

Assessment Practices of Level 3 NCEA Teachers (2004-2006)

Summary of research findings

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Introduction

This summary reports key findings of a three-year longitudinal study investigating how teachers' assessment practices changed with the implementation of the Level 3 NCEA (National Certificate in Educational Achievement) qualification. Assessment practices refer to a broad range of activities for example, the feedback provided to students and approaches to internal moderation of marking.

Interviews were conducted with teachers of four Level 3 subjects (English, geography, statistics, and physical education). Up to 60 teachers from 24 secondary schools throughout New Zealand were interviewed each year in the first three years of Level 3 NCEA (2004 to 2006).

Data collection involved:

- a self-reflection sheet
- semi-structured interviews
- a concept map exercise
- the opportunity to keep a self-reflection journal.

The *Assessment Study* was part of a programme of research by NZQA aimed at seeking feedback from stakeholders to identify where improvements to the qualifications system could be made.

Changing patterns in assessment practices of Level 3 teachers

Research findings from the *Assessment Study* indicate that the NCEA had supported innovative and creative changes to assessment practice. During the three years of the study teachers utilised robust, effective and at times creative assessment practices. Six key patterns of change emerged over the course of the study.

1. Experience, familiarity and increased confidence with Level 3 NCEA has led to positive changes in assessment practices

As teachers became more familiar and experienced with Level 3 standards, their confidence grew. They became more relaxed with their responsibilities as assessors of student achievement which contribute to qualifications. Growth in confidence was widespread and found in many areas of classroom practice.

"I think as we've become more confident with what the criteria mean, we've probably become more confident with being more specific about feedback ... more confident in using the terminology and saying right okay, this is a 'Merit' ... to get up there you need to be able to do this, this and this ... "(English teacher, 2006)

Significant changes linked to this increase in experience and confidence included:

- changes to course design, such as varying the number of standards offered
- more teachers designing their own activities and/or modifying Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI) tasks
- more rigorous moderation systems being developed and used in schools
- more confidence in marking Level 3 assessments.

A number of issues were found to diminish throughout the study as teachers became more experienced, familiar and confident with Level 3 standards. Examples included ensuring student work was authentic, a lack of assessment tasks being available, difficulties with understanding achievement criteria, and concerns about the qualification lacking prestige. These issues were prevalent in the initial stages of the research, but had dissipated by 2006.

2. Teachers embracing new assessment strategies

The new found confidence and experience with Level 3 NCEA led teachers to embrace new techniques and assessment strategies. Changes to assessment practices included:

- the way teachers collected evidence of a student meeting a standard, such as the adoption of naturally occurring and verbal evidence
- the use of exemplars to illustrate achievement levels of a standard
- the use of strategies to ensure authenticity of student work
- a variety of school wide and classroom strategies to help motivate students to achieve to the best of their ability.

"I think I've become more relaxed in terms of not having a rigid requirement for a separate assessment test ... if I can gather evidence from another way than I do ... so if we're doing an exercise in class which is also going to form part of a test and I observe the student doing that exercise ... then I'm quite comfortable to accept that as an answer for the test." (Geography teacher, 2006)

3. Fairer assessment for students

Compared to Bursary, assessment under Level 3 NCEA was believed to have become fairer for students. Teachers reported that students knew what to expect and had a good understanding of the qualification and assessment process.

Assessment strategies targeting student achievement was another area of significant change with many teachers adopting a range of strategies to assist student achievement. These included:

- an increased use of achievement criteria to improve students' understanding of what they will be assessed on
- collecting and using exemplars in the classroom to illustrate the levels of achievement for a standard
- providing more detailed, focused and regular feedback to students
- the use of alternative assessment opportunity methods, rather than full reassessment.

"They've got much more information about what the standard is and what they need to do to achieve ... it is a better method because they are putting more thought and focus into what's happening." (Statistics teacher, 2005)

4. Increase in teacher collaboration

Changes to Level 3 assessment impacted positively on the way teachers work together. By collaborating and working together in a team rather than as individuals, teachers benefited from sharing resources and ideas, and providing and receiving professional support from colleagues.

Increased collaboration was evident in departments, schools, and to some extent, between schools. Internal moderation processes in schools and the need to discuss marking, resources, and administration tasks appeared to have prompted this change. Teachers realised the importance of collaboration and were keen to maintain and enhance ways of working together.

“Since 2004 I think we just are realising how important it is to be a team ... so there is probably more collaborative work now than in 2004.” (English teacher, 2006)

5. Changing relationships between assessment and learning

Over the course of the study shifts in the relationship between assessment and learning have occurred. Assessment appeared to be driving the learning in many Level 3 classrooms in 2004. This was not viewed negatively by some. A number of teachers embraced the assessment focus using assessment as a valuable tool for identifying students’ strengths and weaknesses and as a vehicle for learning. By 2006 a shift away from a predominant assessment focus in the classroom was found. There was an even split three ways between teachers indicating that their focus was on assessment, learning, or an integration of the two. Some teachers were battling to reach a balance between assessment and learning that aligned with their philosophy and ideals.

“Achievement is really important to me but not assessment. It keeps you on your toes as well, it’s not something that you can stand still with ... if something doesn’t work or students don’t seem to achieve very well ... you’ve got that chance to change ... So that’s one thing I like about NCEA is that you have to keep reflecting and looking at your practice to make sure that it is providing them with that opportunity to achieve.” (PE teacher, 2006)

6. Emergence of the strategic student

Level 3 NCEA resulted in unexpected changes for students. Changes in students’ attitudes, increased understanding of the assessment system as well as increased student choice led to the emergence of the *strategic student*. Teachers described a new breed of student that is strategic, selective and takes more control and responsibility for their learning than their Bursary counterpart. Most teachers viewed the strategic student unfavourably. Others acknowledged positive impacts and encouraged the strategic and more responsible learners. Concerns were raised by some that students lacked maturity at Level 3 to make decisions that may impact on their future learning.

“They are more selective and I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing ... I think the choice is good. Students know and perhaps are having to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses more and it’s giving them a sense of control. I’m not sure if they’re fully informed enough and fully aware of what the risks of it are ...” (English teacher, 2006)

Barriers and challenges

Several barriers and challenges impeding the effective implementation of Level 3 NCEA over the course of the study were identified.

- Teachers noted high workload as the most challenging aspect of being involved in implementing Level 3 NCEA. This was attributed to the formalisation of internal assessment, increases in administration duties, and the restructuring and reorganising of learning and assessment

programmes. Whilst it remained a significant challenge for many throughout the study, the increase in workload was most notable in 2004 and appeared to be subsiding by 2006.

- Professional development over the duration of this study was reported to be lacking for some teachers. Barriers to participating in professional development opportunities included time constraints, geographic location, lack of funds and support, and a lack of national professional development programmes. Teachers called for subject orientated professional development organised at a national level.
- Inconsistency and comparability issues were found between schools. While rigorous assessment practices and processes such as authenticity and moderation have been demonstrated by many teachers in this study, mistrust of other schools' and teachers' policies and practices were evident. National policies, such as for assessment opportunities, were called for.

Future change

Overall, assessment practices continue to be in a state of development. Policy announcements in 2007 by the Minister of Education, primarily to enhance external moderation and encourage students to strive for higher achievement, will result in further change.

Future policy changes to external moderation processes include a rise in the number of samples of students' work moderated, the introduction of random sampling, and the employment of full time moderators. These improvements may appease many of the concerns raised by teachers in this study which predominantly centred on a lack of confidence in the moderation system; the issue of consistency of standards across schools; and, a lack of detailed feedback received from moderators

Policy changes aiming to encourage students to strive for higher achievement included the introduction of endorsement of certificates, endorsement of subjects, and the reporting of 'Not Achieved' of internally assessed standards. These changes to national policy in an attempt to enhance student achievement may help to dissipate lagging student motivation and discourage some of the negative behaviours associated with credit collecting, both of which remained significant issues throughout the study.

It is apparent that teachers have been continually reflecting and making changes to their Level 3 programmes to meet a variety of different student needs, interests and system requirements. Looking forward, it is likely that teachers will continue to refine their assessment (and teaching) practices with increasing confidence to assist students to meet their learning and achievement goals.

To find out more...

The full report addresses changes in assessment practices under three key headings: managing assessment, assessment and course design, and assessment strategies targeting student achievement. Impacts on both teachers and students are explored, as well as key issues arising over the course of the research, such as debate over whether standards have fragmented teaching and learning. Themes specific to each subject are also discussed.

The full report can be downloaded from the NZQA website www.nzqa.govt.nz/publications

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