

There are two main issues that are holding NCEA back from being 'great' and keep it in the realm of 'good'. These issues fall into the categories of: what NCEA is currently, and what NCEA should be. The former includes issues in the areas of wellbeing and pathways, and the latter includes issues in the areas of inclusion & equity, coherence, and credibility.

What NCEA is currently

Wellbeing

New Zealand's youth suicide rates are exceptionally high for a developed country, with the highest female, and third-highest male youth suicide rate in the OECD¹. What is the primary thing, aside from age, that the youth of New Zealand have in common? Being part of the education system. And in New Zealand, the "the main secondary schools qualification" is NCEA.² This link is difficult to ignore, especially when the consequences are this significant. While it is highly unlikely that NCEA is the sole reason that youth suicide rates are so high, it is well known that NCEA is guilty of over-assessment. Students taking Level One require 80 credits to pass, but I achieved 116 credits, 36 more than I needed to pass. This equates to 360 hours of "notational learning", using the NZQA definition of learning hours in relation to credit value. In other words, I spent an additional 15 days learning, studying, and being assessed, if these fifteen days were spent without sleeping, eating, or anything else. This is more than two weeks of non-stop studying that was not actually necessary to pass, and thus, made very little difference to how my results would appear to employers or tertiary institutions. If sleeping and eating is factored into the equation, these 15 days would equate to roughly a month of unnecessary learning and assessment. Looking at the numbers of credits for 2017, my Level Two, it can be seen that this wasn't a singular occurrence.

This is the kind of over-assessment that myself and many other students have experienced, and obviously this would have an impact on the amount of stress that students feel. Additionally, if time was spent on quality rather than quantity of credits, results would undoubtedly improve across the board, as both student and staff pressure would be alleviated. So, by looking at this issue, I would suggest altering the amount of assessments students are entered in, and expected to take in each of their subjects. This is one of the primary improvements that could be made to the NCEA system that would create significant positive change for students and teachers. It would allow students to focus their energy on doing the best work they can, rather than rushing to meet clashing due dates. Additionally, it would significantly decrease student stress as the amount of assessment they have to undergo would be a more realistic measure of their achievement and ability.

Year Sat	NA	A	M	E	Total Credits	Total Attempted
2018	0	0	0	39	39	39
2017	4	11	43	59	113	117
2016	0	4	47	65	116	116
2015	4	0	9	0	9	13
2014	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	8	15	99	163	277	285

¹ New Zealand Ministry of Health, 2017. <https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/pages/data-story-overview-suicide-prevention-strategy-april2017newmap.pdf>

² New Zealand Qualifications Authority, undated. <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/understanding-ncea/history-of-ncea/>

Pathways

Another one of the issues with the way that NCEA operates currently is the issue of student pathways. In Year 8, students choose their subjects for Year 9. If they choose French for Year 9, for example, they would be unable to take Spanish in Year 10. This issue does not only relate to languages, but every single subject. Year 9 students are about 14 years old, yet they are having to make decisions that will affect what subjects they can take in Year 13. It is impractical and unfair to assume that students should be able to make informed decisions about what they want to study five years down the track. As well as being a significant source of pressure on our young people, it also means that their pathways might be severely limited by the choices they make when they are 13 or 14 years old. I could cite any number of studies on brain development here showing that brains aren't fully developed until about age 25, but this is generally accepted as fact. So why do we expect teenagers to make rational decisions that will impact their future study and career options? How can we demand rational choices from people whose prefrontal cortices, the part of the brain that manages planning and rational thought, are not anywhere near full development?

A solution for this problem is breaking down barriers between subjects and allowing students to move more fluidly between different areas of the curriculum. A lot of the content that we learn is linked, and could be applied to standards from different subjects. For example, a student could study visual texts (films) in both English and Media Studies, and apply this knowledge to the standard that best suits their knowledge. If they connect with the technical aspects of the film more than the dialogue or themes, they could enter a standard in Media Studies rather than English. If a student studies Animal Farm in English, they could enter a History standard, writing about the importance of symbolism in propaganda. The possibilities are only limited by the number of standards that exist, rather than the subject a student has elected to take. Allowing students to study and learn topics that interest them, and apply this knowledge to the standard that best suits this knowledge would benefit students and teachers, as interest and engagement would increase. Rather than trying to wedge their understanding of a topic into a subject specific standard, students would have a choice of the standard that would allow them to gain the best results. This would also mean that students' pathways are not limited by the subject choices that they make.

What NCEA should be

Inclusion and equity

One of the things that NCEA is doing well is that standards can be completed in different formats to suit different types of learners. For many internal assessments, students have the choice of handing in a report, a video, a PowerPoint, or giving a short speech to demonstrate their knowledge, as well as other formats depending on the subject. This creates a more equal playing field for students of different abilities, and includes opportunities for different types of learners to present learned content in the way that best reflects their achievement.

However, there is one method of assessment that remains the same for over 150,000 students every year: examinations. While debates will continue to rage on the fairness of this method of assessment, and whether or not it reflects what the 'real world' is like, the issue I have with examinations is simple. While there are resources such as 'reader/writers' for students with specific learning disabilities, and some students are given extra time or other adjustments for equity, this ignores the majority of the problem. Students who don't have a disability that is recognised by NCEA aren't eligible to receive help. For example, students with mental disorders such as depression or anxiety aren't recognised by NCEA, or at least, don't receive any acknowledgement, yet they are heavily impacted by the immense stress an exam creates. And for students who are 'normal', or unaffected by any specific disorder or disability, exams are still nightmarish. A stark, silent room, filled with dozens of teenagers that aren't allowed to talk or even look at each other. Even something like going to the bathroom is incriminated, with the time you spend in the bathroom recorded on the role. This is hardly an environment conducive to showcasing student knowledge of content and ability, and it is a distinct minority that succeed in these exams, yet every single student is judged by their achievement in them. This is hardly fair when a significant amount of students are so intimidated by exams that they choose not to attend or attempt them at all.

Coherence

Coherence is another thing that is being managed well. Even though standard based assessment can lead to fractured learning of diverse content, teachers tend to group related content together for ease of learning and teaching. However, one of the solutions I suggested earlier in regards to pathways would also help minimize any issues that a lack of coherence may cause. By allowing students to apply their knowledge to a range of standards from different subjects, the learning they are doing might seem like it's following a more clear pattern. Additionally, by applying their knowledge to several different assessments, it is likely they'll think the content they are learning is more important, since it has a broad application, rather than being disjointed from the other subjects they are taking. This would probably lead to more dedicated learning because the student would feel the content has applicability and importance, as well as the fact that the student could choose to learn content that has importance to their culture, heritage, or is a personal interest, rather than content that would make for a good 91473 essay.

Credibility

NCEA is instantly recognisable because it is New Zealand's main qualification, and this means that for university applications and to employers, it is a good representation of a student's overall achievement. As well as being viewed positively in New Zealand, it is also recognised and respected overseas. While this makes it attractive and worthwhile, the record of achievement is not necessarily a holistic view of a student's ability. There are several things that are to be commended as highly as academic achievement, such as continued and successful involvement in sports, cultural teams, and other avenues that students aren't assessed on. In some cases, these require more commitment and dedication than attempting NCEA. In order to enhance the credibility of the Record of Achievement, it could be adapted to include things outside of academic results, like long term volunteer work, or membership of a debating team for a student's secondary school career. In the same way that a CV shows qualifications as well as personal characteristics and skills, the primary document that showcases your time in secondary school should do the same. This would also be positive because it would show students that academics aren't everything, which to competitive academic students would reduce some stress, and would offer opportunities to less academic students to set themselves apart by involving themselves in extracurriculars that showcase their abilities. Additionally, a common sentiment shared by NCEA students is that the process of examinations and results are dehumanizing. Their entire secondary school experience is reduced to a very scientific looking document filled with numbers, rather than names. While the main purpose of NCEA is to educate and inform tertiary institutions or employers of results, separating the individual from their results to such an extent is degrading. If an individual feels less human because of how clinical their Record of Achievement looks, they are less likely to take pride in it, which detracts from how credible it is.

In conclusion, there are several improvements that could be made to the NCEA system that would positively impact on teachers and students of all backgrounds and abilities. While these changes may seem radical or intimidating to implement, their advantages are very worthwhile. NCEA has faced a lot of criticism, but it has been a successful system thus far, with great development taking place in terms of pass rates and simplifying the system. As such, with the improvements suggested, or similar changes, NCEA could be taken from good to great, and a total overhaul or implementation of a new system would be much more difficult, and yield results that may not be as positive as a few changes to the existing system.

"Every success story is a tale of constant adaptation, revision, and change." - Richard Branson