23 September 2016

To xx at NZQA,

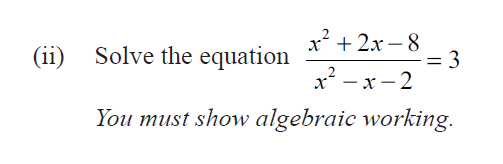
We wish to lay a complaint about the Level 1 Algebra Exam, sat by thousands of 15 and 16 year olds up and down the country last week, including xx of the students at Wellington Girls’ College

Just last week we had a representative of NZQA come to Wellington Girls’ to audit our NCEA processes and we therefore consider it only fair that we ask of you what your processes are for ensuring that the NCEA are set at the correct level.

Specifically, we would like to know why your moderation processes did not pick up the inconsistency between the Algebra Level 1 standard, the skills and understandings in level 6 of the Mathematics curriculum, the clarifications and specifications of this standard as published on the Ministry of Education’s website (all of which teachers refer to and base their teaching on), and the questions in this exam.

We ask that you acknowledge that the Algebra exam was not set at the right level of the NZ curriculum, and issue an apology to students, teachers and parents for the stress and anguish that this exam has caused. We have read your attempts to justify the exam as being at the correct level, despite numerous letters sent to you highlighting specific evidence of this not being the case. I will reiterate here only a few key points, but we totally endorse all the evidence presented in the letter sent to you by the Otago Mathematics Association (attached). Some questions were extremely similar to previous year’s Level 2 Algebra paper, for example please compare Question Two (e)[Day 1] in the MCAT with the

***2014 Level 2 Algebra exam Question 2(b)(ii) which was an excellence question***



Further, Algebra standard AS91027 states “solve simple equations involving exponents such as  
 x3 = 8, 5x=125” and “simplifying algebraic expressions involving exponents, such as (2x4 )3 .

Question One (d) [Day 1 of the MCAT], to solve 4 x 2x = 26x+3 is well beyond curriculum level 6 and without doubt sits at Level 2 with skills from AS91261.

After students would have spent a considerable amount of time doing their best with these overly difficult questions, they were then given an investigation (Question 4d in MCAT Day 1), which can be looked at in numerous different ones. This is a rich and interesting task for students to investigate and discuss in a group situation, but certainly not appropriate for students to undertake when they are likely to have had only 5 or 6 minutes left of their exam time. Is it any wonder students came out of the exam totally frustrated and disillusioned with the examination process?

We do not buy your argument that as questions had a combination of level 4 and 5 skills, the student should be able to combine those skills in the one question. A pertinent analogy given to us by a PE teacher, is that given a level 4 skill is to be able to ride a bike, and level 5 skills are simple juggling and doing headstands, then NZQA is saying that therefore student should be able to juggle while doing a headstand on a bike. This somewhat amusing analogy highlights the issue that being able to do skills individually is certainly not the same as being able to put those skills together.

We are aware of the Wellington Mathematics Association’s request , that although we appreciate is not a completely satisfactory solution, given that a large number of students study a lot harder for the “real thing” than they do for “mock exams, is that NZQA give schools the option of using a student’s derived grade exam mark as their final grade. Allowing this option, would go some-way towards allaying the concerns of some year 11 students.

We have heard that you have responded to this request by saying that “there would be some very unhappy schools if a derived grade was allowed”. Where is your evidence for this? Which schools have you asked for feedback on this idea?

A further and absolutely urgent request is that NZQA provide us with clarification as to what level all the other external mathematics exams that students will be sitting at the end of this year are pitched at, and if they are significantly different to previous years, as the MCAT was, that sample papers be provided to us. Our confidence in NZQA’s ability to set papers at the correct level has been undermined and students of all levels across the country are now deeply concerned about what their end of year exams are going to look like. This is causing unnecessary stress, anger, and impediment to motivation, and we must receive an urgent reply to this request so that students can be reassured on day one of term 4.

The continuing negative publicity about NZQA will continue until you see your way clear to accepting responsibility for a poor exam and starting to put that wrong to right.

As I am sure you will appreciate, this is an extremely busy time of year for teachers and we would not be diverting our attention from our students to write letters to you at this time if we did not think this matter was extremely important.

We eagerly await your response and look forward to seeing evidence of your desire to work with the Mathematics teachers of New Zealand, and repair the lack of faith that New Zealand currently feels for the NZ Qualifications Authority.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Priest and the Wellington Girls’ College Mathematics Department