



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

LEARNING CURVES: MEETING STUDENT LEARNING NEEDS IN AN EVOLVING QUALIFICATIONS REGIME

SHARED PATHWAYS AND MULTIPLE TRACKS

KEY FINDINGS OF SECOND REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

This summary reports key findings of the second year of the 3-year study *Learning Curves: Meeting student learning needs in an evolving qualifications regime*. It builds on findings from the first report *From Cabbages to Kings*, which was released in mid-2002.

This project is documenting changes in the subject and assessment choices offered to senior students in 6 New Zealand secondary schools as the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualifications are progressively implemented. It is also investigating how students perceive and make their subject choices within the context of each school's curriculum policies and practices.

The field work for this phase was carried out during April/May 2003. As in 2002, the principal and the HODs of 5 subjects (English, mathematics, technology, arts, and science) were interviewed in each school. In 2003, the Years 11 and 12 deans were also interviewed. The student survey aspect of the study was expanded in 2003, with both Year 11 and Year 12 students surveyed in all 6 schools.

A WIDER RANGE OF COURSES

The NCEA allows many types of learning to be assessed. Since it has been implemented schools have shaped different courses for students with different learning needs and all of these courses can be assessed for credits towards NCEA or other NQF certificates. Students now need to make course choices in the core curriculum areas of English, mathematics and year 11 science, not just in the optional subject areas.

Different types of courses can be identified by a number of features they have in common. We have chosen names for them that reflect these features.

Traditional-discipline courses

- assessment is mostly by achievement standards;
- all or most of the subject-specific suite of achievement standards for the year level/subject are used;
- the curriculum tends to be organised around the divisions imposed by the separate standards; and

- these divisions reflect traditional ways of thinking about the structure and content of each discipline or subject within the school curriculum.

More than half of the students in the study were taking traditional-discipline courses for their core subjects, at both years 11 and 12. Many ‘traditional’ optional subjects have a similar structure.

Locally-redesigned courses

- assessment may be by a mix of achievement and unit standards (for example a Home Economics course with health curriculum achievement standards and food industry unit standards);
- different mixes of standards are chosen at each school;
- at Year 12 some standards used to assess a course are set at NQF level 1 and some are set at NQF level 2; and
- the curriculum usually continues to be organised around the assessment instruments used, but most courses “cover” less of the traditional curriculum content, allowing for some variation in pacing and limited introduction of broader contexts for learning.

Innovative “locally-redesigned” courses are beginning to appear in the core subjects but are more common in the arts and technology curriculum areas. Subjects may combine discipline areas in non-traditional ways, for example combining mathematics with music, or provide a longer time frame for learning, for example a two-year course in level 1 mathematics.

Contextually-focused options

- assessment is mainly by unit standards;
- a reduced number of credits are offered;
- assessment is exclusively or predominantly internally managed – students seldom sit end-of-year national examinations;
- the division of the curriculum into topics may or may not reflect traditional partitioning of knowledge;
- contextually-focused options give an emphasis on skills and “doing”, rather than the recall of knowledge out of context.

These options have evolved from what would have been called “vocational” or “applied” courses. They make closer links to students’ everyday life contexts or to contexts of future work or leisure. Some students are experiencing greater learning success in these courses than they would have with pre-NCEA assessment for qualifications. Several schools are considering the introduction of contextually-focused options in traditional technological areas such as hard materials, to counter what is seen as the “intellectualisation” of technology.

Graphics and design is a popular subject that could be seen as having some locally-redesigned features (it blurs the boundary between arts and technology) and some contextually-focused features (many 2003 students at both Years 11 and 12 chose it with future careers in mind). However, this subject is also assessed with a full suite of its own achievement standards and at Year 12 was taken in the main by students who were studying traditional-discipline versions of both English and mathematics. This mix of features from across all 3 course types may well become more common in the future.

Locally-redesigned and contextually-focused courses open up the potential to create courses with new combinations of knowledge and skills that more closely match those identified in “knowledge society” discussions about what will be needed for the future.

WHAT INFLUENCES STUDENTS' SUBJECT CHOICES?

In 2003 both year 11 and year 12 students chose subjects they expected to enjoy. Expectations of enjoyment were highest for optional subjects where students had a free choice, although more than half of the students also said they expected to enjoy the versions they had chosen for their core curriculum subjects.

When students said they expected to enjoy a subject, they most often linked that to anticipation that the learning would be challenging and interesting. Practical aspects also rated highly as a factor that would make some subjects enjoyable. Students were much less likely to say they chose subjects expecting that they would be easy, or give them "easy NCEA credits". This pattern of responses held broadly across all subjects, for most students. Students in the contextually-focused options for core subjects were more likely to say they had been influenced by the prospect of gaining easy NCEA credits.

Arts subjects were top rated for expectations of enjoyment. For example 99 percent of year 11 students who chose drama expected it to be enjoyable. Eighty-three percent of this group expected challenge to be a factor in that enjoyment, but just 18 percent expected to gain "easy NCEA credits". The pattern was similar at year 12. Drama, one of the newest subjects in the curriculum, is not being chosen as a "soft" option.

Students said they had missed out on being able to take arts subjects more often than subjects from any other curriculum area. Home economics (year 11) and photography (year 12) were the subjects students were most likely to say they had not been able to take. Timetable clashes were cited most often as the reason for not being able to take a subject, closely followed by not being allowed to, either because the class was full or because the student had not taken that subject previously.

Students were more likely to say future plans influenced their choices of mathematics, English, and science options than their choices of optional subjects. Future plans included further study, career, and life skills. Gaining life skills was also cited as a reason for choosing a number of contextually-focused optional courses, and Year 11 arts courses. Future career was cited as a reason for choosing accounting and graphics and design, at both Years 11 and 12.

Students did not think other people influenced their choices nearly as often as their own expectations of enjoyment or thoughts about future plans. Parents were the people most likely to influence their subject choice. As a general pattern, if students were happy with the choices they had made, they thought their parents were happy too.

THE NCEA AND STUDENT LEARNING

Most of the teachers and principals thought that more students could now gain qualifications. They described increased motivation to learn, increased achievement in English and mathematics, increased student confidence in their learning, and some students returning to school to try again.

There was less comment about meeting the needs of high-achieving students in 2003 than in 2002, although there was a relatively common perception that excellence levels had been set rather higher than in the past in some subject areas. Some concerns were expressed about seeming inconsistencies in judgments made for achieve/merit/excellence levels in specific achievement standards.

WHAT ABOUT TEACHER WORKLOADS?

Teacher workloads remained very high in 2003 but were more manageable when schools set aside a time for professional discussion and course development work within the normal school week. A range of factors specifically related to the NCEA contributed to higher workloads. These included:

- developing professional knowledge of standards-based assessment;
- designing and moderating new assessment tasks;
- developing a shared professional consensus about judgements of student work;
- redesigning courses;
- implementing new administration systems; and
- contributing to the NCEA implementation at regional and national levels.

OTHER NCEA ISSUES

There is a perception that credits gained from achievement standards have more value than those gained from unit standards. This perception appears to be inhibiting a greater level of innovation by restricting the flexible use of unit standards. Unless it is addressed, there is risk that curriculum innovation through the development of new locally-redesigned and contextually-focused courses may be curtailed.

While principals would like to see the number of credits per course reduced, most teachers have reservations. There is a perception that students will not choose courses that offer fewer credits, and will not take their learning seriously unless it contributes to credits. But teachers are also worried about students' assessment overload. Because most students are offered opportunities to gain many more credits than they actually need to be awarded their NCEA, some are now managing their workloads by choosing not to take part in some assessments. Teachers are worried that these types of choices could result in students not being able to take subjects at higher levels if they do not meet the prerequisites. In this complex situation, access to ongoing advice about subject and assessment choices is vital.

HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

The report of the first year can be downloaded from the NZCER web-site www.nzcer.org.nz .



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