

Speech notes for an address to the Top Scholars Ceremony at Government House, 19 May 2006, by Sue Suckling, Chair NZQA.

Your Excellency, Minister Maharey, Ladies and Gentlemen, and, best of all, Top Scholars. On behalf of the Board of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and our Chief Executive Karen Poutasi, can I say, welcome.

This is a day indeed – a day to celebrate. Congratulations to our Top Scholars – today is your day to stand very proud and to be celebrated as glorious tall poppies in New Zealand’s society.

I am new to the education sector. My experience over some years is of governance in the business sector, and I’ve learnt that the personal characteristics and capabilities of those who lead are pivotal to success or failure. So we see here a group of young people who will be pivotal to New Zealand’s success in the years ahead.

However, our Top Scholars today will not only be leading entrepreneurs, or chief executives, or cabinet ministers. Their excellence will also be expressed as exceptional parents, exceptional citizens, exceptional readers of poems, exceptional partners and creators of families – in other words, exceptional in the full gamut of human experience. They will all make New Zealand a better place in the future.

The changes in the New Zealand education system in recent years are all designed around a simple but very powerful idea - that our education system needs to encourage and be open to all learners achieving as much as their ambition and aptitude will permit.

To that end, gifted young people must not be allowed to atrophy for want of a challenge, and that’s what New Zealand Scholarship provides.

The Scholarship exams are difficult – really difficult – a very big stretch.

Under the formula now in place only a very small percentage – about 3 per cent – of potential year 13 candidates succeed. Of course to be a Top Scholar you must be in a very small subset of that small subset – which is not easy.

The exams are difficult not just in that the candidates need to know a lot. Just having a sponge for a memory on its own won’t do. To succeed, candidates must think laterally. They must synthesise; see the pattern and the significance behind the facts.

This is as it should be. Merely knowing information says little to nothing about a person’s capacity to contribute. Society is not short of people who know. It’s the capacity to think and to create that we need more of.

Indeed, I’m told that in the results being recognised here there is a renaissance flavour. A number of you have done very well in subject combinations that combine the arts and the sciences. That’s very interesting and positive, and fits the dynamic

and fluid world of today, in which scholarship must not be constrained by yesterday's stereotypes.

Let me end firstly by saying thank you to Karen Sewell, who was NZQA's Acting CEO through the 2005 Scholarship exams. Her commitment to you and her leadership ensured that the scholarship exam process was very robust, enabling your successes to be truly outstanding.

And, of course, congratulations to all the top scholars, their parents, the schools principals, the teachers and the administrators. You have all contributed, and you will all continue to contribute and to make a difference. Bathe in the glow of your achievement!