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Ormond, B. (2018). Unintended consequences - the impacts of assessment on knowledge in senior secondary school. In *KERU 2018: The 8th International Knowledge and Education Research Unit (KERU) Symposium*. Auckland, New Zealand

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Unintended consequences – the impacts of assessment on knowledge in senior secondary school

KERU 25 May 2018

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Key argument

Knowledge has reduced, narrowed and become fragmented as a result of assessment practices.

Narrowing effects in the enacted curriculum

NZCER Survey of the Secondary Sector 2015

51% teachers (overall) felt that changes from 2011 to NCEA had narrowed their curriculum.

63% of Mathematics and Science teachers felt that changes from 2011 to NCEA had narrowed their curriculum.

43% identified the NCEA requirements as a barrier to making changes or maintaining the quality of the curriculum.

The State of Knowledge

Knowledge for senior secondary subjects now exhibits the following features:

1. **Knowledge reduced** to only the knowledge required to address the assessable features of the achievement standards
2. **Knowledge narrowed** to discrete portions of what might have formerly been a broader recognisable 'topic'
3. **Knowledge reduced** to fewer 'bites' of knowledge in yearly programmes
4. **Knowledge reduced** through important ideas, concepts or skills **being** addressed just once in a year's programme. Once assessed they are not revisited.

Factors Impacting on Knowledge

1. **Segmentation** of subjects into discrete skills, concepts or content
2. NCEA Certificate and Course **Endorsement** which rewards doing fewer standards.
3. Curricula freedom which has led, in some subjects, to **generic** and predictable **examination questions**.
4. The ability to double dip – to **use one topic for two or more standards**.
5. The difficulty in interpreting the standards and **shifts over time in expectations**. Such uncertainty leads teachers to narrow the field and preference depth over breadth.
6. **Excessive assessment** - teachers try to alleviate the difficulty of excessive assessment through reducing the number of standards.
7. **The time spent on internal assessments** which, while having clear learning advantages, reduces the time available to cover a wider range of contexts or topics.

Standards-based assessment

Advantages

- improved student understanding of what is being assessed
- greater accuracy in teacher judgements
- improved generic skills
- replacement of the 'quota' or norm-referenced systems

Disadvantages

- 'atomisation' of learning
- narrowing of curriculum
- over assessment
- focus on assessment rather than on learning

Segmentation and loss of coherence

‘The further this decomposition progresses, the harder it is to make the bits work together as a coherent learning experience which prepares learners to operate in intelligent and flexible ways’

(Royce Sadler, 2007, Perils in the meticulous specification of goals and assessment criteria. p. 389-90)

Segmented learning

Learning is assumed to be -

‘a linear process that functions like a machine, and that every piece can be taken apart, analysed and then put back together.

Can the subject of history (or any other knowledge-based discipline) actually be **disassembled and reassembled** in this way? History is a subject where a student’s progress depends on the depth and breadth of their understanding about the past rather than **isolated measurable**, and transferrable skills’.

Gregor Fountain (2008), Caught in between: How the scientific management of education in New Zealand made history history, (p. 136).

Impacts on knowledge

Will teaching programmes have to change?

The response:

'No, there should be no need to change programmes to accommodate the new qualifications.

Achievement standards describe only what the qualifications designer expects students to get out of their learning programme and what assessors look for in assessment.'

(Ministry of Education, 2001, Workshops 1&2, p. 13)

Standards as the starting point...

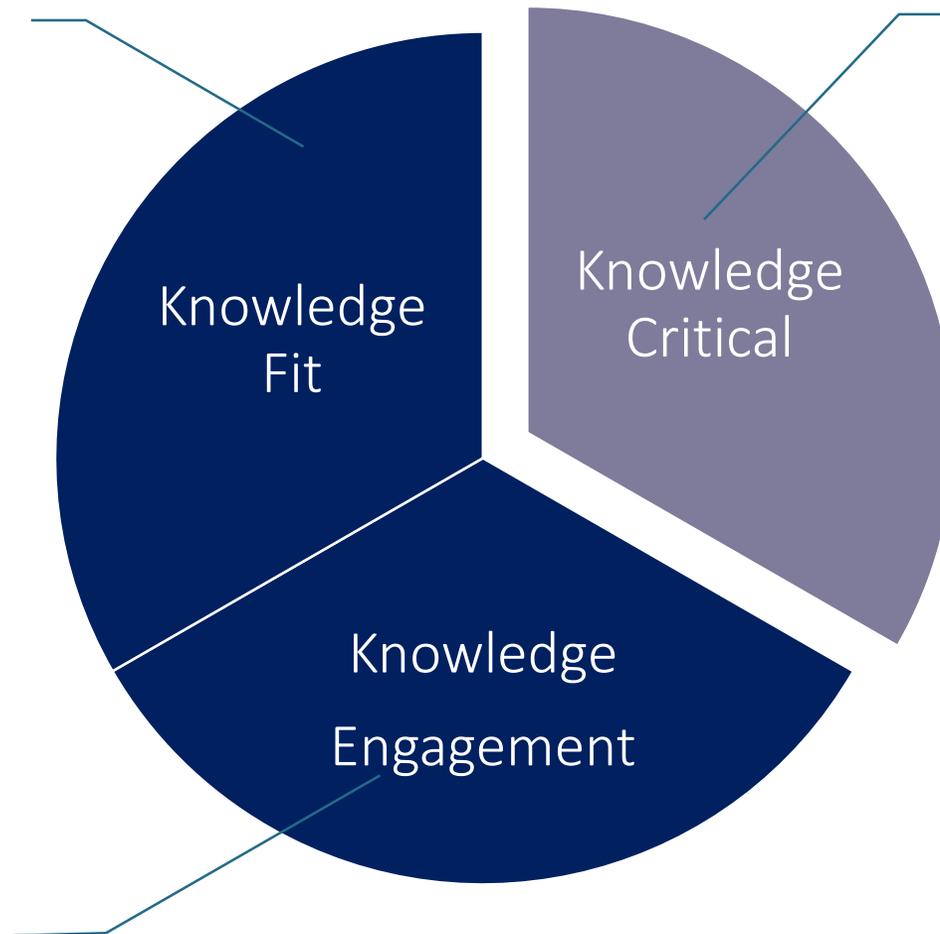
Teachers '**design down**' from the standards so that knowledge itself is rarely the starting point.

(Stephanie Allais, 2006, Problems with qualification reform in senior secondary education in South Africa, p.26)

Teachers' Explanations for Choices

What knowledge is the most suitable to address the achievement standard?

What knowledge will motivate learners? Topics are selected on the basis that they are perceived to be 'high interest'.



What knowledge of the past is valuable to know?
The best of this knowledge can be considered to be *powerful knowledge*.

Largely absent from teachers' explanations

Narrowing the focus

'We don't go into any depth anymore - it's the Rainbow Warrior and the Springbok Tour, just to get them ready for the assessment'.

'We only look at James I and the gun powder plot because that's our "perspectives" standard. We don't look at anything else'.

Suzanne

'So we just take the Montgomery Bus Boycott out of black civil rights and ... we don't want our textbook on black civil rights anymore - we just want one chapter'.

Linda

Limited encounters

‘the ‘pea-sized bits (are) to be swallowed one at a time – and for each bit, once only’

(Royce Sadler, 2007, p. 390)

Endorsement

You get your three excellences for the internal standards and one for the external and that is your endorsement. You know, **no one is giving a prize for the kid who gets 120–130 excellence credits. People really stop caring once you get 80 of them.** Students become very focused on only what is required for the exam throughout the year.

Matthew

Endorsement and accountability for grades

'At the end of the day I think what the school is looking for is for those **high grades - merits and excellences.**

Subject endorsement has forced another shift in thinking towards manipulating the internal and external standards in order to get higher percentage of subject endorsements hence not doing resource interpretation.

I'm seeing a more significant weight being put on internal assessment in order to get them across to that line. **It wouldn't be so bad perhaps if you were going to be offering all your standards in one form or another so it was a more cohesive programme.** But instead what we are looking at now is **reducing those standards in order to get the best academic record for their students.**

I think it has **shifted the balance the wrong way.'**

Karen

History Achievement Objectives

108 words for History

Level 6	Level 7	Level 8
Understand how the causes and consequences of past events that are of significance to New Zealanders shape the lives of people and society.	Understand how historical forces and movements have influenced the causes and consequences of events of significance to New Zealanders.	Understand that the causes, consequences , and explanations of historical events that are of significance to New Zealanders are complex and how and why they are contested.
Understand how people's perspectives on past events that are of significance to New Zealanders differ.	Understand how people's interpretations of events that are of significance to New Zealanders differ.	Understand how trends over time reflect social, economic and political forces.

Close alignment constrains exam questions

NZ Curriculum Achievement Objective (2007)

Understand how the causes and consequences of past events that are of significance to New Zealanders shape the lives of people and society.



Achievement Standard (2011)

Describe the causes and consequences of an historical event.



Exam Question (2016)

Identify and describe the causes of your chosen historical event.

What were the short-term and long-term consequences of the event for people and / or groups?

The 'Excellence' answer

'Once I realised that I gained an Excellence in the mid-years (examination), I knew I could use that essay in the November exams so concentrated on improving that essay. **Whatever topic we studied in class in term 3 was redundant for us'**

(quoted in John Pipe, *The State of History*, 2013, p. 21)

Generic Questions

So it's creating a course of all hateful things, of **rote learning** and preparing and redrafting throughout an entire year one essay. So it's **narrowing focus** and you can talk all you like about teachers, it's in the teachers' hands, ... but it's not actually, **it's the framework that we operate within**. We can manage that to a point but ultimately you know the kids will rework and rework one essay.'

Linda

Classical Studies – reduced knowledge

‘The number of topics taught in a typical Classics course **has reduced over time**, and the **content coverage of each topic has also reduced significantly**. So some teachers only do about four art works for the art standard, focusing entirely on the ones which they predict will give the greatest scope **for answering a generic exam question**.

Likewise, the amount of text studied in the *Odyssey* for example, can also be reduced significantly to focus simply on the themes in the assessment specifications. **I suspect that there is a lot of time spent practising the perfect answer.**

(Auckland teacher)

Year Programmes - Reduction in Knowledge

History – Year 11

Data shows number of topics typically studied in a year programme. These serve only as an indication since school programmes differ widely.

Pre- NCEA	2002-4 Early NCEA	2018
6 exam topics + 1 or more internal = 7	3 exam topics + 1 internal = 4	1 or 2 exam topics + 2 internal = 3 or 4

Classical Studies – Year 12

Pre- NCEA	2002-4 Early NCEA	2018
5 school exam topics = 5	3 exam topics + 1 internal = 4	1 or 2 exam topics + 1 internal = 2 or 3

Art History – Year 13

Pre- NCEA	2002-4 Early NCEA	2018
3 school exam topics + 2 internal = 5	2 school exam topics + 2 internal = 4	1 exam topic + 1 or 2 internals = 3

Note: The number of ‘topics’ does not equate to the number of standards undertaken as students can use the same topic for more than one standard *e.g. History Year 11 – most teachers use the same topic for Achievement Standard 1.1 & 1.2*

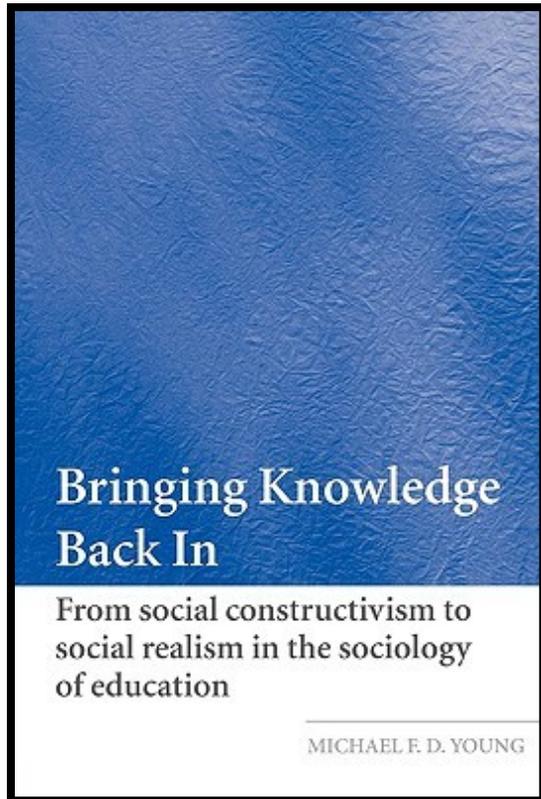
An international issue?

It doesn't matter what you've learned. At the end of the day, it's the grade'

(A year 10 student in the United Kingdom)

(cited by Jenny Clements, UCL Institute of Education, London, *BERA Blog*, 27 April 2018)

Knowledge and the future



- Retain the best features of standards-based assessment – communicating goals to students
- Avoid structures which close down pathways to knowledge
- Expand knowledge to enable connections to be made
- Balance teachers' professional judgements on knowledge selection with certainty of access nationally to powerful knowledge
- Shift our approaches to a Future 3 model of education
- Assessment without accountability dominating the learning.