

How might we shape NCEA and take the qualification from good to great, for all New Zealanders?

One of the largest problems for young New Zealanders today is the issue of mental health. New Zealand has one of the highest rates of youth suicide and mental illness in the world.^[1] In 2013, a study of secondary school students in Auckland found that 37% reported sleep problems that lasted a month or longer, and 17% reported anxiety.^[2] The stress of taking NCEA is not a factor in youth mental health that can be ignored, and the 2018 NCEA Review has made suggestions for how to address these issues. One idea for reducing stress is to halve the number of credits required at NCEA Level 1, and remove all external assessment from that level.^[3] Minister of Education, Chris Hipkins, has stated

“All students have different strengths and abilities. I want every young person to have access to a pathway through NCEA that reflects their strengths, so that all students can fulfil their potential.”

He therefore recognises that different NCEA students have different strengths, and different optimal pathways to follow. Where the NCEA review falls short is that it does not seem to recognise the different reasons that students experience stress when sitting NCEA, and instead suggests a blanket solution for all Level 1 students. I would argue that there are two distinct groups of NCEA students experiencing undue stress from the system, and the proposed change helps neither group. The first group consists of students who do not feel they belong in mainstream education and are not being presented with enough opportunities to pursue alternative education. These students are stressed by the classroom environment itself, so reducing the number of credits required to pass is unlikely to significantly help them. The second group are high-achieving students who enjoy an academic environment, but are stressed due to pressure to achieve top marks. These students *want* to take more than the minimum required credits to pass, so reducing the requirements will once again not help. These two issues need to be addressed separately.

Solution 1: Making alternative pathways more accessible

NCEA has made substantial progress towards having a wide-spread qualification in New Zealand that provides opportunities for all students, not just those interested in continuing their education at university. Gateway programs in place to allow students to gain work experience, or start an apprenticeship that can count towards an official qualification while still in school are one aspect of NCEA that has the potential to help many students, and benefit schools and communities as students gain a more useful qualification that works for them. Unfortunately, these pathways are still perceived as less valid than a traditional qualification, and students who would be better off following an alternative pathway are often still pursuing the usual secondary school options. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, many gateway courses do not get offered until Year 12, so students who dislike school are spending 3 years in a classroom before getting an alternative option. By this time, they have been in a stressful environment for several years already, and have reached an age where they can quit school altogether, rather than opt into a more suited qualification. To better assist students not enjoying their time at school, more effort should be made to help them pursue alternative interests from Year 9, rather than waiting until they are already stressed and disillusioned with the system.

Secondly, Gateway programs are considered by many students to be a lesser option. This is a destructive line of thought that needs to be addressed by remedying the way Gateway is approached in schools. A lot of alternative classes or programs are made available only to students that the school believes to be at risk of failing a traditional NCEA qualification. This creates the impression that those courses are for less able students, and also takes away the opportunity from many students who are capable of passing NCEA but may still not enjoy the traditional learning environment as much as an alternative. While English and Maths are compulsory for all students from Year 9, Gateway options aren't presented until much later which does little to justify it as an equally valid option. Instead of Gateway courses being presented as an alternative only for those who are struggling, Gateway courses and traditional qualifications should be presented as two equal options to *all* students, and the decision left up to the individual student to decide where they feel most comfortable.

Finally, alternative pathways are also viewed by many as less valuable than traditional standards, pushing some students away from them and into a traditional qualification more likely to make them unhappy. This is predominantly because Gateway courses tend to offer unit standards rather than achievement standards. These unit standards do not count towards university entrance, and although the purpose of the standards is not to prepare students for university, this means that many parents and students see taking them as 'shutting doors', rather than opening them. Furthermore, a student taking unit standards is not necessarily one that isn't high-achieving. Because the vast majority of unit standards can not gain higher than an 'Achieved' grade, students who might otherwise be interested in taking those courses see them as worthless towards their qualification when aiming for endorsement. Providing more education to students and parents about the opportunities that Gateway courses can present to young people, as well as rethinking unit standards to allow serious students to be recognised for their hard work, could help more students realise that alternative pathways are a valid option for them.

Solution 2: Provide more opportunities for top students to excel

There is a misunderstanding that stressed secondary school students are those struggling to pass. While there are students stressed about passing, many international studies show that it is the high achieving students experiencing the worst stress.^{[4][5]} Of the number of students I know that have been diagnosed with anxiety or chronic stress, not one is worried about failing NCEA. They are worried about receiving Merit grades.

Rather than addressing the mental health of these students by removing assessment opportunities, a better solution would help these students find a way of still doing well while also easing their worries about grades. Currently the main way in which NCEA recognises high-achievers is through endorsement. This enables students to show universities that they are not simply at school to pass. Unfortunately, the endorsement system falls short for a number of reasons.

For starters, overall excellence endorsement is simply too achievable for a top student to be satisfied with it. In 2015, 18.6% of Level 1 students achieved an overall excellence endorsement.^[6] When this many students are achieving an excellence endorsement, top students inevitably start looking for ways to differentiate themselves from others, to show universities what they can do when applying for scholarships. This is where the habit of 'credit farming' begins. Rather than aiming for endorsement, top students aim to achieve as many excellence credits as possible. They also aim to endorse all of their courses with excellence, a much more stressful endeavour

particularly given the pressure on schools currently to reduce the number of available standards, meaning some students have to achieve perfect grades to endorse their subject. The students are also likely to undertake a number of extracurriculars, many of them overcommitting to a schedule they can barely sustain to ensure their CV stands out in some way.

This mindset becomes destructive quickly, especially after level 1, as workloads increase, yet Excellence grades are still achievable enough that some view them as the minimum acceptable grade. Rather than experiencing happiness when gaining the top grade, a large number of New Zealand students are devastated when they don't. A Merit is viewed as not good enough not only because an Excellence is always possible, but because a high Merit and a low Merit student have vastly different understanding of the subject, but are awarded the same grade. This means getting a high Merit puts top students in the same category as much less capable peers, an additional disappointment.

Addressing the mental health of students who are placing all the pressure on themselves is difficult. Rather than taking away opportunities for these students to excel, I would suggest the opposite. High-achieving students are stressed because they are aiming for perfection constantly, a result of the lack of an alternative achievement that they could be satisfied with. Increasing the number of grade brackets at NCEA could help solve this problem. This would not make it more challenging to pass NCEA, but it could add another grade bracket above a low excellence level, that would be challenging enough to obtain that students would be under less pressure to achieve it every time. A greater number of grade brackets, such as an A+, A, B system that universities use, would also mean that a student receiving one grade would be less likely to be disappointed by it simply because of it not being indicative of their ability, as high-merit students currently believe. Finally, universities would have more detailed information about applicants' academic abilities, rather than being swamped with applications from near straight-excellence students. As a result, there would be less pressure on students to undertake a high workload of extracurriculars to set themselves apart from the rest.

Another possible solution is to add a further endorsement that is harder to obtain. For example, 80 credits rather than 50 at excellence level, or an endorsement based on gaining a certain proportion of standards at a high level rather than an overall number. If the criteria were researched and well thought through, this would give high-achievers something to strive for, without requiring the perfection they currently expect of themselves. It would also help address the issue of people believing NCEA isn't well suited to academic students, by providing more recognition to those who excel.

Conclusion:

Amendments to NCEA should consider 5 principles; Wellbeing, Inclusion and Equity, Coherence, Pathways, and Credibility. Addressing the mental health of secondary school students as a key issue in New Zealand would be in line with each of the principles defined by the Ministry of Education, as well as a necessary intervention into the youth mental health situation in our country. Students with a more inclusive, coherent system that provides opportunities to all are going to be happier, and do better - an outcome that will have positive effects on not only the student, but the school and the wider community. I believe the NCEA Review needs to prioritise two key groups of students who are being less well provided for; students unhappy in a traditional education, and high-achieving students that are pushing themselves too hard. The appropriate changes would

increase opportunities for students to take alternative courses, or provide recognition for those excelling in traditional ones to reduce self-imposed pressure for perfection. In order to improve the qualification for all New Zealanders, the review needs to address the different challenges experienced by a diverse range of students, and implement policies that help more than just the average student. While the majority may be happy in a classroom, passing under the current system, those at the edges need support too.

Sources:

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