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The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA): "Fragile – Handle With Care"

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Abstract:

There is little doubt that the rhetoric surrounding the current preoccupation with standards-based assessment in the senior secondary schools of New Zealand has been persuasive. However, critics have not been silent in their condemnation of standards-based assessment approaches and they argue that these remain firmly embedded in the recently announced National Certificate of Educational Achievement. This paper begins with a critical analysis of the fundamental tensions underpinning the introduction of a standards-based assessment philosophy. It then explores the problems that are likely to arise when the School Certificate and University Bursary examinations are abolished and the NCEA positioned as the only remaining qualification for senior secondary school students. Finally, it is argued that the success (or otherwise) of the NCEA will ultimately be determined by the acceptance of this qualification amongst students, parents, teachers, and employers as a reputable replacement for the School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and University Bursary qualifications.

Fifteen years ago the terms "achievement-based", "competency-based", "criterion-referenced" and "standards-based" assessment were rarely voiced among New Zealand teachers and educators. The then assessment fashion was "norm-referenced testing", an approach wherein students were ranked in relation to a notional performance norm or standard. The most obvious example of the latter approach was the fifth form School Certificate Examination, an examination that had been introduced in 1934 to mark the satisfactory completion of three years secondary schooling (Lee, 1996, pp. 160-179). Fifty years later the educational world had swung firmly behind a new,

seemingly fairer, competency-based system of assessment, and New Zealand was not left behind. By the mid-1980s the Department of Education had convened the Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment, and Qualifications in Forms 5 to 7 *(Learning and Achieving)* and was able to report the Committee's unanimous support for "achievement-based" (criterion-referenced) assessment. Such a recommendation was of course entirely consistent with the policies of the Labour Government (1984-1990) on curriculum and assessment reform. Similarly, after winning office in late 1990, the National Government (1990-1999) announced that a "unit standards" based approach to education and training offered the only real hope for the nation's economic survival. The increasingly competitive international economic (and "free market") environment from the mid-1980s had helped to convince politicians of all persuasions that traditional approaches to education and training were no longer viable in a modern global economy. The way forward lay in accepting a competency-based education and training framework which, it was assumed, would further boost New Zealand's overall skills base, economic output, international competitiveness and economic prosperity.

Education for the 21st Century (1994): Towards "seamless" education

Clearly, in order for this to be achieved, new policy initiatives and administrative structures would be required. The philosophical glue that was to bind the different elements together was finally provided in the National Government's strategic policy document, *Education for the 21st Century* (1994). Underpinning the document was the ostensibly unifying concept of the "seamless" education system which the Minister of Education, Dr. Lockwood Smith, envisaged would "maximise participation and achievement in education and training, from birth throughout life." He continued:

> [B]arriers [will] no longer exist between schools and post-school education and training; all courses of study will lead to national qualifications regardless of the place of study; senior secondary trainees can combine regular school courses with those in polytechnics or universities, or with workplace training; trainees can move freely from institution to institution while continuing to build a national qualification; and those learning on the job in the workplace gain credit towards national qualifications. (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 6)

Embedded in the "seamless" education concept were four key structures – Skill New Zealand, the Industry Training Strategy, the New Zealand Curriculum Framework, and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Skill New Zealand and the Industry Training Strategy were jointly responsible for providing and coordinating industry-wide and industry-led skills training, so as to produce a highly skilled and adaptable workforce able to compete in the international marketplace. Three specific outcomes were expected to follow from this joint relationship:

> ... a training and qualifications system which is highly responsive to the needs of enterprise and industry; an education system in which individuals are enabled to make informed choices about education, training, and employment; [and] the expansion of systematic training in industry, and the development of a training culture in New Zealand. (1994, p. 32)

The third element of the government's seamless education system was the Curriculum Framework that covered students from the time they entered primary school (Year 1) until their exit at the end of senior secondary school (Year 13). Put simply, the Framework set out nine broad curriculum principles, specified seven essential learning areas and eight essential (and generic) skills that all students were expected to acquire throughout their schooling, and, finally, provided for the evaluation of students' learning outcomes using eight levels of achievement objectives (Ministry of Education, 1993, pp. 4-9, 22-23).

Overlapping the Curriculum Framework was the fourth and final component of the seamless strategy – the National Qualifications Framework – administered by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Formally established under the Education Amendment Act in July 1990, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is legally empowered to oversee the development and review of national standards for all qualifications in post-compulsory education and training, and to establish a framework for administering national qualifications (Education Amendment Act, 1990, Section 248). The NZQA is also responsible for formulating policies and criteria for the validation of courses and the subsequent accreditation of "provider" institutions, and for ensuring the international equivalence of qualifications – that New Zealand qualifications are recognised internationally, and that overseas qualifications are recognised in New Zealand (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1991b).

The National Qualifications Framework

Upon being established, the NZQA's first task was to release the National Qualifications Framework for public consultation in October 1990 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1990). Five months later a more detailed discussion document appeared with a further four months allowed for public scrutiny and submission (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1991a). In September 1991 the NZQA Board published its decisions (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1991b), and two months later, the National Qualifications Framework was formally launched, along with the publication of a number of descriptive booklets. Finally, in May 1992, a comprehensive consultation package was announced that included a number of documents outlining proposals for administering the provision of nationally and internationally recognised qualifications (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1992).

Adopting a modular approach to assessment in order to recognise qualifications in both the academic and vocational sectors (Education Amendment Act, 1990, Section 247), the Framework consisted of a National Certificate (Levels 1-4) and a National Diploma (Levels 5-6), followed by an initial degree (Level 7) and post-graduate degrees (Level 8). The essential "building blocks" of the Framework were the competency-based "unit standards" wherein students would be evaluated against clearly defined standards.[1] All unit standards contained two key interdependent features: "learning elements" (statements of intellectual, practical or attitudinal competence exhibited by the learner) and "performance criteria" (statements that specify precise performance standards and for which evidence must be produced).

National Standards Bodies

The formulation of unit standards came to be vested in the National Standards Bodies (NSBs) as provided for in the Industry Training Act of 1992. Representing all the major users of the relevant unit standards and qualifications, the NSBs were expected to assume responsibility for ensuring the wide acceptance of the unit standards, overseeing the development of unit standards in the format required by the NZQA for registration on the Framework, assisting with the design and operation of quality management systems, marketing the new qualifications in their respective sector(s), and arranging the regular review and monitoring of unit standards and qualifications (Industry Training Act,

1992). In order that the newly-developed training and qualifications system would be responsive to New Zealand's immediate education and workplace needs, those bodies who would use, grant credit for, or otherwise provide recognition of, the unit standards-based qualifications were required to endorse these prior to their being registered on the Framework. This stipulation applied not only to the industry-specific unit standards and qualifications being developed, but also to the more general unit standards and qualifications soon to be provided by the secondary schools and tertiary institutions.

Industry Training Organisations

Responsibility for setting skill standards for, and monitoring and administering the delivery of, industry-based training across a variety of workplace settings was given to individual Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) established under the Industry Training Act (1992). Owned by their respective industries, each ITO was required to conduct an industry-wide needs analysis, to define and develop training standards prior to their being registered on the National Qualifications Framework, and to establish partnerships with training providers. Thus, legal recognition of ITOs was contingent on their demonstrating the ability to deliver, assess, maintain and monitor training efficiently and effectively to the standard demanded by the NZQA (1992, Sections 5-7). A three-year time frame (1992-1995) was allowed for the redevelopment and subsequent registration of all existing industry-specific qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework. The same approach was adopted for qualifications available in the post-compulsory (secondary school and tertiary) education sector (Ministry of Education, 1994, pp. 26-33).

The Qualifications Framework and "Unit Standards"

Structurally, the National Qualifications Framework provided the means by which the NZQA could meet its statutory obligation of ensuring "a consistent approach to the recognition of qualifications in academic and vocational areas" (Education Amendment Act, 1990, Section 247). Its mandate was clear – to introduce a unified, logically designed and systematic framework for designing and issuing all education and vocational awards, qualifications and credentials. Initially called "units of learning" (later, "unit standards"), these standards-based "building blocks" represented clearly specified learning outcomes ("elements") that individual learners were expected to achieve, and

against which their performance would be measured and recorded.[2] Common to both general ("academic") education and workplace ("vocational") training courses, these units essentially were prescriptive behavioural statements about separate components of learning within a given qualification that were able to be transferred and credited to another qualification. Thus, from the outset, the traditional distinction between "academic" and "vocational" courses was abandoned in favour of a more integrated, "seamless" approach administered by a single body – NZQA.

Criticism mounts

However, this approach was markedly different from that adopted by the Scottish Vocational Educational Council (Scotvec) during the 1980s, wherein a modularised competency-based National Certificate was introduced to cover non-advanced vocational education and training (Elley, 1993; Wolf, 1995). Seemingly ignorant of educational developments overseas, the NZQA boldly announced that "the Government does not intend that there will be first and second class qualifications based on the discredited distinction between academic and vocational. Both are equal in their worth" (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1991a, p. 32). In seeking to bridge the academic-vocational divide, no consideration was given to the historical reality that reforms in education succeed when, and only when, they are viewed as not threatening the opportunities of ambitious youth and when they enjoy strong support from schools, teachers, parents, and employers. McKenzie makes this point persuasively:

> [G]overnments do not have the power, which they sometimes imagine they do, to decree qualification status. [T]hose who in the name of the State declare that all distinctions between *academic* and *vocational* qualifications are discredited, speak in voices which are often impotent. The real message, which is not to be confused with the rhetoric, is that curriculum issues are political issues that lie deeply embedded in our social structure; a social structure that reformers ignore at their peril. (McKenzie, 1992, p. 29)

With its absolute insistence that all academic and vocational courses in the post-compulsory sectors be included under a single qualifications umbrella (the National Qualifications Framework) and format (the unit standards-based building block approach), the NZQA should not have been surprised when some of its critics began to analyse the theoretical

underpinnings of the Qualifications Framework, and to expose serious weaknesses therein.

In the first place, these critics censured the Framework designers for adhering to a reductionistic and atomistic philosophy in which all knowledge and skill domains became translated into predetermined sets of assessable competencies. These same critics also challenged the NZQA to provide clear evidence that competency-based assessment was the most *valid* assessment method (Codd, McAlpine & Poskitt, 1991; Irwin, 1994; Codd, 1997). Secondly, as Irwin has cautioned, the Framework's "all-or-nothing" unit standards concept, wherein the learner either "passes" or "fails", presupposed that transparent levels of competency ("standards") can be predefined for all academic and vocational courses, and that this process was somehow non-problematic. Such an approach, however, overlooked the more important assessment considerations regarding how much knowledge had been acquired, how thoroughly the concepts had been understood, and the extent to which originality was evident (Irwin, 1994; 1995). Finally, and more damning still, came the allegation that a technocratic view of education and assessment was embedded in the Framework to such an extent that any judgements about specific curricular *objectives* would only be considered in strict isolation from the assessment *outcomes* (Codd, 1997). The NZQA was in no position to disagree with this assessment for in its *Briefing Papers for the Incoming Government* in 1993, the NZQA had conceded that it had purposefully designed its Qualifications Framework so as to separate the "development of the curriculum" from the "setting (and monitoring) of standards" (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1993, p. 9).

The Irwin Report (May 1994)

The underlying dichotomy between curriculum development and assessment was indeed a powerful one and it immediately caught the attention of the New Zealand Business Roundtable. In marked contrast to the Butterworths' recent evaluation of the assessment and qualification reforms as having reached a "steady state" by 1994 (G. & S. Butterworth, 1998, p. 200) the Roundtable's policy analyst, Michael Irwin thought otherwise. In a comprehensive 179-page report written for the Education Forum entitled *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications: An Evaluation of Current Reforms*, Irwin surveyed the recent reforms in curriculum, assessment and qualifications across all levels of education and training from Form 5 (Year 11) upwards.

Beginning with a detailed account of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework, Irwin then analysed school-based assessment, the Qualifications Framework, and, finally, the senior secondary school curriculum and qualifications (Irwin, 1994).

What is especially significant about this report is its detailed analysis of the *international* education context. In drawing upon a substantial body of international literature on assessment and qualifications in both the post-compulsory education and vocational arenas, Irwin convincingly demonstrated that New Zealand went far beyond the reforms undertaken since the late 1980s in England, France, Germany, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. While we do not propose to examine Irwin's report in minute detail, its key arguments, conclusions and recommendations nevertheless need to be borne in mind by both advocates and critics of current assessment policies and practices in New Zealand.

Irwin's chief complaint involved not only the Qualifications Framework *per se* but also its core assumption that every academic and vocational course could somehow be translated into the unit standards format and then slotted into that Framework. The attempt to impose such a "Grand Design", he warned, needed to be resisted because it accepted as an article of faith the assertion that academic and vocational courses would only enjoy parity of esteem once they were placed on the Framework (pp. viii, 85). In order to achieve this, the Framework designers were compelled to argue that there were no significant differences between academic and vocational courses in terms of their respective skills and knowledge bases. All that was required of learners, regardless of the type of course they were enrolled in, was that they could perform certain prescribed tasks to the satisfaction of their assessor(s). According to this "can do" view of assessment, students who could "do" particular tasks were assumed to have acquired the relevant skills, knowledge, and understanding. What this ignored, of course, was the reality that students might not know or understand what they "can do" – they simply "do" it by virtue of having rote learned the required task(s). In other words, it was the behaviour (i.e., the ability to "perform" the task) that was being assessed rather than the acquisition of underlying knowledge and understanding. Such an outcome, Irwin observed, was only to be expected given the Framework's emphasis on surface level "outcomes" and "performance criteria" (p. 87).

In urging the NZQA to review and redesign its Framework, Irwin recommended that the "one-size-fits-all" approach to qualifications

should immediately be abandoned in favour of recognising multiple qualifications systems that "communicate with each other in terms of credit recognition" (pp. xii, 11, 15). These multiple qualifications systems, he argued, would mark the completion of the various "pathways" followed by senior secondary school students. Irwin proposed that three pathways be introduced – academic, technical, and vocational – to take account of the increasingly diverse student population. Each pathway would interconnect by virtue of a coherent common core of studies comprising English, mathematics, science, Maori or a classical or modern language, the social sciences, and careers guidance, and occupy at least 50 percent of students' time.[3] Irwin envisaged the academic and technical pathways leading to the School Certificate and University Bursary examinations while students in the vocational pathway would work towards gaining unit standards-based National Certificate credits on the revamped qualifications framework (p. xiii, Recommendation 19; pp. 155-156).

No doubt aware of the failure of past attempts to differentiate the New Zealand school population according to the particular types of courses offered in the various post-primary schools,[4] Irwin confidently predicted that the introduction of a common core along the lines he proposed would help to minimise undesirable social distinctions by allowing movement between the three pathways (p. 155).

The reality, however, would have been very different from the rhetoric. Although they shared a common core, a hierarchy of pathways was likely to eventuate because each involved optional studies encompassing distinctively different knowledge. The vocational pathway, for example, was intended to cater for "those at the lower end of the attainment range" whereas the technical pathway sought to "develop talents for construction and design" (p. 156). These status differences were further reinforced in terms of the *types* of qualifications available to students in each of the three pathways. Given Irwin's stinging attack on unit standards-based assessment, it is noteworthy that only those students in the academic and technical streams were to have access to the long-established School Certificate and Bursary examinations; students in the vocational stream were limited to earning credits towards the National Certificate. It was a distinction that employers readily understood and one that would continue to trouble those charged with the responsibility of overhauling the existing qualifications system.

The Qualifications Framework Inquiry (June 1997)

At the same time that Irwin's report was released, the relationship between the Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) and the National Government deteriorated further. Having announced their vehement opposition to the bulk funding of teachers' salaries early in 1992, the Association continued to complain bitterly about teachers' growing workloads as a result of the tight timeframe laid down for the implementation of the Curriculum and Qualifications Frameworks. Although the Association strongly endorsed the general principles laid down in both Frameworks, concerns began to surface about the educational validity of a uniformly standards-based qualifications arrangement and the inadequacy of existing resources for the ongoing development of the Qualifications Framework. Indeed, matters came to a head in September 1995 when the PPTA executive released its position paper, *The Frameworks: Braided Stream or Tangled Web?*, at its annual conference. After considerable discussion, conference members resolved that the Association continue its support for the government's curriculum and qualifications reforms on the express condition that the government provide "adequate resourcing" and more effective professional development (Post-Primary Teachers' Association, 1997). They further recommended that the Association appoint an expert panel to undertake a review and audit of the Qualifications Framework. The Executive subsequently approved the terms of reference and the composition of the *Qualifications Framework Inquiry (Te Tiro Hou)* panel.[5] However, no funds could be allocated to the project until late 1996 because the Association was financially stretched underwriting its 1995-1996 campaign against collective employment contracts. When that campaign ended, funding was immediately made available and the Inquiry team began its work. In June 1997 the Inquiry team forwarded its detailed report to the Association's Executive and one month later the Convenor presented the findings to the PPTA's Curriculum Conference (p. 4).

The Inquiry's terms of reference required it to consult widely with the PPTA membership (a process which took place in March 1997) to analyse the educational validity of the Qualifications Framework model (pp. 70-77); to investigate whether standards-based assessment could do justice to educational aims across all levels of the curriculum; to explore the manageability, resource and workload implications surrounding the implementation of the framework; and to suggest solutions to any problems identified by the review team (p. 5).

In a thorough and insightful 138-page report the historical and contemporary developments in New Zealand and overseas qualifications systems were surveyed, the research literature on the Qualifications Framework was reviewed, and the educational validity of the Framework was carefully evaluated. Eight criteria were used as yardsticks by which to evaluate the educational validity of the Qualifications Framework: the qualifications system had to be fair, inclusive, cumulative, clear, motivating, coherent, constructive, and manageable.[6] Although the Inquiry team concluded that the current qualifications arrangement only partially satisfied these criteria, they stopped short of recommending the wholesale rejection of the Qualifications Framework in general, and unit standards-based assessment in particular, on the grounds that some specification of overall standards (outcomes) was better than none at all. Nevertheless, they did propose substantial modifications to both the design and implementation of unit standards. This entailed recognising performance at the "merit" and "excellence" levels rather than the current binary "credit" (pass)/"non-credit" (fail) categories; minimising the large number of small unit standards; reducing the specificity of the assessment requirements through the use of more open-ended, less prescriptive descriptions and language; formulating a realistic policy on the number of reassessment opportunities; restricting the use of multi-level assessments offered within the same class;[7] improving moderation approaches and practices; avoiding dual assessment (both unit standards *and* external examinations) extending the time-frame required to implement any changes; and providing additional support, resources, and professional development opportunities (pp. 114-118, 128).

When read alongside Irwin's (1994) report, the *Qualifications Framework Inquiry* presented a somewhat more optimistic view of the likely impact of the Qualifications Framework on senior secondary school qualifications. Unlike Irwin, the Inquiry appeared less concerned about adopting standards-based assessment for traditional "academic" subjects. Accordingly, they rejected Irwin's thesis that subject "atomisation" or fragmentation was an inevitable outcome of the unit standard approach and that higher-order skills, knowledge and understandings (for example, analysis, critical thinking, and synthesis) were incapable of being evaluated rigorously under this model of assessment. Finally, the Inquiry team outlined seven possible scenarios for future developments in senior secondary school assessment[8] but predicted that only two would be viable. Both these scenarios involved

implementing the framework at Years 12 and 13, retiring Sixth Form Certificate as soon as the Framework was ready for full operation at Year 12, and retaining University Bursaries assessments with adaptations to allow them to be credited onto the framework. Where they differed was over the future place of the School Certificate Examination: Scenario 6 proposed that School Certificate operated outside the Framework, whereas Scenario 7 envisaged its "retirement" by 2003. The Inquiry team made no secret of their belief that the School Certificate Examination had outlived its educational usefulness as the hallmark of the final (Form 5) year of a broad general education. The way forward, they concluded, lay in developing a nationally co-ordinated and coherent qualifications policy in which a single qualification was offered at Years 12 and 13 (thus eliminating the need for dual assessment in Year 13) and credited onto a revamped standards-based Qualifications Framework (pp. 8-9, 121-122).

The "Broadening" of the Qualifications Framework (April 1996)

During the time that the Inquiry team met and deliberated, serious objections to the strict uniformity imposed by the unit standards common building-block approach were beginning to be raised. Finally, on April 4, 1996, the newly appointed Minister of Education, the Hon. Wyatt Creech, announced that the Framework would be "broadened" in order to allow whole "provider" non-unit standards-based qualifications and degrees to be registered (Irwin, 1997, pp. 14-17). Describing this "broadening" process as one of "natural evolution", the Minister insisted that the Framework's "single comprehensive and integrated qualifications structure" would remain unchanged, despite its new emphasis on comprehensiveness and inclusiveness and the fact that *all* qualifications, irrespective of the assessment practices employed, would now be eligible for registration on the Framework (p. 17). In keeping with the original Framework principles, each and every qualification would have to contain specific learning outcomes that "clearly explain what the learner knows and can do"; providers and assessors would be required to adhere to a "strict quality assurance programme"; and levels and credits would need to be defined in order to ensure flexibility and portability for learners (p. 14). Thus, according to the Minister, while the "broadened" framework had "evolved" from the original concept, it still retained all of the perceived strengths of its predecessor in terms of its coherence, portability and "seamlessness" (p. 17).

But, as Irwin has explained, there was an inherent problem with this "broadening" strategy. Given that the common building block, unit standards design was the keystone of the Framework, any suggestion to include (i.e., recognise) *non*-unit standards-driven courses and qualifications was clearly incompatible with the Framework's unitary structure of courses, levels and credits. The Ministry of Education apparently did not regard this as indicating a significant policy shift and one that potentially threatened the Framework's basic design characteristics, assessment methodology, and core philosophy (p. 17). Furthermore, the Ministry omitted to consider in detail the impact of the "broadened" Framework on the senior secondary school sector. Presumably they simply assumed that the non-unit standards-based School Certificate and Bursary examinations could now be placed on the Framework and receive credit recognition. Again it is to be wondered how the integrity of the "original" Framework could be upheld at the same time as allowing non-unit standards-based qualifications to be registered.

The National Qualifications Framework Green Paper (June 1997)

Sensing the growing speculation over the direction in which the Qualifications Framework might be heading, in July 1996, the Minister of Education announced his government's intention to "consult widely on policies for the future development of the National Qualifications Framework" (Ministry of Education, 1997). However, that consultation was postponed pending the outcome of the forthcoming general election. With a new National-New Zealand First coalition government in office by late November, further work on the qualifications policy was undertaken, in line with the Coalition's agreement on education, and on June 5, 1997, a 39-page Green Paper outlining the government's thinking on the future direction of the National Qualifications Framework was released for public scrutiny. A twelve week period was allowed for comment and submission.

To its credit, the Green Paper acknowledged the contentious nature of the Framework and unit standards and, perhaps more importantly, included a number of new policy directions as a concession to those groups who had so far been critical of the qualifications reforms in general, and the model of assessment in particular (pp. 14-15). From the outset, a more conciliatory approach was adopted, with the Minister of Education setting the overall tone in his Foreword to the Green Paper and noting his government's wish to enter into the consultation process

with an "open mind" in order to "ensure that the proposals for dealing with an issue are the best solution" (p. 4). In stark contrast with earlier official documents, the Green Paper now admitted that the Qualifications Framework had become inordinately expensive to implement and that "the reduction of compliance costs needs to be a permanent focus of all the NZQA's work".[9] In other words, the financial costs associated with the Framework's implementation were becoming too much to bear, all the more so for an administration that had prided itself on being "fiscally responsible". Furthermore, the Green Paper conceded that the unit standards approach to assessment in the senior secondary school had been overly cumbersome and excessively time-consuming for teachers, and one that had proved unpopular with some groups (pp. 4, 12-13, 19-28). Clearly, the current qualifications policy could no longer be sustained and it fell to the Green Paper to suggest ways in which the Framework could accommodate the requirements and demands of as wide a group of interested parties as possible.

The Green Paper outlined a number of proposals regarding the "further development" of the Qualifications Framework (pp. 6-8, 18-35). In the first place, registration was to remain voluntary, although the Minister of Education confidently predicted that "those who seek to register will gain the benefits of expert audit and endorsement of their qualifications" (p. 4, Foreword). Significantly, for the first time since the Framework's inception, the Green Paper now proposed that "all major types of qualifications, at all levels and across all subject areas, regardless of how they were designed, taught or assessed" should be registered on the Framework (pp. 6, 14). In order to gain registration, qualifications would need to "meet or exceed a clearly specified *quality benchmark*" (p. 7, emphasis in original) and satisfy six key criteria: be credible and useful to interested groups, such as employers, teachers, students and parents; be portable and durable; be structurally sound; contain skills and knowledge that are clearly stated and endorsed by employers and other interested parties; embody assessment practices that are valid; and provide opportunities for students to enter into, exit from, and transfer between different learning environments and programmes leading to qualifications (pp. 7, 19-20).

Secondly, the Green Paper proposed that all Framework-registered qualifications should have a "common currency" by virtue of their having clearly stated *outcomes* (statements about what students know and can do) to enable comparisons and facilitate cross-crediting (p. 7, emphasis in original). These "outcome statements" could include

"purpose statements", "objectives", "process objectives", "standards" or "learning outcomes", and be specific enough to "provide useful information about the qualification to students, employers and providers, and to make qualifications easy to compare" (p. 21). All of this was geared towards providing flexible learning pathways and qualification portability between different learning environments and institutions (pp. 11, 14). Such portability, the Green Paper argued, was enhanced by the common currency of unit standards because they "represented identical 'blocks' of learning" (p. 11).

Responding to the criticism that the Framework did not recognise excellence and merit – students either gained "credit" or "no credit" – the Green Paper noted the growing pressure to recognise secondary school students' outstanding performance (in relation to both the standards of achievement and in comparison with other students), and recommended that the NZQA "develop a scale of nationally recognised excellence to be integrated into the NQF for school subjects assessed against unit standards" with grades recorded nationally (p. 24). It was hoped that this would motivate the more able students to achieve at a level higher than the bare minimum required to pass each school subject.

Having discussed the rationale for the Qualifications Framework and proposed a number of important structural changes, the Green Paper then outlined the NZQA's broadened responsibilities thus:

> [T]he NZQA should be the overall guardian of the quality of NQF qualifications. The NZQA would delegate approval authority where appropriate, and monitor the practices of approval agencies to ensure the integrity of the NQF. The NZQA would be impartial with respect to different types of qualifications and assessment approaches, requiring a shift in focus from promoting nationally agreed standards and standards-based assessment to promoting quality across all types of qualifications and assessment approaches. The NZQA would have an overview role; it would not focus on the detail of courses and teaching. (p. 8. See also p. 28)

Clearly, adopting a neutral role will prove especially challenging for the NZQA given its single-minded advocacy of the exclusively unit standards-based Framework. For its part the Green Paper momentarily found great difficulty in distancing itself from favouring the concept of unit standards-based assessment. On one such occasion its professed impartiality was seemingly forgotten when it observed that:

> The unit standards approach has helped to recognise a broader range of educational achievement by testing a greater number of skills, by making educational standards more explicit, and by promoting consistent assessment across different learning settings. The introduction into schools of unit standards in non-traditional subjects is one example of this. (p. 14)

Curiously, for a document that so readily endorsed the principles surrounding standards-based assessment, the Green Paper provided no robust evidence regarding the educational and vocational benefits accruing to individual students by assessing them on a competency-based model. Similarly, the substantial overseas research literature critical of such an approach was also not referred to.

Finally, the Green Paper recommended that all existing national secondary school examinations (School Certificate, University Bursary and Scholarship) be registered on the Framework, provided that they satisfied the registration criteria regarding quality, explicit learning outcomes, level and credit. Such a move was justified on the grounds that this would allow a fully "comprehensive" and "inclusive" qualifications framework to emerge (p. 26). However, it can also be argued that the Green Paper had no option other than to recommend that external examinations be included on the "broadened" Framework in light of their long-established status and popularity. In other words, the continued existence of separate but parallel qualifications arrangements was seriously threatening the viability of the Framework. The way forward, the Green Paper concluded, lay in allowing all qualifications to come under the "broadened" single Framework policy umbrella, wherein norm-referenced examinations co-existed alongside unit standards-based qualifications.

Towards the National Certificate of Educational Achievement

At the time that the Green Paper was released, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was barely eight months old. Launched in October 1996 as a certificate that "recognises significant achievement across a range of learning areas, including communication and numeracy skills", the Green Paper confidently predicted that the new National Certificate would soon become a "major qualification in secondary schools" (p. 27). By February 1997, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority Board had resolved that existing national secondary school examinations should now be credited towards the

newly registered National Certificate. The advantage of this approach, the Green Paper later observed, was its "flexibility".

> [W]here options were available, secondary students could choose how they wished to be assessed – whether through [external] examinations, internal assessment, or some combination of assessment methods. Also, they would not be forced to choose between alternative qualifications, but would be able to work towards achieving one or more of the National Certificate, other qualifications assessed against unit standards, and qualifications gained entirely through external examinations. (p. 27. See also p. 15)

The Green Paper further anticipated that once the National Certificate became fully operational "across the full range of school subjects", it could then replace the Sixth Form Certificate and thereby eliminate dual forms of internal assessment in Form 6. For the time being, however, the future of the National Certificate hung in the balance, owing to the government's decision in 1996 to suspend the Framework's implemen-tation in schools pending the outcome of the Green Paper (p. 15).

Achievement 2001

With the much-awaited National Qualifications Framework White Paper not yet on the educational horizon – it was supposed to be released to the public in December 1997 (p. 35), but eventually appeared in late October 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999) – the Minister of Education (The Hon. Wyatt Creech) announced his Government's *Achievement 2001* qualifications policy on November 5, 1998 (Minister of Education, 1998). Not surprisingly, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement was to become the central qualification for senior (16 to 19 year old) secondary school students. The key features of *Achievement 2001* are:

- There will be four levels to the Certificate: Students will be able to study at different levels at different years if they wish to.

Level One	For most Year 11 (Form 5) students
Level Two	For most Year 12 (Form 6) students
Level Three	For most Year 13 (Form 7) students
Level Four	"Scholarship" for the highest achieving students

- Achievement at each level will be assessed by a mix of external and internal assessment.
- The School Certificate and Bursary examinations will be retained, though marks would no longer be scaled. Success in these examinations will earn a student recognition at Level One and Three of the Certificate respectively.
- The Sixth Form Certificate and Higher School Certificate will be abolished (from 2002).
- The new *Achievement Standards* will measure achievement in internal assessment and exams for each curriculum subject. They will recognise excellence by grading achievement.
- *Unit Standards* will remain, measuring success in non-conventional subjects (tourism, forestry, recreation, etc.). Success in Unit Standards will earn a student recognition at Level One, Two or Three of the Certificate.
- Student performance will be graded according to their success (i.e., merit will be recognised) through the new Achievement Standards. These will be established for conventional school subjects such as English, history, geography.
- Each student's annual results will show credits gained from Achievement Standards and Unit Standards, grades for Achievement Standards, exam marks, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement and any other national certificates.
- Secondary schools will be able to offer courses that package any combination of Achievement Standards and Unit Standards.
- To ensure a smooth implementation, the new qualifications system will be phased in over three years (2001-2003), starting with Year 11 (Form 5) students in the year 2001 (pp. 1-2, 4-5).

Summarising the new qualifications policy, the Minister claimed that it provides

> ...credible, quality qualifications that recognise their strengths and allow them to succeed at different levels and in different subject areas; ... encouragement to schools to offer innovative programmes that embrace both the New Zealand Curriculum and a range of other options beyond the school; flexibility to maintain national standards and encourage schools and students to strive for higher levels of achievement; links between school learning, tertiary education, and the workplace; a mix of internal and external assessment within a unified set of qualifications; results that show how well students have done against each other and against national standards; and a system that makes teacher workload manageable. (pp. 2, 5. See also *QA News,* December 1998, p. 13)

Given the wide-ranging nature of the reforms, the Minister admitted that an "information campaign" for employers and post-secondary institutions would need to be organised, along with the appointment of an interim joint Ministry of Education and Qualifications Authority project group – the Qualifications Development Group. That Group would develop qualifications policy; oversee the development of the achievement standards, assessment resources and the training of teachers in classroom assessment; and administer the work of the subject specialist panels who were to assume responsibility for determining the Achievement Standards and recommending the proportion of internal and external assessment for each subject. Once the Qualifications Development Group had completed its work and *Achievement 2001* was fully operational in the secondary schools, the NZQA would administer the new system (p. 5. See also *QA News*, December 1998, p. 3).

Those who had followed the qualifications reforms closely no doubt detected a striking similarity between the Green Paper's proposals for the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (June 1997), the Government's *Achievement 2001* qualifications policy (October 1998), and the White Paper's subsequent endorsement of *Achievement 2001* and the NCEA in October 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999, pp. 33-34). By 1999, the "broadened" Qualifications Framework earlier outlined in April 1996 was all but complete, pending the inclusion of all qualifications under the *Achievement 2001* umbrella.

The Labour Government and the NCEA

Upon becoming the Government in late November 1999, Labour's new Minister of Education, the Hon. Trevor Mallard, inherited National's *Achievement 2001* initiative . Having earlier announced his unequivocal support for the NCEA whilst in Opposition, the Minister was now keen to see it implemented (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, March 20, 2000, p. 20). However, he did agree that the 2001 deadline was overly ambitious and therefore proposed a one-year delay in implementing the new NCEA to allow additional resources to be developed and trialled, and further professional development to occur.[10] Critics of the NCEA now knew that they could not rely on the Minister to scuttle the new Certificate. From that point on the battle lines began to be drawn.

In May 2000, the Ministry of Education's Qualifications Development Group launched its nationwide (27 venue) "roadshow" to inform secondary school principals, senior teachers, boards of

trustees' chairpersons, and parent or student representatives about the NCEA. Videos, pamphlets and posters were distributed, along with an information pack that was mailed to all third form students and their families (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, April 24, 2000, p. 13; *Principals Today*, May 2000, p. 48). To its credit, the Ministry of Education dedicated a section of its website to the NCEA and included regular updates, Ministerial press releases, and other information and resources relating to the NCEA. The public information campaign alluded to by the Hon. Wyatt Creech in October 1998 was now well underway.

*The structure of the NCE*A

The NCEA will be gained by accumulating credits on the Qualifications Framework, with each credit awarded on the basis of students having demonstrated that they have met (or exceeded) predefined outcome standards. Typically, each standard is worth three or four credits, regardless of the grade achieved. A total of 80 credits is required to gain an NCEA at a particular level, with no more than 20 of those credits being obtained through successful achievement at a higher or lower level (National Certificate of Educational Achievement, *Frequently Asked Questions*, n.d., p. 4). Thus, to gain the full NCEA, students will have to amass a total of 240 credits.

Each "conventional" secondary school subject (e.g., English, history, mathematics, science) will be divided into between five and eight Achievement Standards that describe what has to be achieved to gain credit towards the NCEA. For each of these Achievement Standards, at each of the three levels, there will be explicit criteria for each of the three grades (credit, merit, and excellence). At least half of the Achievement Standards are to be assessed externally (the remainder to be assessed internally) with each school primarily responsible for its own internal assessments, subject to a process of national moderation (pp. 5-9) overseen by National Assessment Panels.[11] By way of comparison, students taking a vocationally-related unit standards-based course could gain their NCEA based entirely upon internal assessment (p. 4). The academic (Achievement Standards) – vocational (Unit Standards) divide, it seems, is no less a feature of the NCEA than it was under the "original" Framework.

Achievement Standards

Somewhat surprisingly, given the intense criticism that had surrounded the implementation of unit standards, the Qualifications Development

Group settled on the Achievement Standard as the essential building block of the new Framework. It defined an Achievement Standard as follows:

> [It] is a statement that makes explicit the things we want to report about student achievement. It defines what we expect students to know and be able to do in order to gain credits towards a qualification. This is in contrast to a syllabus or course outline, which simply describes what students should be taught. (p. 5)

In endorsing Achievement Standards, the Qualifications Development Group noted a certain similarity to unit standards to the extent that "both try to set clear objectives for achievement, and to provide language for reporting achievements" (p. 5). Nevertheless, the Group was adamant that Achievement Standards differed significantly from unit standards in three important ways:

- Achievement Standards are being defined to recognise superior student performance – students will achieve at credit, merit, or excellence level, unlike unit standards which were defined at only one level: students were either competent or not yet competent.
- Expert panels are required to ensure that Achievement Standards describe broad outcomes, unlike unit standards which many people felt "atomised" learning.
- No unit standard used in the school sector is externally assessed. At least half of the qualifications credits available from Achievement Standards in any conventional subject must be obtainable by external assessment (p. 6).

Criticisms and problems

The NCEA's critics, however, saw little difference between Achievement Standards and unit standards, and argued that the Framework's underlying principles still were seriously flawed (Chamberlain, 2000, pp. 87-94). The fact that the Secondary Leaders Forum, convened by the Ministry of Education in November 1999, had recommended that 70 per cent of Level One NCEA candidates should pass (they had earlier suggested 80 per cent) when approximately 60 per cent currently pass School Certificate, merely confirmed the critics' view that the new NCEA would be a "soft" qualification (2000, p. 92; Cassie, 1999, p. 1). The Concerned Teachers' Association (CTA) went further and claimed that Achievement Standards were incapable of

testing and reporting knowledge gained through the study of traditional academic subjects (Calvert, 2000a; Schurgers, 2000a; 2000b). Their growing frustration over the PPTA's support for the NCEA, and its apparent unwillingness to listen to opposing viewpoints, led one of its members to "gate-crash" the PPTA's annual conference in Wellington in September and, when denied the opportunity to enter into debate with the Minister of Education who was addressing the membership on the NCEA, to release two guinea pigs into the audience. Not surprisingly, a formal complaint was lodged with the SPCA and the CTA member immediately apologised for her actions (*Eduvac*, October 9, 2000, p. 3; Calvert, 2000b, p. 13). Still, the CTA had achieved what it had set out to do – the NCEA would invariably be associated with guinea pigs in the public mind for months to come.

Some secondary school principals also distanced themselves from the new NCEA on the grounds that it would increase, not decrease, teachers' workloads; encourage plagiarism owing to the greater emphasis on internal assessment; remove comparability between secondary schools; reduce academic rigour; and create uncertainty over university entrance requirements (Peat, 2000). Homing in on the issue of academic standards, the headmasters of Auckland Grammar (John Morris) and Kings College (John Taylor) both announced that their schools had little faith in the NCEA and urged the Minister to retain the University Bursary examination. Morris, however, went further and declared his support for the English A-level and Cambridge University entrance examinations. (*Weekend Herald*, July 8-9, 2000, p. A24; Taylor, 2000, p. A15; Roger, 2000).

Further doubts about the reliability, validity, and manageability of the NCEA began to be voiced by university academics such as Dr Terry Locke and Professor Cedric Hall (Locke, 1998; 2000; Hall, 2000). In September, they were joined by an unlikely ally when the Education Forum (of which Morris is currently acting chair) released three critical reports on the NCEA (Donnelly, 2000; Education Forum, 2000a, b). Taken together, these reports argued that the NCEA is based on a model of assessment that is not only inherently flawed but also, from an international perspective, sub-standard. The reports' authors urged teachers and parents to resist the implementation of the NCEA on the grounds that it would further compartmentalise teaching and learning; provide unreliable and invalid assessment information; add to the workload of teachers and schools; and provide insufficient information to allow students' performance to be differentiated (Education Forum,

2000a). The PPTA membership, however, was not persuaded to abandon the NCEA when balloted early in November to gauge their level of support. Of those who returned their ballot papers (approximately 6000 members), 65 per cent supported the NCEA in principle but 82 per cent noted serious concerns about inadequate resources, procedures and policies, and urged the government to work harder to allay their fears (*New Zealand Education Review*, November 3, 2000, pp. 6-7; November 17, p. 3; *Eduvac,* November 13, 2000, p. 3).

No Way Out? Some Lessons From Our Educational Past

The real appeal of the new *Achievement 2001* initiative in general and the NCEA in particular, according to the NZQA, Ministry of Education, and PPTA triumvirate, was the varied educational and qualification pathways available for academic and vocationally-oriented students. However, it is highly unlikely that these pathways will enjoy "parity of esteem". Those who doubt such an outcome need only to look to New Zealand's educational history to discover the ways in which "practical", "technical", "vocational" education came to occupy an inferior status vis-a-vis academic education. Moreover, it was a status difference that was firmly embedded in the first School Certificate (1934-1945) and Matriculation (1871-1944) Examinations.

Although the first School Certificate Examination in theory should have been popular – it offered a much wider range of subjects than did the Matriculation Examination – it quickly proved itself unable to challenge the long-established status of the university entrance qualification, despite its being of equal scholastic difficulty (Lee, 1996, pp. 160-179). For the School Certificate Examination to fulfil its stated objective of providing a marketable alternative to Matriculation, it needed to win the confidence of pupils, parents, teachers and employers. But this did not happen. Instead, there is clear evidence to support the view that the majority of fifth formers preferred to enter for the more prestigious Matriculation Examination. In fact, throughout the years 1934-1945, the School Certificate attracted very few candidates, whereas entries for the Matriculation Examination outnumbered those for School Certificate by a ratio of 18 to one (Lee, 1991, p. 220, Table 27).

By the time that the School Certificate Examination was launched, a substantial body of evidence had accumulated to indicate that New Zealand post-primary education was still defined predominantly in terms of its *academic* content. While it was true that many schools had successfully developed programmes of work aimed at "rounding off" a

pupil's schooling after a period of two years' post-primary education, the influence of the Matriculation Examination still weighed heavily upon the high schools' junior classes. Moreover, as the post-primary school retention rate increased, so did the criticism of the dominance exerted by the Matriculation Examination. The concept of an alternative qualification to Matriculation therefore became much more appealing.

In designing the new School Certificate Examination the Chief Inspector of Secondary Schools, Edward Parr, advised the Minister of Education that "School Certificate would need to be held at the same time as the University Entrance (Matriculation) Examination, *otherwise many pupils would submit themselves to both tests* – a most undesirable procedure and to be discouraged by all means" (*AJHR*, 1930, E6, p. 2 – authors' emphasis). It is clear from the outset that Parr was well aware of the danger of market forces destroying the intended function of a new and alternative qualification to Matriculation. He pinned his hopes on a changing market response, provided that the Department of Education took all reasonable precautions to ensure that the alternative status of the new qualification was maintained. Somewhat optimistically, Parr concluded:

> It is possible that at the outset pupils might hesitate to enter for the new examination, not caring to forgo the advantages which are undoubtedly associated with the passing of a university entrance test, but in a little while the status of a leaving certificate would be satisfactorily established and would secure the approval of public estimation. (p. 2)

Like Parr, the Minister also recognised that the viability of the Department's new examination would depend, in large part, on the strength of market support. Nevertheless, he confidently predicted that the School Certificate Examination would be sought after by the business world as a way "to single out those who have had the kind of training and possess the special qualifications [that] the type of business demands" (*AJHR,* 1930, E1, pp. 3-4). The move to dethrone Matriculation appeared to be gathering momentum.

The real challenge in introducing the School Certificate Examination lay in persuading candidates to enter for the examination *instead* of Matriculation. Although all were agreed as to the general form that School Certificate was to take, they had in fact talked themselves into a contradictory proposition. The new examination was to be the same standard as Matriculation and occupy the same status *(New Zealand*

Gazette, 1934, Vol. 1, p. 955, Clause 8; *AJHR*, 1934-35, E2, p. 6). Yet, it was also to appeal to less "academic" pupils – especially those at the technical high schools – and it was to include many subject options not considered by the University to be of sufficient academic merit. For its part, the University made it clear that its interest in School Certificate was that it could use its alternative status to boost the scarcity value, and therefore prestige, of its own Matriculation Examination. In practice, the hard truth is that the claim that two things are separate yet equal means that they are inherently *unequal*.

When put to the test, the School Certificate Examination quickly proved incapable of matching the status of the Matriculation Examination. The obvious market preference for Matriculation was the result of candidates rejecting a terminal examination of unproven status in favour of an examination that had been operating for more than 60 years and which had an established reputation. Moreover, the University authorities also did not regard the School Certificate Examination highly, for they consistently refused to accept School Certificate as being equal in status to Matriculation for University entrance purposes (*Entrance Board Minutes,* 1932, p. 6; 1933, p. 4; 1936, pp. 2-3; 1937, p. 2; 1941, p. 3; *Academic Board Minutes*, 1933, p. 5; *Senate Minutes,* 1933, p. 47; 1937, pp. 3, 53). Other critics of School Certificate echoed what the "market" suspected – that the examination was "intellectually soft". Secondary schools, the argument ran, should "shun the 'softer options'" and preserve their "intellectual values" by encouraging their fifth formers to bypass School Certificate in favour of the long-established, well-regarded Matriculation qualification *(New Zealand Secondary Schools' Association and New Zealand Technical Schools Teachers' Association*, August 1937, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 12. – H. W. Slater, letter to the editor) In short, many pupils were sceptical of the Minister's earlier claim that the School Certificate Examination "demanded a degree of mental ability of the same standard as that of Matriculation" and therefore shied away from it (*Otago Daily Times*, September 6, 1934).

Further evidence to support the view that the School Certificate Examination was widely regarded as being the "poor relation" to Matriculation came in 1939 with the publication of *Entrance to the University.* This study explored the relationship between School Certificate and Matriculation from two perspectives: first, by inviting comment from the principals of every New Zealand state secondary school, registered (private) secondary, and technical high school and, secondly, by distributing a questionnaire to 289 employers across 20

regions seeking their views on the two qualifications (Thomas, Beeby & Oram, 1939, pp. 79-82, 96-97, 182-186, Appendix VIIIB).[12]

The majority of the 98 school principals who responded to the survey reported that pupils in the "academic" and "modern" courses spent more than 80 per cent of their school day on Matriculation subjects (p. 87, Tables IV and V; Lee, 1991, p. 598, Table 65). Employers, for their part, displayed an overwhelming preference for the Matriculation Examination. Of all the employers who responded to the survey, 54.5 percent required their employees to have passed Matriculation. By comparison, School Certificate was requested by only 6.9 percent of the employers. Much of the reason for this difference can be accounted for by the fact that that almost half (46%) of all the employers questioned had either "heard vaguely" or had "not heard" of the School Certificate Examination Given the employers' lack of knowledge about (and understanding of) School Certificate, it is not surprising that they should have continued with their customary tradition of requiring their employees to have passed Matriculation, a qualification of well-defined status with which they were familiar. This was evident from the high proportion (55%) who responded that they preferred the Matriculation Examination because it constituted a "guarantee of a good general education". This was precisely the role that the School Certificate Examination was designed to fulfil (p. 183, Tables 2, 3; p. 184, Table 5; Lee, 1991, pp. 245-247, Tables 30-32).

The situation was finally addressed when the then Labour government appointed the Consultative Committee on Post-Primary Education (Thomas Committee) under the chairmanship of William Thomas in late 1942. In its deliberations the Thomas Committee wholeheartedly endorsed the principle that post-primary education should no longer be selective, that it should be freely and widely available, and that the curriculum should be broadened to provide for a "generous and well-balanced education for all learners" (Department of Education, 1944/1959, pp. 1-11; Mason, 1945, pp. 9-10). The Committee's dilemma, as the then Director of Education (Dr C. E. Beeby) later saw it, was to find a way of:

> ...balancing [non-academic] courses against those preparing for further education, of giving every student a fair chance to compete for entrance to the next higher stage of schooling, and at the same time preparing the mass of the students for the kind of life and livelihood they can expect in the communities in which they will live. (Beeby, 1979, p. 139)

The way forward, the Thomas Committee concluded, lay in separating the School Certificate and Matriculation Examinations so that from 1945 pupils would choose either a *terminal* school-leaving qualification (School Certificate) or the *preparatory* University Entrance Examination in line with their post-school destinations.

In recommending that from 1945 the School Certificate and Matriculation Examinations be separated, the Thomas Committee was able to grasp the logic behind the school credentialling process. They recognised, for example, the historical reality that

> ...the nature of the education a pupil has been given has frequently been determined less by what his teachers have believed he actually requires, even for vocational purposes, than by *the demand for attainments that can readily be marketed.* (Department of Education, 1944, p. 5 – authors' emphasis)

Fifty-five years later, we are about to embark upon another major overhaul of our senior secondary school qualifications system. As in the past, the success of these current reforms will doubtless be measured in terms of the uptake of the new qualification – in this case the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. But given that the NCEA will be the *only* qualification available to students in Years 11 to 13 (Forms 5 to 7), even more important still will be the degree to which schools and students actively explore other (overseas) examination options. If the NCEA is judged somehow to be failing, then we can expect to see a significant increase in the number of New Zealand students entering for the English A-level and Cambridge University Entrance examinations, for example.

In the final analysis, it is students, parents, teachers and employers who ultimately determine the success or otherwise of any qualifications policy. As Dr Beeby sagely observed:

> Whatever purposes politicians and administrators might have had for education, their plans could be deflected when ambitious parents acting individually but in unspoken accord decided they wanted the school to do something different for their children ... there is always some tension between the controllers and the consumers of education and, in the long run, the consumers' purposes usually prevail. (Beeby, in D. McKenzie, 1982, pp. v-vi)

With the new National Certificate of Educational Achievement firmly on the qualifications horizon, a reappraisal and redefinition of "competency-based assessment" is urgently needed. It is to be hoped

that this will involve intelligent (and often critical) debate about the likely consequences of our assessment decisions along with future options and possibilities. Having done so we can then be confident that we are implementing qualifications policy that is thoroughly grounded in both the research evidence and well-founded assessment practice. The New Zealand public should expect no less.

Notes

1. In their publication, *An Introduction to the Framework* (1991), the New Zealand Qualifications Authority defined standards-based assessment as "the measurement of a learner's performance against pre-determined, clearly stated and well-defined standards of achievement or competency" (p. 6).
2. Students would receive a "Record of Learning" from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority's central database of student records. That Record would include the titles of all of the standards a student had achieved, the level of each standard, the grades (if any) awarded, the credit value of the standards, and the date completed.
3. The academic pathway would contain options for arts and science students; the technical pathway would contain options "to develop talents for construction and design. It would include practical courses"; and the vocational pathway "would be similar to the technical one but would involve greater specialisation in the type of work the students might move into" (p. 156).
4. According to the differentiated schooling policy, the academic secondary schools were expected to offer only professional courses, the rural district high schools were supposed to teach agricultural/rural-oriented courses, with the technical high schools providing commercial, domestic, industrial and trades-oriented courses (See Openshaw, G. Lee & H. Lee, 1993; McKenzie, H. Lee & G. Lee, 1996).
5. The Convenor was Shona Hearn, a former National PPTA President (1990-1991) and Head of English at Birkenhead College. Other Inquiry members were Peter Allen, Principal of Rangiora High School and a former PPTA President (1986-1987); Dr Terry Crooks, Co-Director of the Educational Assessment Research Unit at the University of Otago and of the National Education Monitoring Project; and Kath Irwin, then Chairperson of the Department of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. Dr Alison Gilmore from the Department of Education at Canterbury University was also commissioned to review research and to provide a written report on the Framework (*Report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry, Te Tiro Hou*. (1997, June). Wellington: PPTA, p. 1).

6. Credits and qualifications accurately describe learner achievement, and are trusted (pp. 95-96).

   The range of credits and qualifications available meets the needs and aspirations of learners and of all sections of the community (pp. 96-97).

   Learning achieved and demonstrated in one context is accepted and credited in other contexts where it is relevant (p. 97).

   Learners and teachers can readily obtain clear and helpful information and guidance about the content, criteria and expected standards for particular credits or qualifications (p. 97).

   Learners and teachers find the qualifications and assessment system empowering and motivating (pp. 97-98).

   Assessment arrangements promote coherence and integration of learning and teaching (p. 99).

   Learners and teachers receive clear and helpful feedback on progress, and have more than one opportunity to attain the required standards (p. 99).

   Assessment arrangements involve acceptable levels of workload and stress for learners and teachers, and justifiable expenditure for the community (p. 99).

7. The NZQA adopted this approach in response to the criticism that the credit/non-credit system was incapable of recognising superior performance and also as a means by which to motivate students to achieve highly (p. 116). However, there was no acknowledgment that the unit standard at the higher level usually involved quite different content.

8. *Scenario 1:* Retire existing awards and fully implement the Framework at Years 11-13. *Scenario 2:* Abandon all internal assessment and implement wholly external examinations at two or three years of Years 11, 12 or 13. *Scenario 3:* Abandon the Framework and continue existing qualifications. *Scenario 4:* Implement the Framework at Years 12 and 13 with external examinations at Years 11 and 13 to encourage excellence, and retire existing awards. *Scenario 5:* Implement the Framework at Years 12 and 13 with external examinations for credit on the Framework at Years 12 and 13, and retire existing awards. *Scenario 6:* Implement the Framework at Years 12 and 13, retire Sixth Form Certificate as Framework development permits, retain Bursary adapted to give credit, continue to offer School Certificate outside the Framework. *Scenario 7:* Implement the Framework at Years 12 and 13, retire Sixth Form Certificate as soon as the Framework is ready for full operation at Year 12, retain the University Bursaries assessments with adaptations that allow them to be credited onto the Framework, and retire School Certificate.

9. As the Green Paper acknowledged, the "development and maintenance costs of qualifications are only some of the compliance costs relating to the NQF. Others include the costs of accrediting providers, moderating assessment, and recording and reporting on students' achievements. Initiatives such as the NZQA's proposals for NQF credit through national school examinations and an integrated standard for accreditation and audit of providers are expected to reduce compliance costs" (p. 27).

10. The decision to postpone the NCEA was announced on March 1, 2000. See *New Zealand Education Review*, March 3, 2000, pp. 1-2; March 17, 2000, p. 2.

11. These National Assessment Panels will interpret, monitor and report on national standards and their assessment; train assessment personnel contracted by NZQA; develop external assessment materials; and review assessment judgements nationally (*New Zealand Education Gazette*, March 5, 2001, p. 34).

12. The questionnaires were distributed to the employers by Rotary Club members. At that time, William Thomas was the District Governor of Rotary.

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