

Standards Review Guidelines for Subject Associations

Introduction

The alignment of standards process began in the middle of 2008 with a goal of a staged implementation beginning at level 1 in 2010.

During the initial consultation period towards the end of 2008, concerns were expressed by principals, teachers and others, about the following issues:

- the process for aligning standards with *The New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC);
- the extent to which it is appropriate that standards prescribe specific contexts for the assessment of concepts, knowledge and skills;
- the relative place of unit and achievement standards in curriculum-based subjects;
- the expected balance of externally and internally assessed standards;
- the probable impact of applying the principles of the review in regard to the range of qualification options available for some students, and strategies for mitigating this impact;
- writing standards with grade distinctions; and
- further assessment opportunities.

The Minister of Education has responded to these and other sector concerns by extending the Stage 2 of the standards review implementation period to allow a progressive alignment of Level 1 NCEA by 2011, Level 2 by 2012, and Level 3 by 2013.

The purpose of this paper is to provide MoE/NZQA officials and subject associations with clarification, advice, and guidance in respect of each of the above issues.

Background

The standards review has been initiated to:

1. improve programme and pathway coherence for learners;
2. improve the design of all standards;
3. align standards with the NZC;
4. enhance support for assessors' professional practice; and
5. improve the credibility of the NCEA and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The four stages of the review process

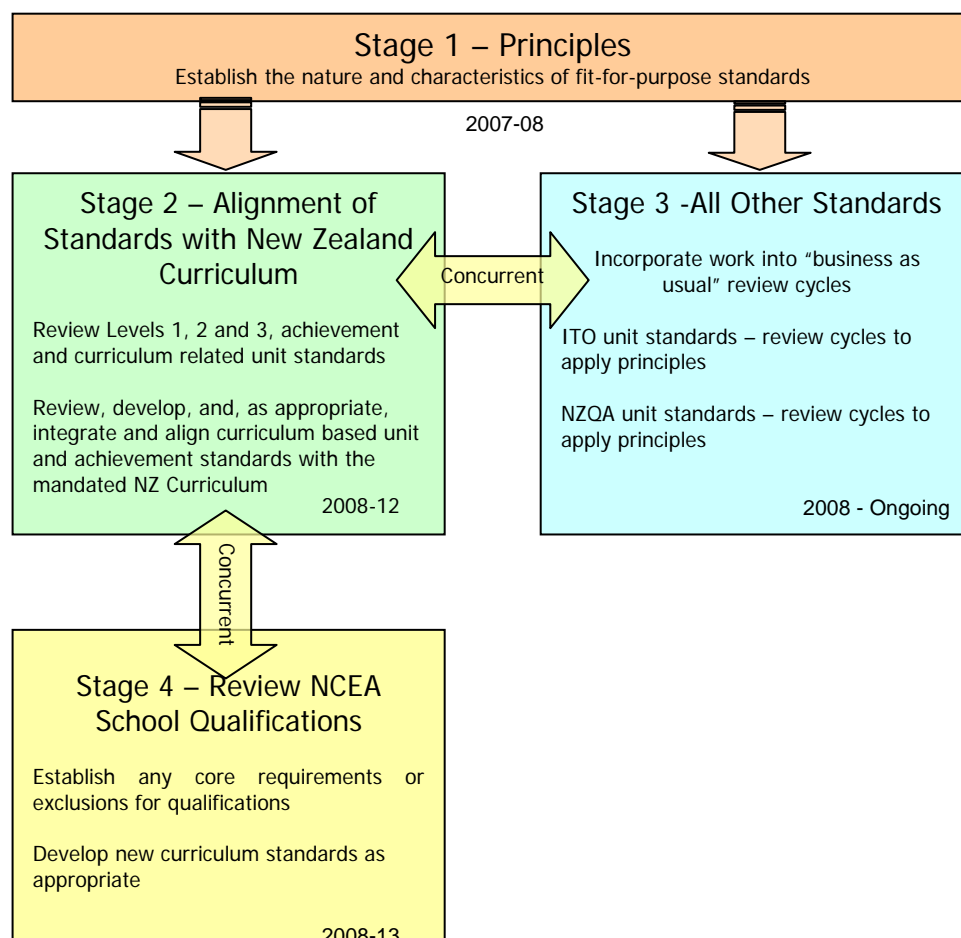
The standards review process comprises four stages, depicted in Figure 1. The overall goal of the process is to address issues of duplication, credit parity, consistency, fairness, and coherence for all achievement and unit standards on the NQF. This will be achieved through the application of a set of principles for the standards review that have been developed during Stage 1 of the review process (now complete). The set of principles addresses the broad issue of what constitutes a *fit-for-purpose* standard. These principles will underpin future standards development and review across the entire NQF.

Stage 2 of the review process, which is now underway, will fulfil the Cabinet NCEA improvements directive to align the achievement and curriculum-related unit standards with the mandated NZC.

Stage 3, comprising a review of unit standards *not* derived from the NZC, has been intended to take place concurrently with Stage 2. The unified nature of the NQF means that achievement and curriculum-related unit standards cannot meaningfully be reviewed without consideration of the implications for the remaining standards on the NQF. Industry Training Organisations will be encouraged to apply the principles developed during Stage 1 during their regular standard review cycles. NZQA will also apply the principles to the non-curriculum based standards for which it has responsibility during the review cycle for these standards.

Stage 4 is also occurring concurrently with Stage 2, with the alignment of curriculum standards to the NZC leading to the development of new standards where appropriate.

Figure 1: The Four Stages of the Standards Review



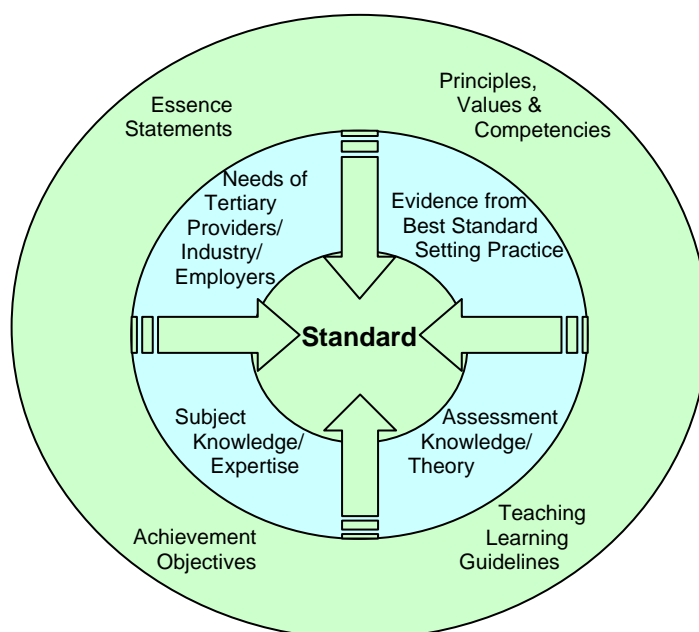
Evaluation of progress to date for stage 2

- Subject associations have been contracted to carry out the review.
- Milestones have been established and progress is being monitored. Some subject associations have met all milestones and made very good progress. Others have encountered some obstacles in applying the principles to their subjects. The main purpose of this paper is to establish strategies for overcoming these obstacles.
- MoE and NZQA staff have worked with subject associations to interpret the guiding principles for the review process.
- The Minister of Education has extended the timeline for Stage 2 by one year, and there has been a general agreement that the extension was necessary to ensure appropriate implementation.
- Assessment and exemplar resources are being developed as part of the process of reviewing the standards.

The process for aligning standards with the NZC

- The principles, values and key competencies in the new curriculum are mandated from Years 1-13. The achievement objectives (AOs) in English, the Arts, Health and Physical Education, Mathematics and Statistics, Science, Social Sciences and Technology are mandated until the end of Year 10.
- The intention of the new curriculum for Years 11, 12 and 13, is to be 'enabling' and allow schools maximum flexibility in learning programmes within the mandated framework of the principles, values and competencies.
- The expectation is that there will be more specialisation in Years 11, 12 and 13 than at previous year levels.
- A standards writer has a key role in distilling the fundamental principles, knowledge, theory, and skills associated with a subject into the standards that will be used to assess that subject. In so doing they are required to interpret, with respect to their subject, the achievement objectives, key competencies, values and principles, documented in the curriculum and make recommendations based on this.

Figure 2: Influences in Constructing a Standard



Teaching and Learning Guidelines are being developed for a number of curriculum subjects. These guidelines will provide essence statements, learning outcomes, learning progressions, and possible content and contexts for learning, but these guidelines should not be seen as a 'proxy' curriculum.

The extent to which it is appropriate that standards prescribe specific contexts for the assessment of content concepts, knowledge and skills

*In this paper we refer to **content** as defining the concepts, skills and knowledge required to achieve a standard, and **context** as the vehicle that might be used to deliver the content.*

A standard describes what a student must know or do in order to gain the credits for that standard. All standards will therefore describe content (the concepts/skills/knowledge being assessed). Currently there are standards that contain reference to suitable *contexts or content* for any assessment against the standard. There is a need to be more precise with this terminology because there has been some confusion with respect to standards that ought not to be too prescriptive with regard to context. Furthermore the appropriate relationship between content and context varies between subjects.

Three specific examples are as follows:

1. In History, the content of a standard might be an understanding of the way in which historical forces and movements influence the development of the culture of a nation. The context for delivering this content might be a study of the New Zealand wars.
2. In English, the analysis of written texts may be described as content, and the use of a particular play may be described as the context.
3. In Mathematics, an understanding of right-angle triangle geometry might be the content, and the calculation of the length of a rope tied to the top of a vertical pole and pegged to the ground at a distance from the pole, the context.

The new curriculum is intended to be **enabling** so that standards should as far as possible be written in such a way as to provide schools and teachers the opportunity to select contexts which are best suited for the students at that school, to delivering the outcomes described in the curriculum.

This is easier to do in some subjects than others and is dependent on the level of detail provided in the AOs.

In most cases the key debate, if there is one, will be about context; what *context* will be used to assess the key content (concepts/ skills/ knowledge) encapsulated in the standard, and should this context be identified in or required by the standard itself? Should History teachers be required to use the Tudors, or New Zealand History, or both as a vehicle (context) to meet the requirements of a standard which aims to identify understandings about historical concepts, skills and knowledge (content)? Some might argue that New Zealand History is important enough that it should be a nationally prescribed context. Similarly in English, it might be argued that the study of Shakespeare's plays should be a prescribed context because of the importance of Shakespeare in English literature. In either case, a counter-argument would be that prescribing any context is against the enabling spirit of the curriculum.

The initial responsibility for recommendations to Government regarding which, if any, standards in a subject should have prescribed contexts, lies with the Subject Associations, as subject experts.

Externally assessed standards need particular attention with regard to the context/content debate. Specifically, a large majority of these standards are assessed by time-limited examination, and markers may not be familiar with a specific context used by an individual teacher. Therefore, placing no restrictions on context may, in some cases, compromise the reliability of the assessment. It is important to note however that many current externally assessed standards do not specify any context whatsoever, though the nature and availability of resource material has encouraged some common practices (in terms of context) to develop across the country in some subjects.

The problem is somewhat alleviated where Teaching and Learning Guides exist, or are being developed. These Guides provide advice on the key concepts/skills/knowledge of a subject, and thus help unpack the content derived from the AOs. They also provide specific advice on context if appropriate.

Key Messages

- The set of standards for a subject **should** encapsulate the key *content* (concepts/skills/knowledge) for that subject, and should reflect what is documented in the Teaching and Learning Guide (if it exists).
- As far as possible, teachers should be allowed flexibility in selecting *contexts* (as defined above), **unless** the context is of such importance to a proper understanding of the subject as to warrant prescription, or unless, in the case of externally assessed standards, a lack of restriction on context would be likely to compromise the ability of markers to reliably, confidently and accurately assess candidates' performance.

Externally assessed standards without any prescribed contexts may create reliability problems for assessment. Unlimited contexts in history, for example, may make it hard to set questions and mark consistently. This means that it might be necessary to prescribe a limited range of contexts for the assessment of some such standards.

It is important to note that contexts, where prescribed, will restrict the way in which content is taught and learned. It is important therefore to balance the need for reliable assessment and the need to implement the spirit of the curriculum as enabling teachers to take a professional approach in course design. In some cases it will be possible to place no restrictions on context without compromising the reliability of examinations for the standard.

Where necessary guidance on which contexts may be suitable should be provided. These contexts will be selected on the basis of advice provided

in Teaching and Learning Guides, if they exist, and or advice from subject associations. Contexts could be documented as follows:

For externally assessed standards: in explanatory notes (where guidance is needed to illustrate the type of appropriate context and unlikely to require regular change) or in assessment specifications (where the context(s) are likely to change regularly); and

For internally assessed standards: in explanatory notes (which will become part of the standard, or in Teaching and Learning Guides where they exist (which will be reviewed annually).

In all cases, information in the standards or in assessment specifications can be hot-linked to the relevant Teaching and Learning Guide document if it exists.

- A standard should not be so general as to compromise its uniqueness in terms of content. The Standards Review Principles require that there should be a *demonstrable need* for a standard, that a standard should not unnecessarily duplicate an existing registered standard, and that a standard should have clear and achievable learning outcomes, worthy of certification. Overly generic standards should be avoided.
- Contexts for externally assessed standards, where they are required, will only be reviewed within the practical limitations of resource and assessment development timelines, if they are located in the standard itself.
- If content or context changes are to be made to existing standards, these changes should be incremental rather than sudden. This is an important consideration to ensure sector 'buy in'.

The relative place of unit and achievement standards in curriculum-based subjects

The relationship between unit and achievement standards in curriculum based subjects has come into focus as a result of attempts to apply the standards principles during the review process to date.

An analysis of the currently proposed matrices suggests that proscribing duplication has led to many subject associations either entirely removing unit standards from their matrices, or drastically reducing their numbers. In some cases unit standards with both merit and excellence grades have been retained in addition to achievement standards in order to fully reflect the AOs in the curriculum.

There is now a good case for removing the distinction between achievement and unit standards for the school curriculum, and allowing subject

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associations to develop 'achievement standards. This means that the 24 achievement standards credit limit no longer applies.

Key Messages

- All standards derived directly from NZC Learning Areas should be written as Achievement Standards.
- It is expected that in general all curriculum based Achievement Standards will have three grades of A, M and E. However, all Achievement Standards could be written in three ways: with only A grades, with A and M grades, or with A, M and E grades depending on the extent to which qualitative differences can be identified.

Note: Unit standards will be reserved for non-NZ Curriculum standards (and may still have M or E grades if appropriate).

The expected balance of externally and internally assessed standards

Expert advice is that no more than three standards should be assessed in a three hour written examination. This is for reasons of reliability and validity of external assessment and does not reflect a change in policy in terms of the ratio of internal to external assessment for NZC based standards. Practically speaking, unless some standards are to be assessed externally by means other than time-limited examination (e.g., by Common-Assessment Tasks; CATs), no more than three externally assessed standards for a given subject-level will be allowable.

This limit impacts on the credit weighting between internal and external assessment in some subject matrices. It is important to look at the total number of credits for each of internally and externally-assessed standards in this respect.

Any comparison between proposed and existing subject matrices should include a consideration of the credit values of both unit standards and achievement standards currently available and proposed on the subject matrices.

Key Messages

- Decisions about whether a standard should be externally or internally assessed should also reflect the advice in the principles paper [ref Principle 3: A Standard must allow valid and reliable assessment]. *However a generalised swing towards a greater proportion of internal assessment across levels 1, 2 and 3 for student programmes is not desirable.*
- We do not intend to create a hard rule about the proportion of standards externally assessed; rather officials will address the issue

subject by subject by examining each proposed matrix in comparison with the existing one. *The key objective must be to ensure that the balance between external and internal assessment is seen to be reasonable by the sector. The proposed matrix should not drive a substantial increase in internal assessment in school programmes, unless there is already a heavy external assessment balance in existence.*

- In many cases (but not all), it may be appropriate to have a heavier external assessment load at level 3.
- Particular care must be taken to ensure that fully internally assessed programmes are not constructed in schools to avoid external assessment. This will mean that the balance of credits on the subject matrix, and in likely school programmes, between internal and external assessment will need to be closely monitored.
- In general, 6 credits for an externally-assessed standard will be regarded as a maximum.
- Where more than three externally assessed standards prove to be necessary at a given level, assessment methods such as portfolios and CATs could be considered, particularly at levels 2 and 3 but care will need to be taken to ensure that this would be practicable in terms of teacher workload and resourcing.

The probable impact of applying the principles of the review in regard to the range of qualification options available for some students, and strategies for mitigating this impact

At present, subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science make available an extensive range of internally assessed unit standards. Many of these unit standards may be recommended for removal during the review process, for reasons of duplication with achievement standards, and/or because the standards are aimed at lower than level 6 of the NZC. A likely effect of this will be that the range of options for some students will become much more limited, particularly at level 1.

This is an issue that will need further analysis and action. However it should not be allowed to override the basic principles of this review. Work is already underway to scope the extent of the issue and to develop solutions if required.

Key Messages

- All standards should reflect the appropriate curriculum level, and there should be no standards based on the NZC in the matrix below the appropriate level 6 of the curriculum.

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- Significant work is under way, led by NZQA and MoE, to develop mechanisms to address the needs of the students in question which could involve:
 1. Alternative literacy and numeracy standards. These might be developed in the context of work already underway in the primary, intermediate and adult sectors;
 2. Advice to schools to encourage a greater use of the range of qualifications on the NQF; and
 3. Advice to schools to encourage some students to achieve the required level for a qualification over a period of time (for example taking two years to achieve NCEA Level 1).

Writing standards with grade distinctions

It is important that the standard criteria are written carefully and comprehensively to illustrate differences in grades and ensure that an emphasis, where possible, is placed on quality rather than quantity. Students need to demonstrate a better (higher quality) performance on the *same outcome* in order to achieve the higher grades.

Key Messages

- The meaning of the grades must be clearly articulated by using the key competencies where possible.
- The achievement criteria must describe the performance required in a clear and detailed way. The explanatory notes can be used to unpack these requirements in more detail.
- *As far as possible* what is currently often written in explanatory notes can be included in the criteria sections.
- Ensure that what is written in the explanatory notes provides a rich description of the nature of the student work which would be expected at each level.

Note: Assessment resources will be produced to test the standards and that further development of the achievement criteria and exemplar material will result from this. Quality checked exemplar material for each grade boundary will be the final outcome of the process.

Further achievement assessment opportunities

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Part of the brief of the subject associations was to write Conditions of Assessment notes for each internally assessed standard. A national set of guidelines is being developed for Further Assessment Opportunities.

Key Message

- It is important that the standards and standard guidelines for Conditions of Assessment use the same terminology as the national guidelines for further assessment opportunities, and that they adhere to the guidelines.