

Interim measure required for NCEA Literacy and Numeracy

Dr Michael Johnston

5 December 2023

Key point

From 2026, students will have to pass new assessments in reading, writing and numeracy to attain any level of NCEA. However, pilots of the new assessments in 2022 and the first full-scale assessment round for these new standards in 2023 indicate that if they are adopted as a corequisite for NCEA as planned, completion rates for the qualification will fall precipitously.

The incoming National-led government has prioritised a move towards evidence-based, structured methods of teaching literacy in primary schools. Similar moves for numeracy are also necessary. The incoming government has also promised to rewrite the curriculum, which will assist teachers to sequence learning more effectively.

It will take time, however, for these changes to work through into improvements in the literacy and numeracy skills of senior secondary students. In the meantime, certification of literacy and numeracy should be separated from NCEA.

The new requirements replace an existing indirect method of assessing literacy and numeracy. Under the indirect approach, students attain the NCEA literacy and numeracy requirements by passing assessments in a range of subjects deemed to require these skills. The Tertiary Education Commission published research in 2014 showing that the indirect method is very unreliable. It also showed that the literacy and numeracy skills required to achieve these requirements are substantially lower than those that they are intended to certify. That research led to the development of the new approach.

Under the new method, reading, writing and numeracy are directly assessed by tests. Students can reattempt the assessment if they don't pass on their first attempt. In 2023 students can attain the literacy and numeracy requirements using either the new, direct method, or the old, indirect method. In 2024 and 2025, transitional arrangements will be in place, allowing students to attain literacy and numeracy either by the new direct method or the indirect method based on a more restricted set of standards¹. In 2026 and thereafter only the direct method will be available.

The direct assessment approach was piloted twice in 2022, in July and September. NZQA ran the first full-scale assessment round using the approach in June 2023. Results for both pilots and the June 2023 assessment² are compared in Figure 1. Some students undertaking the June 2023 assessments had unsuccessfully participated in one of the 2022 pilots. Only results for students attempting the standards for the first time are represented in the figure. This comprises 95.6%, 93.0% and 93.2% of all candidates attempting the reading, writing and numeracy assessments, respectively.

From 2013 to 2022, achievement rates of Year 11 students for the NCEA literacy requirement under

¹ <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/standards-approved-ncea-co-requisite-2024-and-2025>

² The data for the 2023 event were obtained from NZQA under the Official Information Act (OIA 20231117).

the indirect approach have varied between 82% and 87%, and for the numeracy requirement, between 81% and 86%³. Under the new approach achievement rates are much lower. Across the two pilots and the 2023 assessment, achievement rates ranged from 58%-66% in reading, 34%-57% in writing, and 56%-58% in numeracy.

Similar percentages of students achieved the standards for reading and numeracy on all three assessment occasions. Reading has fluctuated somewhat, with a six-percentage point decrease between the July and September trials, but coming back up by eight percentage points in the June 2023 assessment. However, in writing, results were 12 percentage points higher in the September 2022 pilot than in the July 2022 pilot, and 11 percentage points better again in the June 2023 assessment.

A plausible reason for the improved results in the June 2023 writing assessment is that schools would have been aware from the pilot data that the direct approach is much more challenging, especially in writing. Students may have been encouraged to rely on the indirect method if their teachers thought they were unlikely to succeed in the direct test. This would have skewed the candidature for the June 2022 assessments towards more able students.

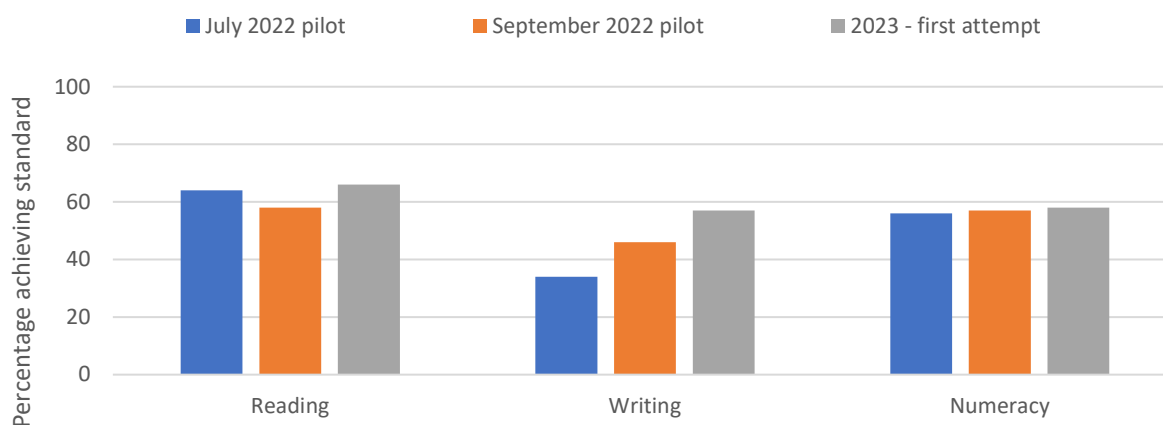


Figure 1.

Percentages of candidates achieving reading, writing and numeracy standards at each of the three assessment events

Fewer students (26,331) undertook the writing test than the reading (28,296) or numeracy (33,032) tests. Thus, the writing candidature was 20% smaller than the numeracy candidature, and 7% smaller than the reading candidature. These data are consistent with the possibility that at least some of the increase in the proportion of students achieving in the June 2023 writing assessment was due to weaker candidates opting not to undertake the direct assessment.

Another factor contributing to the successive increases in achievement in the writing assessment may have been changes in the assessment process. In the two pilots, students had to write two pieces of 250-350 words each. They also had to complete a series of exercises, such as correcting passages containing errors and reordering sentences to make sense in sequence.

In the July 2023 assessment, they also had to write the two short pieces. However, the latter

³ <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/NCEA/Secondary-school-and-NCEA/Annual-Reports-on-NCEA-New-Zealand-Scholarship-Data-Statistics/Annual-Report-on-NCEA-New-Zealand-Scholarship-Data-Statistics.pdf>

exercises were replaced with multiple-choice items. These involved identifying correct punctuation, correct word usage, and correct grammar amongst alternatives with errors. It is possible that these items were less challenging, contributing to the higher achievement rate in July 2023.

Students repeating the assessment in July 2023 did not enjoy high rates of success. Four percent of candidates in reading, and 7% in each of writing and numeracy candidates were on their second or third attempts after failing one or both of the pilot assessments. The achievement rates in the July assessment for these students were 33%, 43% and 25% respectively. It is clear that reassessment alone is unlikely to bring overall achievement rates for the direct assessments up to anywhere near those for the indirect assessments.

The new approach to assessing literacy and numeracy for NCEA is welcome. It is important that students leave school credentialed as being literate and numerate. However, it is not realistic to make the new requirements a corequisite for any level of NCEA in 2026. Doing so would almost certainly result in a very substantial fall in qualifications achievement.

Rigorous and reliable assessment of literacy and numeracy is important, and the lax and unreliable indirect approach should not be continued. However, until the improvements in literacy and numeracy resulting from the reform of pedagogy and curriculum flow through into improved literacy and numeracy at NCEA level, the literacy and numeracy requirements should not be a co-requisite for NCEA. Instead, they should contribute to a stand-alone literacy and numeracy certificate.

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The New Zealand Initiative is an independent public policy think tank supported by chief executives of major New Zealand businesses. We believe in evidence-based policy and are committed to developing policies that work for all New Zealanders. Views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The New Zealand Initiative, its staff, advisors, members or officers.
www.nzinitiative.org.nz | +64 4 499 0790 | info@nzinitiative.org.nz

