

The Making of a Precedent: The Evolution of Cook Islands School Certificate

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Internal assessment

The Cook Islands School Certificate (CISC) is an interesting development in the South Pacific region because it is one of the few national certificates, and probably the only one which includes a large element of internal assessment. It is now over ten years since its inception and the charting of its sometimes uneven course should prove instructive for individuals or countries interested in the benefits and problems associated with internal assessment.

Uncertain beginnings

In some ways, the initiation of an internally assessed certificate was an accident. In the mid-70s, a cabinet decision was made to institute a national certificate at the Lower Fifth Form level (the year before NZ School Certificate). The new certificate was to cater for students who had no realistic chance of success in NZSC and would otherwise leave school with no recognition other than a school report. It was to be awarded that same year. This last requirement put huge time pressures on the Cook Islands Department of Education, and it was decided to use the end of year examination papers produced by Tereora College, the largest secondary school in the country. Unfortunately, there were no comprehensive prescriptions or syllabi for many subjects, and schools were often teaching different material. The result was that students at the other schools did poorly overall, particularly in the outer islands where there was little contact with those people who set the papers. There was a great deal of resentment at what was seen as central domination, and one outer island principal even threw the final certificates away rather than give them to his students.

The new certificate was off to an unpromising start. There was great suspicion of it, and also a demand that future control of the certificate be school-based. That is, that schools should award their own certificate, based on their own syllabi. However, it was still to be a national certificate.

The fresh start

This system was adopted for the next two years. Schools assessed their own students, sent their subject grades (A to E) to the Department of Education at the end of the year, and national certificates were then produced centrally and sent out. While this satisfied the pride of individual schools it did nothing to hasten local acceptance of the certificate. Rather the reverse. It became apparent that some mechanism was needed to ensure that differences between schools were recognised so that, for instance, a B in Maths at one school meant the same as a B in another.

At this point a flurry of educational activity was set in motion. Teachers were formed into syllabus committees to revise and devise syllabi and agree on prescriptions. Procedures and regulations were agreed on and a controlling body was set up. It was agreed that the major aim of CISC was still to provide a standard qualification for school leavers from the Lower Fifth Form, but in addition there was the goal of improving teachers' own assessment techniques. These two requirements led to the first of the standardisation techniques.

Standardisation by sampling

Schools were required to set tests every six weeks, to mark them, and send tests, marking schedules and a sample of marked scripts into the Department. Subject specialists were contracted to review these documents, and send back reports with advice and criticism to each school. In addition the specialists noted differences in standards of achievement between schools. At the end of the year, each school sent in the list of grades it wished to award. Each subject specialist adjusted grades where necessary, the Department approved the grades, and they were sent back to the schools, which awarded them to students on the basis of their whole year's performance. This system was of great benefit to classroom teachers, who in general devised and marked their own tests, and received advice on assessment techniques. However, it put enormous pressure on the subject specialists, often teaching in the classroom themselves, and was an administrative nightmare, with bundles of papers speeding in and out of the Department at an ever increasing rate as new subjects were added to the list of those available.

Standardisation by testing

In the very early stages, plans were made for the replacement of some of the six-weekly checks with a national test which would establish relative standards between schools. These national 'Moderating Tests' were to apply to those subjects most amenable to examination assessment, such as Mathematics, Science, Social Science, English etc. Subjects like Agriculture and Physical Education would continue to be standardised by the good sense of a subject specialist.

Over the years, as assessment expertise increased, a three tier system evolved. In some subjects, students sat a Moderating Test and gained grades in that subject for their school. At the end of the year, the school allocated those grades on merit, not necessarily to those students who had gained them for the school. In addition, school tests were sent in for evaluation and comment twice a year. Other subjects retained the original system of sending in school tests only, but with a reduced frequency of three times a year. And a third group of subjects were in transition between the two systems on a trial basis.

Grades in all subjects were expanded from the original 5 (A-E) classifications, which was found to be too coarse, to 10 classifications, by the simple expedient of adding a + to each grade. All subjects were awarded grades on a normal distribution basis as follows:

Grade	A+	A	B+	B	C+	C	D+	D	E+	E
% of Students	2	3	9	16	20	20	16	9	3	2

The Cook Islands Public Service Commission accepted a CISC average of C+ as entry qualification for certain jobs, provision was made for high flying students to skip CISC and go straight into the NZSC class, assessment expertise was increasing, outer island standards were approaching those of the Rarotongan schools (and in some cases exceeding them), the Moderating Tests were professionally set, schools were able to assess their own students, and examining panels were being localised year by year. All that was left to do was to sit back and endure that slow process of public acceptance of the new certificate.

Alas, it was not to be. The course of sound assessment, like that of true love, seldom runs smoothly.

Refining the system

Oddly enough, the problems which arose were not the anticipated ones of erratic grading. A system of check marking a sample of each school's Moderating Test papers in each subject was instituted to correct inevitable differences between markers (even when they were following the same marking schedule). This system also allowed the Department to be alerted if a marker was inflating marks to boost the grades given to his school. So far, this has not occurred. It also helped the Department check on teacher-sanctioned cheating in the examination room. Only one case of this has so far been established. Of course, there is always the danger of a school awarding final grades to unworthy candidates (giving As to the dull child of an important person, for instance). There is no evidence of this happening so far. The rationale has been that teachers are professional people, and worthy of professional trust. To date, Cook Islands teachers have fulfilled that trust very well. Rather, problems were caused by consequences of the original concept, and later, by its growing acceptance.

Status

Initially, CISC was for the slight majority of students who left school before tackling NZSC. Indeed, some of the early syllabi owe a great deal to 'alternative' Fifth Form courses being developed in New Zealand at the time. It was intended to be a fully graded certificate which awarded early leavers realistic grades in relevant subjects. However, the fact that numbers of accelerated students (sometimes 25%) skipped the CISC year led to a perception among teachers and the community that CISC was a second rate certificate, one for the 'dummies', and that a failure in NZSC was worth more than an A in CISC. This perception at one point brought the future of CISC, the only national Cook Islands certificate, into question. It was decided to make CSIC a prerequisite for entry into NZSC classes, though students could still be accelerated before the CISC year. The results were interesting. Although accelerated students in general did well, they did not monopolise the top grades as had been feared, nor were the standards required an insult to their intelligence. It made good grades slightly harder to get for the 'average' student, but made his certificate more acceptable.

Differing subject standards

In the early stages distributing grades normally across all subjects seemed a

fair and equitable way of ensuring that subjects were treated equally. As the system and its users became more sophisticated there were complaints that able students who attempted difficult option subjects were not getting a fair deal. The problem was that even if a subject attracted students who were all above average in all their other subjects, some of those students were going to be awarded Ds and Es no matter how well they did, as a consequence of the norming process. Subjects which attracted the vast bulk of candidates, like English, Mathematics and Science, were not affected. However, the result of this anomaly was that grades could not compare across subjects. That is, a B in Accounting was not necessarily of the same standard as a B in Agriculture or Social Science.

The solution was to find which subjects did *not* attract a normal distribution of students, and to allocate grades in that subject in accordance with its actual distribution pattern. Almost without exception, English and Mathematics are sat by all candidates, so these scores were added (after being standardised to the same mean and standard deviation) to form a composite mark. The marks were converted to grades, on the normal distribution curve, and the grades used to find whether a subject had attracted a strong, weak or 'non-normal' sample of candidates. This then created a 3 step system of grade allocation for subjects with a Moderating Test:

1. Standardised English/Mathematics composite grades were used for allocating the grades available to a subject.
2. Individual subject results were used for allocating grades to schools, based on that school's results in the Moderating Test.
3. All the subject grades a school earned were used for allocating grades to students.

In a system where there are many small schools, and some disparities in teaching standards, it was felt necessary to retain subject Moderating Tests so that a school whose students did badly in English and Mathematics could still earn good grades in other subjects if its students did well in them.

There are continuing problems of misunderstanding with this system. Subject specialists and teachers are delighted if their subject receives a better than average selection of grades because strong students are taking their subject. They are less impressed when their subjects receive rather more Ds and Es than As and Bs. However, their concern is an indication of the rising esteem in which CISC is held.

Vernacular language status

The Cook Islands, like many Pacific countries, is increasingly concerned with the position of its vernacular language. In the past, Cook Islands Maori was often not studied by the brightest students, and was often based on the craft, rather than the language elements of the culture. To ensure that Cook Islands Maori retained its proper place in the school curriculum, it was decided to make it a condition for CISC entry that students took courses in both English and Maori. This meant that special syllabi in both languages had to be augmented or initiated: in English for students with very weak English, often doing a partial CISC in a work experience course; in Maori for English monolinguals — Cook Islanders returned from lengthy stays overseas, and expatriate students. It was decided that these students did not have to offer their weak language as a CISC subject, but they did have to take a course in it. Recognition of the course was to be made on their certificate.

The result of this change was that many bright students studied Maori language for the first time, some with very good results. The school assessment system had made a valuable contribution to the maintenance of a bilingual society.

Practical subjects

As the subject weighting system developed, some concern was expressed that it was not being fair to subjects with large practical components. It was felt that an English/Mathematics composite might not do justice to the groups of students taking practical subjects, some of whom had weaknesses in these academic areas. A two-pronged response was formulated. A study was made of all practical subjects to see what the effect of weighting them was in comparison with the normal distribution, and with subject specialists' recommendations. At the same time, a degree of flexibility was built into the system so that a practical subject specialist could query the grades allocated to his/her subject and negotiate a modified allocation.

It was discovered that in general, the weighted grades were closer to subject specialists' recommendations than were the normally distributed grades. A vindication of the weighted approach has been that the freedom to negotiate practical subject grades has been little used.

Subject status

In recent years there has been a demand for Moderating Tests in more subjects. Practical subjects had in general been standardised by a subject specialist looking at the school tests and using his/her professional judgement. It had been felt that a Moderating Test would not be able to cover enough of the essentials of such subjects to give a reliable result. However, as examining expertise increased, many of the practical subject specialists grew more confident that they could devise tests which gave a fair sampling of the material learned and the skills acquired. They also felt that their subjects were losing status through not having a Moderating Test and were in danger of becoming perceived as second class subjects, or 'soft options'.

Accordingly, Moderating Tests were devised for a greater range of subjects. At this stage, only Physical Education, of the sixteen available for CISC, does not have a Moderating Test.

Use and abuse of the Moderating Tests

Some teething problems occurred with the use of Moderating Tests. Because CISC uses classroom teachers as first-step markers and because the concept of a test to establish subject and school differences was a new one, some misinterpretation was bound to occur.

Some teachers treated the Moderating Test, sat about two-thirds of the way through the year, as a final examination. There was a tendency to relax after the Tests and not cover the rest of the syllabus. Also, since teachers knew the marks they had awarded their own students for the Test, (though not the adjusted ones after check-marking), some gave those marks as the students' whole year results.

The timing of the Tests seemed crucial. They could not be held at the end of the year, since then they would inevitably be used as summative assessment. (In any event, there would not have been enough time to complete the standardisation process). The suggestion was made that they be held at the end of the previous year, but finally they were moved forward to about half-way through the year and schools were instructed that marks gained in Moderating Tests could be used for only 40% or less of a student's final mark for the year.

End of problem? Not quite. The 40% requirement threw teachers and schools back on their own resources; and a check revealed that some teachers had problems in setting, varying and weighting in-class assessment. Advisory visits were made to assist classroom teachers with their assessment, and to alert principals and heads of departments to the necessity for a preventive but supportive overview of assessment techniques.

Norming

The odd technical poser reared its ugly head as well. The English/Mathematics composite technique uses the normal distribution as its base. That is, it assumes that the population sitting those tests is a representative sample of all children in the Cook Islands of that age (and that those children conform in their academic achievement pattern to the normal curve, but we won't go into that here).

However, there are problems. A small proportion of students drop out before CISC year. Were they a representative sample? What is the effect of expatriate children on the distribution? A reasonably stable, but quite large percentage (10%) of students are accelerated a year into CISC. They are a year younger than their mainstream fellow students. What effect does that have on the norms? Is it balanced by students who have repeated in previous years, or is the effect made worse? What effect does migration have? Do we lose the best students and regain the worst? Or vice-versa?

There is a thesis waiting there for some enterprising student, but at the time it was concluded neither the data nor the manpower was available, and the best guess was that the sample was as near normal as realistically possible.

Benefits

This whole procedure may seem unconscionably clumsy, when a good old end-of-year examination could have graded the students perfectly satisfactorily as far as parents and employers were concerned. There have, however, been some enormous benefits:

1. Students now understand that it is their whole year's work that is being assessed and graded, not a single set of examinations.
2. Teachers have had to teach to a syllabus, and many have been involved in syllabus analysis and change.

3. There has been a new look at the relevance of syllabi, with consequent benefits in content for the students.
4. There has been a great increase in teachers' competence in various forms of assessment, so that students are now being assessed much more professionally than before.
5. Educational and societal priorities have been able to be re-examined and adapted to meet current needs.
6. Teachers feel themselves to be an integral part of CISC. They set the Tests and mark them, with checking and standardisation being organised by the Department.
7. The system has proved to be sufficiently flexible to allow for the participation of isolated islands with few candidates and no air-access.
8. The ultimate responsibility for grading students is put where it rightly belongs — on those who teach them.

Acknowledgement

Some mention should be made of key figures in CISC development. These are: Mr. Sandy McNicol, then Evaluation Officer for the Cook Islands Department of Education, who initiated the system that exists today and who nursed its early development; Dr. Warwick Elley, then Fellow in Assessment and Evaluation with the IOE/USP, who gave direction, advice and encouragement; and Miss Maara Karotaua, Curriculum Adviser for the Cook Islands Department of Education, who helped refine the system and is currently in charge of it.