Reforming Vocational Qualifications in Victoria (Australia)

This is one of three case studies illustrating how assessment policy has developed in three jurisdictions and the contextual factors that have shaped this.
The case study is mainly based on interviewees' accounts so reflects the views and opinions they shared.
Loic Menzies, 2023.

Introducing the Victorian qualifications

In Australia, each state runs its own qualification system and in Victoria the main school leaving certificate is called the Victoria Certificate of Education (VCE). Pupils sit VCE exams at 18 (in year 12), though most courses are spread out over two years. Pupils normally take five or six subjects which are mainly assessed through an exam, although there can also be an element of coursework.

Students' scores on the VCE are converted to an "ATAR" (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank) score which is a standardised, rank-based score across states allowing for comparison at a federal level. This is used for university admissions. Some students (around 10%) chose to take their VCE on an 'unscored' basis. These students do not need to sit an exam and do not get an ATAR score (The Age, 2022). This might happen where a student is going straight on to TAFE (technical college).

There are vocational alternatives to VCE. The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was a qualification based on literacy, numeracy and an employment-based course, but is being merged into VCE as part of the reforms discussed in this case study. Students can also sit a 'certificate 2 or 3' in a vocational area, often at a TAFE.

Pupils also take 'the GAT' - a generalised attainment test, and the score can be used as a proxy if a student misses their final exams. Many schools also set an internal test in Year 10.

Across Australia, pupils take a federally mandated test known as "NAPLAN" in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to track school and system-level performance. The test includes reading. writing. conventions of language (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.

Reforming vocational qualifications

Extensive reforms are currently underway to bring VCAL into the VCE as a 'Vocational Major' option and there are various other reforms to vocational education going on alongside this.

What problems are the reforms setting out to address?

- Parents perceive vocational qualifications to be low value, despite 'tradies' getting sky-high salaries.
- Schools occasionally 'soft exclude' pupils who are not going to pursue academic tracks by not offering vocational alternatives and saying they were 'academic schools'.
- Schools were not valuing a sufficiently broad range of achievements.
- Teaching VCAL is sometimes perceived as something with which to fill up a free period, rather than being recognised as a skilled activity. The reform is therefore partly about changing perceptions of vocational *teaching* not just learning.
- Vocational qualifications are seen to be "a mess" across states, so the problem is not unique to Victoria. Other states are therefore looking to the current changes as an example.

The process of reform

There were widespread calls for a review of vocational education from professional associations; senior civil servants (particularly Stephen Gniel, one of the deputy secretaries in the Victorian Department of Education); and employers. Victoria's education minister at the time, James Merlino was supportive of

these calls, and he asked John Firth to lead a review. Firth was a highly respected and influential individual who had previously been the CEO of the Victoria Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). He was also a board member of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and was involved in setting up NAPLAN and MySchool. The fact that he was brought in to lead the review demonstrated that this was a serious priority since normally a review like this would simply be led by the VCAA and involve some routine consultation with parents, teachers and pupils. Because Merlino was also the Deputy Premier the review had high level support. The review was commissioned in 2019 and published in 2020 (Firth, 2020).

In an effort to break down a 'two tier' education system, the review called for VCAL to no longer be a separate qualification and instead to be integrated into the VCE as a 'vocational major.'

The review's recommendations were all accepted by ministers and hundreds of millions of dollars of funding were signed off by government ministers. Funding was not a problem because it was 'Gonskiable' – a term used to describe expenditure that counts towards nationally agreed spending pledges. Because 'Gonskiable' funding has already been committed it becomes a question of how it is spent rather than whether it is spent, so expenditure is not in competition with other departments. The changes required legislation which secured bipartisan support, partly because they addressed a widely agreed need, and partly because they linked to different actors' respective agendas.

The overall direction of travel would probably have been the same even if a different party had been in power, but under a different government (for which this was less of a priority) there might have been less senior-level oversight with less pressure to deliver. It might also have been less well-resourced and more work outsourced.

Actioning the recommendations involved:

- Creating new qualifications and courses,
- Making core vocational courses available in all government schools and ensuring access to other programmes through partnerships with other schools or TAFEs,
- Piloting 'Headstart' - a new school-based apprenticeship model integrated into senior secondary school.

A new division or taskforce was created in the Department for Education and Training to implement the recommendations. This was jointly chaired by the Department and VCAA. Around the same time, Stephen Gniel moved over to be the new CEO of VCAA and he continued to work closely with the Department. As explained below, the VCAA has a slightly different governance arrangement compared to similar authorities in other states which may have played a role in this collaborative approach. Shifting gear from operations and finely tuned delivery towards change management – whilst simultaneously keeping day-to-day delivery on track was also tricky.

Implementation has gone to plan despite fears that the pandemic would disrupt plans. The taskforce spoke to all the key stakeholders to "cover our bases" and there was some negotiation do but no real opposition.

In order to promote the new VCE Vocational Major route, commercials were targeted at pupils on the basis that they would then influence their parents. The slogan was "Many talents one VCE"

The VCAL reforms were coupled with other reforms to vocational education, work experience and careers education.

The Firth review recommended replacing the 'Foundation VCAL' with a new 'Victorian Pathways Certificate'. The Foundation Certificate was believed to lack consistency and rigour and certain pupils were being pushed onto it due to low expectations. The new certificate is intended to carve out a different level of achievement for a specific cohort whilst maintaining the flexibility to move in and out of different

pathways. It is aimed at pupils returning to school after a period of disengagement or with certain disabilities. The certificate is at level 1 of the Australian Qualification Framework (AQF).

The Pathways certificate reforms involved "regular and exhaustive meetings" with critical stakeholders, (including providers, schools providing for at-risk kids and special schools). There were a lot of tricky issues to iron out and the decisions was made to keep consulting and engaging until these had been resolved. At times it seemed like more time was being invested than was reasonable, but this is believed to have paid off. The certificate is deliberately low profile as it is only intended for a small part of the cohort.

Alongside this, the Government and the Department recognised that disadvantaged pupils often lacked the necessary connections to secure work experience and that wraparound support was needed. Dandolo Partners - a consultancy, was therefore contracted to conduct an evidence review in 2018 and a support group was set up and led by a Deputy Secretary. The review showed a significant gap which shaped a 'transforming careers education programme' focused on government schools. A business case for the programme went to ministers as part of budget proposals ($126million) and again, because it was 'Gonskiable' it was not hard to sell.

Verdicts on the process and outcome

The review went down very well because:

- The problems the reforms were setting out to solve were keenly felt by a range of stakeholders including schools, employers and parents.
- The reforms played to multiple different agendas and sat close to the core of what different groups believed to be the purpose of schooling. For example, The Green party supported them because they were anti-elitist and inclusive; others bought into the employability and economic growth narrative; there was a potential risk that the Liberals might see the changes as a threat to rigour but in the end, no one saw it that way. The policy is therefore safe-ground for bipartisanship and all parties supported the recommendations.
- Links to employability and the economy helped secure ministerial support. The reforms also played to a government that was reformist in character and wanted to get things done.
- The reforms were fully backed by Merlino who was highly influential and experienced and wanted it to be part of his legacy. A new minister might not have had as much success.
- The review was consultative and included the sector through unions and peak bodies – as interviewees put it, "you have to road test these things with the sector"; "we had a clear plan for how we'd take the sector with us"; "It's teachers who sell this." Plans were socialised in advance and this was a careful political calculation that paid off.
- The positive reception for the review created a mandate for change when it came to the detailed reforms, and people knew they were coming. This process contrasted with other reforms that landed on people unexpectedly (e.g. learning specialists who were announced when schools had already planned out their workforce for the next year, or the tutoring programme with 3 months' notice).
- Press coverage was positive
- Funding for the changes was Gonskiable so funding was relatively unconstrained.
- The plans built on a precedent and the institutional architecture: TAFEs are already well-established. There are also many private vocational providers (though some of this provision is shoddy). Schools were therefore not suddenly being told they had to do everything.

Although the content of the reforms has not been contentious, there have been some criticisms of the process:

- Some felt the reforms went too fast. This feeling grew once the reforms had teeth, with schools potentially being penalised for not complying. Post-pandemic there was also a sense of: "of all the years to be putting this through!"

- Schools who did not want to offer vocational qualifications have been somewhat resistant to the reforms, seeing them as a threat to their high status.
- There have been some frustrations with specific elements of the process, for example with onerous data requests.
- There are some concerns about the workforce element. It will be tricky to secure the necessary staffing, particularly because potential instructors on vocational courses have the alternative of earning high wages in their trades. This has not necessarily translated into opposition from schools because it will not be them in the firing line if there is a problem with TAFE provision.
- There was more opposition to reforms of the certificates. This came from schools working with challenging students who wanted the pathways certificate to be accredited at a higher level than Level 1, or who wanted more flexibility and further input. Ultimately the VCAA said 'that's the level it's at' and this was something it was not possible to compromise on. However, extensive consultation meant that opposition was gradually resolved.

What factors have influenced and shaped the process?

How has the environment shaped decisions and approaches?

National and state history, the constitution, and the political system

Constitutionally, schools are a state's responsibility. According to some, Australia looks like one country but is in fact a collection of eight countries stuck together, all with different cultures and personalities. Over time the federal government has 'leaked' into education. There is a form of hierarchy of states in terms of power and influence and alongside New South Wales, Victoria is one of the most powerful. Other states and territories are therefore looking to its lead when it comes to vocational education reforms.

Australia has three-year electoral cycles at both state and federal level which leads to a high degree of churn and constantly shifting dynamics. However, Labour has now won three elections in a row in Victoria and is continuing to make gains, providing a stable platform for the reforms.

The country has benefited from a strong economy over several decades. It was relatively insulated from the great recession and has ridden a long-running commodities boom. The combination of this economic performance - alongside a commitment to increasing funding for education (linked to the Gonski-review – see below), has led to significant investment in the sector. Education reforms can therefore precede with limited financial constraints. Indeed, some argue that the free-flowing cash in education has resulted in limited scrutiny and poor choices.

Victoria has had a long-running focus on education. When Daniel Andrews (the current State Premier) was first running for power, he pledged to make Victoria 'The Education State' - even changing the slogan on car number plates to state this. Melbourne is seen as an intellectual city and the state is seen as being at the 'leading edge' on some aspects of education according to one faction, though others point out that it has been 'a laggard' in areas like phonics and equalising state and independent school funding.

Victoria had a particularly tough series of lock-downs which has driven an appetite for change in terms of the role of technology; a heightened focus on health, well-being, and inclusivity; and an increased focus on improving teaching and learning for pupils falling behind

Education policy history and precedent

The highly inequitable state of school funding is a major pre-occupation. Around 30 percent of pupils attend independent schools which are state subsidised and there is a huge discrepancy between most of these schools' budgets and those of state schools – though there are also some under-resourced independent schools. The Gonski review of 2010-11 was intended to resolve this problem but has never achieved its intended goals (Greenwell & Bonnor, 2022).

According to some, Australia prioritises novelty and autonomy in education policy rather than reliable and well-evidenced practice. There are strong tensions between advocates of phonics and 'the science of learning' - and those advocating more child-centred pedagogies. The media is pre-occupied with these battles, particularly 'the reading wars.'

Narratives, ideologies, and policy orientations

The dominant narrative about education is a 'human capital' orientation (Bell & Stevenson, 2006) focused on education's economic functions. The discourse tends to concentrate on employers' needs and how to fuel growth. There is a strong focus on narratives of equity on both sides of the political divide. These reforms played to the core of these debates.

In previous elections, education has been salient and Labour has made pledges on education an important part of their platform, however this was not the case at the most recent election.

Australia has long been pre-occupied by questions of 'alignment' (Savage, 2020). The totemic story is of the railways which were built to different gauges in each state and territory, making it impossible to run efficient inter-state train services. This leads people to refer to a lack of alignment as "the railways all over again." Federal government therefore tries to drive increase alignment between states and territories, with varying degrees of success.

There is some concern regarding Australia's falling performance in Pisa. However, comparisons between states and territories' (including through NAPLAN results), and the dynamics of their diverging approaches often take precedence. Victoria does well by Australian standards (though this may be a product of its demographics) and this limits the sense of crisis. Some describe a form of stagnation based on a view that "we're fine" and "if it's not broken…" Others believe that there is a sense of crisis and that this drives a constant stream of initiatives, none of which 'move the needle.' The introduction of NAPLAN has prompted much more comparison and data-ification than there was previously.

Some people consider poor educational performance to be a product of the country's approach to pedagogy and curriculum but others maintain that it is a problem of funding due to the failure of the Gonski reforms.

Narratives around the culture wars have gained some traction but efforts by some politicians and certain tranches of the media to escalate these along US lines have not gained significant traction.

Who have the key actors been?

Government

<u>The Department of Education</u>

The Department of Education has been a key player throughout. It operates with a considerable degree of autonomy from ministers compared to what has become the norm in England. Ministers are hands-off and are said "not to bring us into politics" and to be "respectful of our role… we don't have to think about what is doable in their political position, that's not our job."

Beyond setting a broad direction and providing political support for the reform, it has therefore largely been down to the bureaucracy to shape the changes.

<u>The VCAA</u>

VCAA is responsible for assessment and curriculum not just for state schools but also for independent schools. It sets standards and oversees 1,800 schools in the state. It is a statutory authority with an unusual structure defined in legislation. This involves having fifteen board members who provide governance and are responsible for the authority's functions. However, the CEO is not employed by the board - instead, they are employed directly by the Secretary for Education (who is equivalent to England's

Permanent Secretary). VCAA's CEO reports on policy to the board rather than the minister, and the board in-turn reports to the minister. The Secretary for Education advises ministers on the VCAA (as they do on other matters) and the CEO of VCAA sits on the board of the Department alongside the other Deputy Secretaries. This approach came from a recognition that you cannot talk about education without talking about curriculum and assessment. This arrangement is described as "complex and messy" but effective since it forces actors to "rely on relationships rather than structures." This arrangement contrasts with other states where curriculum and assessment authorities are separate from the department and relationships can be more adversarial. The reforms described in this case study provide an example of what this approach looks like in practice.

The VCAA delivers all exams and is therefore highly operationally focused, running exams for 80,000 pupils a year, as well as internationally. It is therefore effective at continuously refining and adjusting delivery but this makes focusing on strategy and significant change-management difficult. Addressing this has been a key focus for Stephen Gniel and has required him to draw on external expertise from consultancies.

Stephen Gniel:
Gniel was previously a deputy secretary within the Department. He has been a key player in the reforms and his background within the Department has helped him make a success of the joint approach taken over the course of these reforms.

Merlino
As a long-serving education minister who was also deputy premier Merlino had considerable political capital and influence. He could therefore take on ambitious reforms.

John Firth
Given his previous roles, Firth combined deep expertise with credibility. His report was therefore taken seriously and recognised as being highly significant.

Social stakeholders (Parents, teachers, employers, 'the public')

- Employers have been actively involved in flagging up the issues the reforms are designed to solve and have been involved in shaping the solution.
- The Firth Review commissioned market research among parents and parental attitudes play an important part in this issue. Policy makers chose to address parental attitudes indirectly through advertising targeted at pupils.
- The Firth review worked with Peak Bodies, representing the sector in the early stages of the consultation and there were additional rounds of consultation with the sector throughout, including road testing the ideas. The consultative approach is credited with having helped the reforms land well. Teachers and the profession took an active role in more detailed debates around the foundation VCAL/Certificate reforms.

Other policy actors

- Australia does not have a particularly crowded think-tank and policy ecosystem. The Grattan Institute and the Centre for Policy Studies are relevant players across the country and Learning First is a particularly important player in Victoria, but none of these were flagged as key actors in these specific reforms.
- As noted above, VCAA used consultancies to help it deliver the reforms and Dandolo partners played a particular role in the careers education reforms.

Dynamics between different players

- Tapping into multiple agendas (around inclusion and anti-elitism, as well as economic growth and employability) secured a broad coalition of supporters.
- Schools serving marginalised pupils worked together to influence government on the Certificate reforms.

What role did evidence play?

The role of evidence in the reforms includes:

Expertise:

- The Firth review involved extensive consultation with expert stakeholders. Visits were conducted to rural school and groups like Principal Forums, the Principals Association of Victorian Catholic Secondary Schools, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated general conference

Quantitative data:

- Surveys were conducted as part of the Firth review but these only received a low numbers of responses (n=185 education, training, industry and community stakeholders; n=279 students; n= 76 parents and carers (Firth, 2020, p. 1))

Research studies:

- The Firth review drew on a range of studies, many of which were reports from government bodies. Cited research tended to be focused on employability and vocational education in Australia, although there were some OECD studies and a few studies and sources of information from other countries - for example on vocational education policy in England, Germany and Finland. Research from various Australian states including Western Australia and New South Wales was included.

How do assessment arrangements relate to other features of the education system?

- Schools in Victoria have a relatively high degree of autonomy compared to other states.
- There is a well-developed and established network of TAFEs that provide a credible and well-respected vocational education offer.

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New Zealand's National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)

This is one of three case studies illustrating how assessment policy has developed in three jurisdictions, and the contextual factors that have shaped this. The case study is mainly based on interviewees' accounts so reflects the views and opinions they shared.
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1. Introducing the NCEA

The NCEA was introduced in 2002 and is described as "one of the most complicated school qualifications systems in the world" (R. Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 6). It is made up of credit-earning units that are part of the National Qualifications Framework which is overseen by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). It is assessed through a mix of internally and externally assessed components, and features 3 more or less stand alone qualifications, known as NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3 (which are generally undertaken in years 11, 12 and 13 respectively, although there is flexibility over this). University Entrance (UE) is a separate accreditation, awarded based on meeting additional criteria (including credits from approved subjects and additional literacy credits).
The NCEA was introduced based on a gradual recognition that things needed to change from the previous system which was afflicted by a number of flaws including:

- domination by universities and university pathways (R. Hipkins et al., 2016; Lipson, 2018),
- a system of internal assessment in which teachers were given a quota of grades to allocate to their pupils (R. Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 38); and,
- an extreme form of norm referencing whereby pupils received a pass-fail grade.

A consensus around the need for change had emerged across the education sector, among policy makers and academics, and industry. There was a shared desire for a flexible 'standards-based' assessment which judged whether pupils had met a descriptor-based level of achievement and which did not consign as many pupils to 'failure'.
The original aim was to create non-competitive, largely teacher-assessed qualification comprising a range of units of different sizes, allowing all pupils to gain credit for achieving different forms of success. However, ideals soon butted up against reality and ways of differentiating achievement soon emerged, for example through adjectival descriptors of the level pupils had achieved[1].
On top of this, pupils who wanted to distinguish themselves began to take as many credits as possible and the number of credits became a new currency. Many pupils in elite private schools also continued to take a 'scholarship exam,' and eventually the NZQA reintroduced the exam across the system as a way of marking out top performing students. Universities also continue to reverse engineer rankings from pupils' NCEA outcomes and to stipulate a range of additional entrance requirements (Lipson, 2018, p. 71). This experience is an example of the fact that policy is not just the decision made in government – it is what becomes enacted by 'street level bureaucrats' as they interpret and adapt policy institutions in real-world contexts (Poocharoen, 2012).

A small number of schools (mainly top independent schools), have opted out of NCEA levels 2 and 3 and use alternatives such as the IB or Cambridge Assessment. Others are now opting out of Level 1 too. The possibility that more high status schools might lay aside NCEA sits as a latent threat that shapes government decision making, since this would be seen as a threat to the qualification's credibility.

Alongside the NCEA sits a sample-based national monitoring study of student achievement (NMSSA) which is based on a national sample of students. This takes place in year 4 and 8 through a mix of internal and external assessment but it is currently being reshaped so that in future it will assess pupils in years 3,

[1] A student's achievements can carry the descriptor "Achieved"; "Merit"; or "Excellence" but they achieve the same number of credits regardless.

7 and 8. The National Party, under the influence of Michael Johnson from the think tank 'the New Zealand Initiative' is currently pledging to expand the study across other year groups too if elected.

2. Reviewing the NCEA

New Zealand is in the final stages of a major programme of reforms to the NCEA.

What problems did the review set out to address?

- Too many small units that resulted in 'credentialised' assessment whereby teachers are constantly assessing bite-sized chunks of learning which fail to knit together into a coherent whole.
- Perceived game-ability. For example, some units are easier than others, leading to 'credit farming'.
- An ongoing lack of alignment between the curriculum and assessment, exemplified by the last NCEA review which had attempted to align the qualification with the curriculum but gone over budget, leaving the NZQA to step in and attempt to retro-fit one to the other.
- A dearth of Māori subjects and language options - or more broadly mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), resulting in a continued privileging of 'Western Knowledge/subjects' and more constrained choices for Māori learners.
- Low standards of literacy and numeracy revealed by a Tertiary Education Commission report (Thomas et al., 2014).
- A view that the vocational units lacked credibility compared to the 'well-lit' pathway to university.
- A recognition that the balance between external and internal assessment is not right, with too much internal assessment harming the qualification's credibility and creating significant teacher workload issues (particularly given the large number of low-credit assessments).

The process of reform

NCEA units are normally reviewed on a five-yearly basis by the NZQA. This tends to be a minimal process asking 'is it fit for purpose; and, are any changes needed?' The process takes a year and involves a public consultation which normally results in minor changes. However, the Ministry of Education (MOE), has flexibility to vary this process.

A new government came in in 2017, with a commitment to reviewing NCEA. It set up a ministerial advisory group (the MAG) which included industry training organisations, digital technology experts and the Head of the University student union. This group were subsequently described as 'dreamers' by their critics.

Given the new government, and then-education minister Chris Hipkins' priorities, the MOE advised that a more substantial review of NCEA units could be combined with the wider NCEA review. The process has so far taken five years (the full review is yet to be completed) and involved substantial consultation. Consultation began in 2018. It initially involved:

- A range of Māori groups including those working in Māori medium schools and in English medium schools (since these have slightly different contexts and priorities).
- Various experts being asked to write papers to inform the consultation, for example on credit-value and the place of knowledge in the curriculum. These helped build the case for reducing number of credits.

Initially, the MAG made very radical suggestions like abolishing Level 1 and replacing it with a form of project-based learning portfolio. Some see these proposals as a return to NCEA's original intent but there was also opposition from many quarters. Many felt the reforms were too radical and the unions were worried that the reforms failed to tackle concerns about workload. Outspoken heads of high-status schools wrote an open letter in the national press and threatened to switch to alternative qualifications. Meanwhile some teachers criticised the approach because they felt it side-lined discrete disciplines, and some were concerned that their subjects would disappear into a general qualification. Parents were also opposed, so there was a powerful alignment between different stakeholders and there was a backlash

against the 'boffins who wrote the report.' Some therefore consider the process to have been a huge waste of time.

Partly in response to these criticisms, the Ministry set up a new 'Professional Advisory Group' (PAG) with 10-12 members. The minister played a part in the appointments and decisions were made with a diplomatic eye to engaging a range of potentially vocal stakeholders. Members therefore included some conservative teachers, alongside other factions such as peak bodies of Māori schools and the unions. There were tensions between the MAG and the PAG, and the ministry had to navigate between the PAG's technical work and the MAG's idealism. A policy group and the curriculum strategy group were involved on the ministry side and they were responsible for generating advice to ministers. These two groups also had an uneasy relationship at times. The MAG has now been disbanded but the PAG is still around.

There was also substantial public consultation, including an event with several thousand people at the Sky Stadium. This was facilitated by PWC with "lots of post-it notes" and a speech from Minister Hipkins. According to some, the process was carefully shaped through detailed 'design-thinking'. Participants were encouraged to engage in blue-sky thinking and there was a very open ethos such that it is described as having "strong start up vibes." Supporters of the process note that by the end of 2018, 16,000 'points of contact' had been made through the consultation.

A wider, mass public consultation with several large events called the national 'education conversation' took place alongside the NCEA review. The scope of these discussion encompassed the education system as a whole (including NCEA). Findings from Education Conversation were distilled by partners including the New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER) and PWC. Findings were summarised in six big ideas (such as 'Inclusion', 'Parity for Māori Ways of Knowing' and 'Assessment').

According to some, the direction of travel on NCEA was already clear before the consultations, but others say that the consultation threw up a huge mix of contradictory and competing views which were useful and not always predictable. For example, bureaucrats were surprised by how much came through about lack of rigour.

The Cabinet signed off on the top level ideas for reforming NCEA but these were very broadly framed and some of the complexity was 'fudged' to meet the deadline. It was then time to move onto a more practical phase - working out the detail of how to make the package a reality. In this way the process was iterative: as one civil servant put it, "we got the broad-brush strokes and then made the decisions that needed making as we went along."

Once the parameters had been agreed, work moved in-house into the ministry rather than being contracted out. This revealed various gaps and uncertainties. For example, 'Big Idea Number One' was about learning being made accessible through "Universal design for learning" (UDL). This idea sounded appealing and had been agreed by the cabinet, but it then became necessary to work out how this would apply to assessment standards given that UDL is not an assessment tool. Specific experts were therefore brought in to resolve more technical, operational challenges.

A key task in the practical phase was rewriting the standards. This is being done through co-design involving teachers from different stakeholder groups across the sector – with only limited ministry oversight, arguably jeopardising coherence. Vocational elements of NCEA have been overseen by workforce development councils made up of employers from different sectors.

Since assessment is generally subject-based, whereas the curriculum is based on broader 'learning areas' (larger subject domains), standards have to be mapped back onto the curriculum (despite the fact that the curriculum is itself currently being rewritten). In some cases, this has meant removing a subject (such as Latin) because it does not fit with the curriculum and has low uptake. Decisions about abandoning a subject are challenging and involve balancing between stakeholder views - including schools, businesses,

parents, and teachers; alongside pragmatism - taking into account what was practicable given the financial and human resources available.

The detailed technical phase of working through the new standards was described by one interviewee as the "messy" or "chaotic" phase - to the point where at times it seemed things might go "off the rails". Keeping things on track required further injections of funding through 'supplementary and contingency budgets' so that additional briefings could be commissioned answering specific questions or conducting additional mini-pilots. This led to spiralling costs and there were a few battles with the treasury about this, but funding was always found because it was a government priority and Minister Hipkins had considerable political heft. Money could also be allocated from the ministry's 'baseline' budget and some was sourced from other initiatives, for example by drawing on capacity from the Heads' association and cross subsidising from the principal's association budget.

Level 1, 2 and 3 units were rewritten in staggered stages, with some released last year. These are now being piloted. Others are being rolled out next year and all the work was due to be completed in 2026 – until in April 2023 it was announced that there would be further delay until 2027 (Gerritsen, 2023). This means that some students will now sit the new Level 1, followed by the old levels two and three, further reducing coherence.

Some pilots are still ongoing, for example on new forms of external assessment and adjustments for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. This work involves expert advisory groups like the NZCER. Once all three levels have been implemented the plan is to shift to rolling updates rather than having a big-bang review again.

Minister Hipkins had also initiated a common practice model for literacy and numeracy under the influence of the Chief Science Advisor for education. The Chief Advisor released a report on the state of literacy in around 2020/21 and this strand of work was a more political process, tied to election manifesto pledges. The MOE had already done some work putting together progression maps in these areas and the reforms drew on these by building assessments around the progressions. The teaching sector was vehemently opposed to literacy and numeracy assessments and the MOE saw its role as blending a harder fixed policy from government, with an approach that would land better with the sector. This is an example of the role the MOE often plays, as a 'go-between', brokering compromises between government and the sector.

Verdicts on the process and outcome

- Some people believe the open, extended, consultative process was bureaucratic and a waste of time "when you put everything on the table like this, nothing happens."
- Others believe "the hard work was worth the pain" because it means the reforms have landed well; schools feel equipped to deal with them; and they are deeply embedded. This makes them less likely to be undone. Not everyone agrees though, some say that schools have been frustrated by the amount of change and that it has now been left to them to get it done.
- The consultation helped build a case for change: talking publicly about the NCEA being gameable is taboo but being able to say "*you told us* that poor practices were harming pupils" was more palatable
- Some believe that the consultation was seen as 'the evidence' but that this was not sufficiency linked to other forms of evidence - or that the research evidence that was considered was too narrowly selected.
- Some people believe the NCEA is still "bafflingly confusing."
- A key challenge is the separation between curriculum development and qualification development. In theory, the NCEA reforms are not supposed to be changing the curriculum but when you change assessment, it changes the curriculum, so some argue that in an ideal world the curriculum would have been reviewed first, and then assessment. This separate development is nothing new – it was not until several years after the NCEA was first introduced that the current New Zealand

> Curriculum was published and cycles of assessment and curriculum reform have tended to be out of sync (R. Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 4)

3. What factors have influenced and shaped the process?

How has the environment shaped decisions and approaches?

National history, the constitution, and the political system

The Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi set the basis of relations between Māori and the Crown and is of fundamental importance, particularly given historic and ongoing racism and prejudice[2]. This has driven the prioritisation of inclusive approaches and the desire to fully acknowledge Māori ways of knowing/ mātauranga Māori and ensure all pupils are equally able to succeed - regardless of which community they come from, a goal which is far from having been achieved. Many look at reforms like the NCEA review through the lens of whether they will further this goal.

New Zealand has a three-year electoral cycle which means reforms are often only embarked on if they can be achieved in a short period of time, or if there is bipartisan support. However, the Labour party has now been in power since 2017. Moreover, despite the short electoral cycles, proportional representation (which was introduced in 1996) is said to have ushered in a period of relative consensus, with the parties sitting fairly close to each other on the political spectrum, and a succession of coalition governments. Education policy has therefore not been particularly contested in recent years, particularly given that it is not hugely electorally significant. This contrasts with periods of much greater political conflict and polarisation in the past.

Interviewees did not think the review process and outcomes would have differed greatly if the National Party had been in power, given the similarities between the parties, although the consultation would perhaps have been less extensive. Moreover, the review of the standards was initiated – in a lighter-touch form - under the previous National Government, and opposition parties were subsequently kept in the loop throughout the review.

The ministry is very powerful and is not a compliant instrument for politicians. The system is described as being 'More Westminster than Westminster' in terms of civil service independence, but this is based on a somewhat dated view of the Westminster system harking back to the era of 'Yes Minister' (Menzies, 2023). As discussed below, the ministry to some extent sits as an arbitrator between the government and the profession/the unions. In contrast, elected government is said to check, not lead or drive reform, with the exception of a small selection of higher profile electoral pledges. The treasury is a much less significant player than in England which may explain why additional funding was easy to come by when the review budget spiralled. The context of expansionary spending over the course of the covid-pandemic may have helped create the conditions where this was possible.

Education policy history and precedent

Government has few policy levers. Schools have been locally managed by parents' boards since the Tomorrow's Schools policy of 1989. The highly divisive National Standards were abolished in 2018 (C. Hipkins, 2017) and the inspectorate (the Education Review Office) is said to be weak.

Unions are strong but current dynamics contrast with the 1990s - known by many as 'the neoliberal phase.' This was a very confrontational and divisive phase during which unions were pushed out. However, despite the changes that have taken place since, a legacy of mistrust between unions and the Ministry/Government remains.

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[2] There is also an important controversy around the relative status of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori version) and The Treaty of Waitangi (the English version).

This history has shaped the commitment to a consultative and consensual approach and the aversion to external assessment and accountability.

Narratives, ideologies, and policy orientations

Inclusion and social equity are highly valued across both main parties, and, as noted above, the approach to policy making is consultative and consensual with competition frowned upon. Underneath this, sits a tension regarding what it means for the assessment system to be inclusive. For example back in 1998, David Hood, former Chief Executive of the NZQA referred to "the right to achieve success" (quoted in R. Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 62), but opinions differ as to whether everyone being able to pass an exam is inclusion, or whether not passing the exam simply reveals an underlying failure of the system to achieve inclusive outcomes. In other words, is the assessment racist or does the exam reveal the underlying racism of society?

The media narrative focuses on the immediate impact that 'failure' will have on Māori Pasifika kids rather than the historic reasons for their underachievement. This was seen when findings from the pilot of the new literacy/numeracy assessments were published. For some, the high number of pupils failing showed that 'the pilot had not gone well,' for others it revealed something about the state of the system.

In recent years there has been a change in the narrative about New Zealand's curriculum (and potentially the system as a whole). Previously it had always been described as 'world leading' but doubt has now crept in - partly as a result of falling rankings in international comparative assessments. This has shifted the backdrop to the review.

Who have the key actors been?

Politicians

- Chris Hipkins, as minister of education was the key politician. He had particular clout, for example during the pandemic he was known as 'minister for everything' and he subsequently became prime minister. However he did not necessarily have a strong sense of what direction things should go in and was not generally involved at a granular level once the review had kicked off.

Social stakeholders (Parents, teachers, employers, 'the public')

- Education policy is not particularly politically salient for parents, perhaps partly because:
    - their views on the state of schools tend to be directed towards local boards;
    - their attitudes towards education are relatively uncompetitive in nature, compared to countries where educational success is seen as an essential, positional good needed for future economic success;
    - a lack of collective voice or lobby.
- Government (and the ministry in particular) looks towards teachers more than parents but there are plenty of counter-examples to this when something catches parents' attention (for example the 'dreamers' proposals on NCEA Level 1.
- Employers are somewhat more influential when the Nationals are in power, and teachers somewhat more powerful when Labour is in power. Employers also seem to play a role in the background, for example their priorities unexpectedly appear in policies.

Other policy actors

- The system does not have the 'polycentric' characteristics of the English system (Exley, 2020). In other words, there are very few think tanks, policy entrepreneurs and influential edu-businesses and consultancies. Policy is largely determined by relations between government; ministry; unions; universities/academics - a more 'corporatist' system. This has the benefit of reducing turbulence and certain vested interests, but some argue it also contributes to group-think, producer-capture and that it reduces scrutiny. It also reduces the range of channels available to stakeholders to get

their voices heard and reduces the range of evidence that is considered. The NCEA review therefore did not have many different lobby and advocacy groups clamouring to influence it.

- The NZI is seen by many as the main dissenting voice. Briar Lipson in particular (who used to lead the think-tank's education work) was a vocal critic of the NCEA system and published an influential report on it (Lipson, 2018). She is credited - even by her opponents, with having pushed people to think more rigorously and critically and for shifting the Overton window. Michael Johnston has taken her place and was involved in the Tertiary Commission report that demonstrated the low standards of literacy and numeracy achieved by students who passed NCEA (Thomas et al., 2014).
- The NZCER is the go-to expert organisation which conducted a lot of the detailed work that fed into shaping the reforms. Rose Hipkins is the Chief Researcher there and is an influential expert on curriculum and assessment. She co-authored a book on the NCEA with Michael Johnston and Mark Sheehan from Wellington University (R. Hipkins et al., 2016)[3].
- Māori treaty partners and representative groups, as well as Peak Bodies (including the school trustees' association which speaks for 2,500 school boards) were involved throughout.
- Elite schools were influential critics, reprising a role they had played in the development of the original NCEA (R. Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 69).
- Unions are a powerful presence. People joke that "there are branches of the primary union even in towns without a McDonald's." Most teachers are unionised and many members are highly active. Although the unions' influence waxes and wanes depending on the issue, they have never been pushed-out to the extent that they were in the 'neoliberal period.' Serious opposition from the unions would have been a blocker to the NCEA reforms.

Dynamics between different players

- There were two factions at the start: 'the dreamers,' and an alignment of unions and independent school leaders who resisted their initial recommendations, with support from certain groups of parents. The MAG and the PAG then came to embody this, and relations were tense, it could be said that the PAG eventually won out, though others argue that they are still able to influence the more detailed and ongoing work, rewriting the standards.
- The ministry acted as a go-between, brokering compromises between the profession and the government.

What role did evidence play?

The role of evidence in the reforms includes:

Expertise:

- The various advisory groups.
- Advisory papers written by experts on crux issues at the start of the review process
- Specialists who wrote further papers to resolve tensions and emerging challenges during the technical/operational phase.

Quantitative data:

- A more minimal role, but the Tertiary Commission Report (Thomas et al., 2014) was highly influential.
- Falling Pisa results undermined the narrative of 'a world leading curriculum' and showed that something was amiss, even if the country did not end up in the grip of a 'narrative of crisis.'
- Rising NCEA pass rates which were interpreted by many as egregious grade inflation rather than 'real' improvement.

Qualitative data:

- A vast body of insight from the national conversation which was synthesised in a series of reports

Research studies:

[3] She is also the mother of Minister Hipkins (now Prime minister)

- Research evidence is not talked about a lot and generally comes from relatively aligned sources. For example, comparative international evidence is generally drawn from countries with contextual and ideological similarities such as Canada and Wales, whereas the US is seen as unpalatable.
- If theory is included in 'what counts as evidence' then evidence may have played a more significant role, as theoretical underpinnings about what education should be like have shaped the approach throughout.
- It is said to be hard to conduct large-scale experimental studies in New Zealand given the small size of the system.

4. How do assessment arrangements relate to other features of the education system

- Schools have a high degree of autonomy and there is not a culture of compliance. They are also free to shape their own curriculum around the flexible national curriculum.
- Policy makers have few levers to drive their intended changes and shape the system.
- The qualitative element of accountability, the Education Review Office (equivalent of Ofsted) is weak.
- There are no imposed resources such as textbooks, but resources are available to help teachers deliver education as envisaged – for example the NZCER developed a series of assessment resource banks (Menzies et al., 2020).
- There is a degree of tension between the discipline-based elements of the assessment system and the curriculum which is structured around broader learning areas and competencies.
- Universities have a high degree of autonomy over teacher training (R. Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 214).

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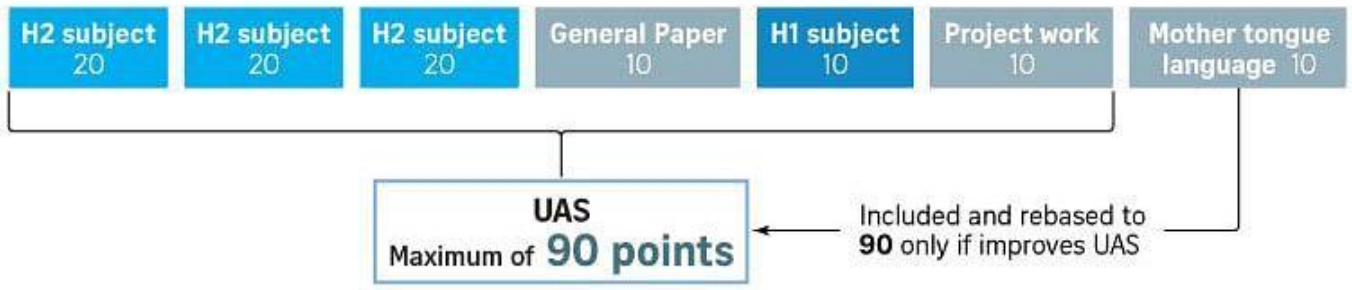
Reforming Singapore's Primary and Post 16 Assessments

This is one of three case studies illustrating how assessment policy has developed in three jurisdictions and the contextual factors that have shaped this.
The case study is mainly based on interviewees' accounts so reflects the views and opinions they shared.
Loic Menzies, 2023.

Introducing Singapore's Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) and University Admission Score (UAS)

In Singapore, all pupils complete the PSLE in their sixth year of primary school. They take multiple choice exams in English, Maths, Science, and their mother tongue (Tamil, Chinese or Malay). The exam is based on England's old 11-plus exam and serves a similar function - in terms of determining which secondary school pupils will attend. Pupils receive a fine-grained score that places them within a national distribution. This is now changing as a result of the reforms explored in this case study. Until recently, pupils also sat various mid-year and end of year exams throughout primary school. This assessment burden is now being reduced.

The University Admission Score is currently scored based on a maximum of 90 points. This is based on three main content-based subjects, an additional content-based subject, a general paper, project work, and mother tongue (if this improves their overall mark).

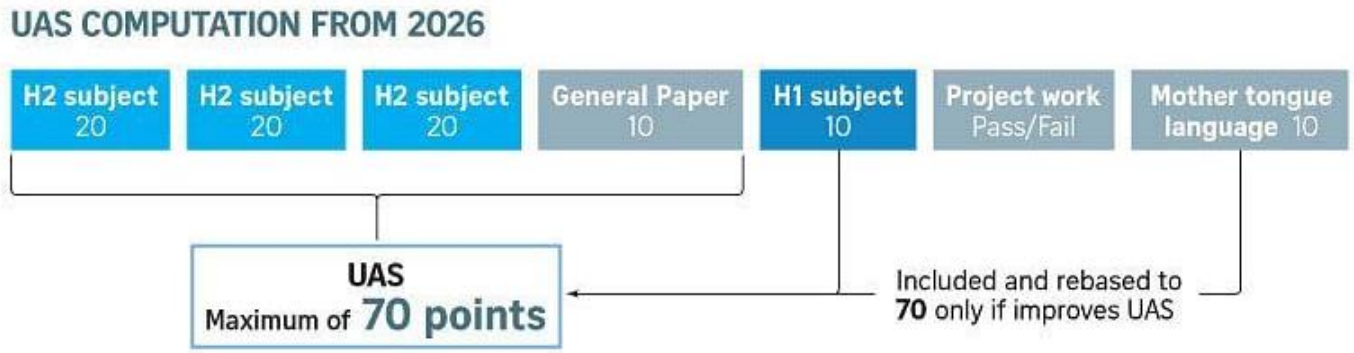


(Teng, 2023)

Reforming Assessment

Reforms are currently underway to shift from fine-grained scores in the PSLE, to broader attainment bands. This builds on the O-level and A level precedent. Mid-year - and some end-of-year exams have already been abolished and this is now happening at post-16 level.

Reforms are also taking place to reduce stakes on certain elements of post-16 assessment. This will result in the 'additional subject' only being counted if it improves a pupils' overall UAS score and removing the project work from the score (and turning it into a pass-fail assessment) as follows.



(Teng, 2023)

What problems are the reforms setting out to address?

- Government and society have been concerned that children are being pushed to chase every last mark in primary school assessments and that the PSLE is driving a tutoring 'treadmill'. This concern was frequently raised during a big national consultation (the 2012 national conversation) on the issues Singapore is facing.
- There are concerns that A-Level pupils lack the space to explore their interests, free from worries about their final result. Education Minister Chan Chun Sing has suggested that moving to a pass-fail approach to project work will encourage students to "exercise greater agency and creativity in areas of interests, rather than be driven by grades" (Teng, 2023). There does not seem to be significant concern yet that these changes will result in a cliff-edge or that given the high-stakes, pupils will be incentivised to narrow their focus to scored subjects.
- Reducing the assessment burden is seen as a way of increasing 'joy' in learning and freeing up time for a greater range of subjects and rigour (Chia, 2018b; Teng, 2018).
- There are serious concerns about pupils being over-pressured and hot-housed through excessive pressure and tutoring.
- Although there have been multiple calls for the PSLE to be abolished, these calls have so far been rejected since former education minister, Ong Ye Kung has argued that although there are problems with the system, it remains a "useful checkpoint" and is the fairest approach (Teng, 2018).

The process of reform

PSLE

The latest PSLE changes are not a single, 'big-bang' reform. Various iterative tweaks have been made over a long period of time to reduce the emphasis on exams. For example, in 2018, the government announced certain 'weighted mid-year' assessments and end of year exams (Chia, 2018).

Agenda setting and problem identification (Howlett & Giest, 2012) took place as part of one of Singapore's 'national consultations'. A similar big conversation is currently underway, led by the Deputy PM - this time focused on renewing the social compact.

The last 'national consultation' involved a series of dialogues with citizens and was run by a cross-governmental team. Views expressed as part of this sparked a two-year review of primary scoring and the latest reforms have therefore had a ten-year gestation period. When civil servants first looked at the dialogue findings, they looked at big "blue sky options," "casting our net widely". This led to consideration of radical changes like getting rid of the exams completely. They then whittled down the options towards the Overton Window (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2019) within which they could 'manoeuvre'. This took into account what was palatable to ministers.

When reviewing options, the first thing civil servants report doing is asking themselves "why did that policy come about historically", in other words, what was the rationale for it and:

1. What, if anything, has changed since?
2. Are there any of the aims from that time which are no longer valid?

The answer was that historically, detailed scores from the PSE had been needed because schools were not equally resourced and quality diverged considerably. Now that schools are more equitably resourced precise sorting may matter less – particularly now that the country has moved on from the 'efficiency' paradigm described below (Gopinathan, 2015).

Having narrowed down the options, civil servants moved on to a more technical phase, conducting extensive modelling of different approaches to scoring and simulating different placements to see how well different approaches might predict pupils' future outcomes (perhaps a sign that the 'efficiency'

paradigm to some extent persists). The process was lengthy since new options were constantly identified and each time a new option was identified, there was another round of modelling which needed to go to ministers. There were senior-level discussions about the various options at cabinet level and different concerns were raised each time - for example regarding how many scoring bands to have. It took five years to reach a decision on the preferred option.

Part of the challenge came from interdependencies, since only a small part of the system was being changed and the placement process itself has remained intact. The national policy also needed to align with school practices since schools run their own mock, mid-year exams which they set themselves. They therefore needed to be adjust these to the new system. Civil servants' view is that "the ground" needs a lot of time to adjust and teachers need to develop the skills to implement government-led changes such that mandating is not enough.

The Singapore Exam and Assessment board provided technical input on scoring and bands throughout the process.

UAS

Unusually these reforms were announced as part of a parliamentary debate on the budget rather than as part of a more formal and detailed document.

Verdicts on the process and outcome

- These latest changes to the PSLE should be seen as part of an ongoing process. As one interviewee noted "maybe the exam will go completely one day."
- Changes to A-level appear to represent a significant recognition of the problem of inequality and the need to widen opportunities – a shift in the narrative and priorities that we return to below.

What factors have influenced and shaped the process?

How has the environment shaped decisions and approaches?

National and state history

Singapore gained 'reluctant independence' from Malaysia in 1965 and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew declared "that the country had no other resource apart from its human beings. This has driven a long-running prioritisation of education, and a strong 'human capital orientation' (Bell & Stevenson, 2006).

The country is small and has no rural hinterland, making it highly governable. Having "secured the fundamentals" the country now has the luxury of asking "where we will be in 50 years". There is a sense of having achieved an equilibrium but a recognition that the world will always change and that this will require the country to continually seek new equilibria.

The constitution and political system

The same party has been in power since independence and the governing arrangement is referred to as a 'social compact.' Politicians keep an eye on election results with a benchmark whereby the ruling party aims to secure around 75% of the vote. If this dips to 73%, then it is considered a sign that something is amiss and action needed. There is now an increasingly consultative style to governing, and the national conversations are an example of this. This is a shift from the early days of the Singapore state when the government was run in a more top-down manner by highly educated individuals who stood out from a less educated population. As the population has become better educated, their ability to engage in the process has increased.

The contrast between Singapore and its far less successful neighbouring states (and the sense of being 'a nice house in a bad neighbourhood'), is said to contribute to the population's high approval of the governing party. Ultimately, the population trusts the highly educated and non-corrupt technocratic class

to govern. Having long time-horizon, few obstacles to governing and 'not having to play politics in the conventional sense' reduces complexity and makes a more planned approach possible. It also means politicians can 'get on with the job of governing and spending time in their constituency.' This constituency level engagement provides another form of consultative input.

Assessment reforms are an example of Singapore's highly iterative approach to policy making. Changes begin with an outline set of ideas rather than fully fleshed out policies. The government might announce a broad approach to reform but this will gradually change and be refined "because the world changes and that's not a problem."

Because policy making is insulated from short-term politics, and because the country is small (reducing the distance from policy-making to enactment), it follows a very structured, somewhat textbook policy process, as exemplified by the assessment reforms:

- **Policy formulation:** A stakeholder and gap analysis is conducted reviewing whether the context or priorities have changed.
- **Implementation**: Legislative requirements are identified, alongside any, funding, training or communication needs.
- **Review**: policies are scheduled for review after a set number of years, though some argue that review is a continuous process.

Education policy history and precedent

As a former colony, much of the education system is modelled on the UK.

Education follows ten-year masterplans and policies like assessment reforms are developed over a long period of time. This is possible because there is little risk that change of government will disrupt long-term reforms and the system is insulated from partisan politics (although some suggest that this is beginning to change). Rather than reform involving specific initiatives - there are "constant cycles of evolutionary and accretive reform." Thus, the assessment reforms described in this case study are not a self-contained initiative, they are features of an overall direction of travel.

Fine grained scoring has already been abolished at O Level and A level and being able to link PSLE reforms to this precedent is said to have helped overcome opposition

The current Deputy Prime Minister was previously the education secretary and in 2012 called for "Every School to be a Good School", which had not previously been the case. This drove reforms, like sending top teachers to the toughest schools. In turn - by reducing disparities between schools, this shift made it possible to reform the PSLE because precise rankings were less important.

Singapore is confident that its education system is world class but there is sense that maintaining this requires constant adaptation and learning.

The size of the state, the proximity of policy makers to delivery and the fact that there is only one National Institute of Education (which trains all teachers and conducts most education research) means it is easy to achieve alignment through: 'one ministry - one NIE - one national school system'. Intentions therefore get realised – though this may inadvertently inhibit innovation

Gopinathan and Lim (2021) distinguish between two phases in the Singaporean education:

1. Developing the system (1965–1997):
    - Unifying a segregated system and developing a standardised (but streamed) system,
    - Resolving issues with the medium of instruction and mother tongues,
    - Establishing the National Institute of Education and a skilled teaching workforce.

2. Shaping a post-industrial innovation economy (1997-2020)

- Moving away from standardisation,
- Introducing key reforms - Thinking Schools, Learning Nation (1997), Teach Less, Learn More (2004) and ICT Master Plans policies, which sought to promote deeper, more open, and questioning learning.
-

These are broken down into more detail (Gopinathan, 2015) as:

- Survival (1965–1978) – by focusing on cohesion and developing a skilled workforce;
- Efficiency (1979–1997)– through selection and streaming;
- Ability-driven (1998–2011)- by moving up the value chain and into a post-industrial system;
- Student-centric, values-driven (2011–present) – by emphasising the more holistic priorities explored in this case study.

Narratives, ideologies, and policy orientations

The concept of meritocracy and the assumption that sorting by merit and aptitude is appropriate ran through the 'national consultation'. This narrative provides a shared and consensually accepted starting point. It also came up in every discussion and interview. However, there is an active debate underway about what meritocracy looks like in modern Singapore, partly driven by the fact that less space is now being created at the top now, compared to in the past when 'a rising tide lifted all ships.' Equity is now an increasing concern and focus. For example in 2018, schools minister, Mr Ong made a speech in parliament about the paradox of meritocracy and inequality (Chia, 2018a). Some speculate that in the long run, it will become possible to abandon sacred cows – like streaming and the exams that arbitrate it, by pointing to a fast-changing world. Debates about the PSLE are part of these narratives. Similarly, the ability to mandate policies that enhance equity is seen as a reason for a high degree of central direction.

There is an overall effort to broaden education and make assessment more holistic. Universities now take into account resilience and the whole person - for example by exploring in interviews whether people have overcome adversity. Activities like youth social action are also now being recognised and publicly celebrated to emphasise that these things matter. Reforms to UAS are part of this direction of travel and some believe that this will eventually lead to a move away from subject disciplines.

Fertility is falling and the government therefore takes the obligation to maintain the stock of human capital seriously – even avoiding sucking up too much expertise within the civil services.

The country has three main ethnic groups and maintaining the balance between them, and promoting social cohesion is considered important for national stability. There are emerging questions about the future of bilingualism in school.

The country is keenly aware of its proximity to China which drives a degree of competition as well as being an important source of wealthy migration of people and capital

Previously, the focus for the system was efficiency but diversification is now important. This involves increasing the number and range of paths available.

Who have the key actors been?

Government

- The political will for recent assessment reforms came from the current Deputy Prime Minister who was previously a minister for education and was very active in the national dialogues.
- Extensive discussion and debate about the reforms took place at cabinet level. This may have driven the frequent back-and-forth on different grading models. Most cabinet members have been at the table for a long time and many have been education ministers. They therefore have highly-developed views on many of the issues. This can result in a degree of attachment to previous

policies when they are being reviewed and revised. For example, with the A level reforms, some of the ministers in the cabinet had been involved in broadening the curriculum by increasing the number of subjects taken. They were therefore concerned that reforms to exclude these from scoring would represent a rowing back and unpicking of their work.
- What is said in Parliament can affect public sentiment contributing to what gains salience. However, would not normally act as a blocker.
- The governing party tends to source its talent (in terms of politicians) from within the bureaucracy. This means that one education minister involved in the assessment reforms was a former permanent secretary for education. Politicians therefore often have considerable pre-existing, domain-specific policy expertise.
- There are "coordinating ministers" with responsibility across broader remits such as 'social issues', national security or economic affairs. They bring departments together and are normally senior ministers (for example a former Deputy Prime Minister)

The Bureaucracy

- The civil service includes both policy generalist (~20%), and specialist (~80%) teams drawn from the profession. Civil servants are seen as internal consultants rather than work being routinely outsourced. The professional/specialist teams provide insight into the operational reality. They are also less frequently rotated and therefore provide institutional memory as well as domain expertise. Both teams made an important contribution to assessment reforms and there is sometimes a degree of horse-trading between the two to reconcile their slightly different perspectives.
- Civil servants are said to be more insulated from politics than in other countries. There is a healthy degree of trust between politicians and civil service. For example, one civil servant explained that they felt empowered to say 'no' to ministers and confident that when they say 'no', politicians will listen. Nonetheless, in these situations, civil servants must still work hard to back up their argument and they will be diplomatic and aware of their political capital. However, some believe that civil service neutrality has been eroded in recent years.
- When making an argument to ministers, civil servants may appeal to professional authority saying "teachers have called for this" rather than simply the logical reason for doing it.

The Treasury

- Competition between ministers for departmental budgets is minimised by agreeing five year block-budgets for ministries, which can then be deployed at their discretion.
- It is down to permanent secretaries rather than ministers to negotiate the department's budget.
- If, within those five years, there are new ideas then the permanent secretary can go to the finance ministry to justify the case and secure the funding.
- The aim is to depoliticise the process of departmental budget allocations and to ensure decisions are based on cost benefit calculations rather than politics
- This approach is made easier by the fact that there have been national budget surpluses in recent years, reducing the degree to which negotiations are a zero-sum game

Social stakeholders (Parents, teachers, employers, 'the public')

- Culturally, education is seen as something schools and the experts know best, limiting parents' involvement in education policy.
- However, given the high-degree of prioritisation of education in Singapore, and the high-profile nature of exams, there is a nervousness about interfering with assessment.
- As noted above, Singapore has pursued an increasingly consultative approach, including with parents, employers and the public in general.
- Consultations with the public are valued as a means of surfacing concerns but less so for generating solutions where more technical expertise is needed. They do not tend to yield unexpected issues because it is a small country so it is not hard to know what is going on, but they do help with understanding what the biggest issues are.
- Given education policy's human capital orientation, employers are a key stakeholder group.

- Slightly different policy messages are emphasised to parents and teachers.
- Schools perceive their boss to be the government rather than parents.

Unions and the media

- There is a Singapore Teaching union as well as separate Chinese, Tamil and Malay unions. Where there is an issue they want to raise, they are expected to do so behind closed-doors in discussion with the ministry, rather than through public outcry.
- The media is funded by the state and its role is to 'get ideas out there.' It is informative rather than investigative.
- Social media has to some extent 'disintermediated' the traditional pres.

Other policy actors

- The Singapore Exam and Assessment Board sets national exams and works with Cambridge Assessment on the A-level assessments. The board is very involved in policy making and provides technical expertise on things like scoring and bands.
- There are a few small research institutes and consultancies that occasionally respond to calls for research or advice from government (which are sometimes issued as 'problem statements'), rather than pursuing their own work agenda. Some, like the Head Foundation, conduct more regionally focused work.

What role does evidence play?

Expertise:

- Most expertise is internal to the ministry, either through the specialist/professional branch or the policy branch.
- Education expertise also sits within the National Institute for Education which works closely with the ministry.

Consultation and piloting:

- Public and stakeholder consultation plays an important role in informing policy, as noted above through the national conversations. This is particularly the case at the agenda setting/problem identification stage.
- Policies are generally piloted and evaluated.

Quantitative data:

- There is a strong preference for quantitative data and the Singaporean state has rich data sets that allow sophisticated and extensive analysis – for example in recent analyses of intergenerational social mobility.
- Research institutes and think tanks occasionally make requests for government data but this is not routine.

Research studies and international evidence:

- Research studies tend to come from the National Institute of Education
- International studies and examples are widely used, sometimes drawing on expert organisations from overseas. England remains a frequent source of international input (such from Cambridge Assessment and the UCL IOE) partly because of historic colonial links.
- As an established educational super-power, Singapore has a degree of confidence in asking for advice to provide external learning, but acting as a critical consumer, rejecting it when it does not resonate or hit the spot..
- Hong Kong is often used as a comparison point given its similarity as a small, high performing, Asian jurisdiction.

How do assessment arrangements relate to other features of the education system?

- Given the degree of central direction and the “one ministry - one NIE - one national school system” approach, there is a high degree of alignment between different elements of the education system.
- Primary school assessment is designed to cohere with the established streaming system.
- Singapore is enthusiastically pursuing a new approach to lifelong learning, whereby the state supports people to regularly upgrade their educational credentials. This involves creating additional places in higher education institutions and setting targets for the proportion of people pursuing education at this level over the course of their lifetime, rather than simply when they leave school. Minister Chan has argued that this will lead to more “purposeful and timely acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills.” Post-16 qualifications are therefore now less significant as a gatekeeper to higher education.

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