see [Annual Report on NCEA and New Zealand Scholarship Data and Statistics \(2010\)](#), currently available on the NZQA website.

A learning experience

“The NCEA system is world class - other countries would do well to emulate it. Well qualified candidates are welcomed across the world. The unique strength of the system is its inclusivity; in a boys’ school such as mine, every individual is on the same programme - and can explore it to the limit of his capability and determination.”

Simon Leese, Headmaster, Christ’s College

Does internal assessment favour girls?

In 2011, NZQA has completed a study of the relative performance of boys and girls in internal and external assessments. The study found that:

- Both boys and girls perform better in internal assessments than in external assessments.
- With a few exceptions, girls perform better than boys regardless of the assessment method.
- Boys and girls show about the same difference in performance between internal and external assessment.

In summary, there is no evidence to support the claim that internal assessment systematically favours girls relative to boys at any level of NCEA.

A report on this research will be published later in 2011.

There is a common belief that internal assessment favours girls relative to boys, but to date no statistical analysis has been published that supports this view.

People who believe that boys do better in examinations than in internal assessment often base their views on what they see as the 'nature' of boys. It is claimed that boys enjoy the challenge of an end-of-year examination and internal assessment impinges on their activities outside the classroom.

But others point to the 'nature' of boys as a reason for offering them more, rather than less, internal assessment:

“NCEA's internal assessment (is) better suited to the immediate nature of boys. They do a piece of work, it gets assessed, they get some credits and they're not waiting until the end of the year to get some qualifications. Their goals are much more immediate than girls. They don't look past the current teacher to a career.”

Nelson College headmaster Gary O'Shea quoted in [Nelson Mail](#) January 2011

A learning experience

“Our current Level 1 gender gap, which some still consider news, was well established by 1993. All that's been changed since then is the method of reporting.

NCEA made little difference, especially to top grades. Individual subject pass rates across the two systems of School Certificate and NCEA also show remarkable consistency.

Why then was NCEA believed to have increased the gender gap? Because School Certificate did not have an overall pass rate, and NCEA does, apples were compared with lemons. The reported jump was from a 5-6 point School Certificate gap (taken from all individual subject passes) to a 10 point NCEA gap (taken from overall level completion passes). Level completion is harder than passing one subject, girls work more consistently across subjects, and enter more papers, so the level completion gap will be greater than the subject completion gender gap.”

Dr Paul Baker Rector of Waitaki Boys' High School

Comments from the sector

Comments in a United Kingdom report suggest that boys should be well suited to internal assessment.

“Boys in particular responded well to carefully structured work in lessons. Their responses were strongest when the work had clear objectives, when it was set in real-life contexts, and when it involved well-focused short-term tasks on which there was quick feedback. They also reacted very favourably when the work had an element of fun and competition.”

Boys' achievement in secondary schools, Office for Standards in Education, 2003