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.
Loic Menzies, 2023.

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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