

# Accommodating diversity in assessment, a snapshot of practice in 2022

## Summary report

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### Introduction and background

Special Assessment Conditions (SAC) is a term used in Aotearoa New Zealand to describe the provision of accommodations in assessments to support equitable access and participation in NCEA. SAC accommodations enable learners who face barriers to achievement when faced with traditionally designed assessment design to fairly demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and understanding when being assessed. SAC are designed to support students who need them without providing an unfair advantage over other students. At present, SAC support is achieved through students applying and being granted assistance to complete assessments; for example, using reader-writers, being given modified exam papers, providing separate accommodation during an assessment, or using assistive technologies for computer-based assessments. Such supports provide additional assistance to students who otherwise take part in assessments that follow “practice as usual”. For this reason, they are considered to be a “bolt-on” to traditional assessment practices.

Requests for SAC are growing, and the process is becoming more difficult to manage and to resource. Making NCEA more accessible was listed as first priority when the Ministry of Education released its NCEA Change Programme in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Education asked NZCER to provide a snapshot of the current situation, working from first principles, and to explore options for addressing the issues already evident in the system. This summary provides high-level findings from a small-scale investigation of SAC, as they are currently applied in schools. We summarise our recommendations for short-term remedies, followed by medium- and long-term plans for developing inclusive, equitable assessment design strategies that restore student agency and improve accessibility by utilising Universal Design for Learning (UDL).<sup>2</sup>

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1 <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/what-ncea-change-programme>

2 The full report was delivered to the Ministry of Education in July 2022.

## Methodology

Five key research themes for this investigation were agreed with the Ministry of Education:

- a snapshot of the current situation
- what we can learn from good practice elsewhere
- establishing continuity between learning support and assessment support
- the impact of the Review of Achievement Standards (RAS)
- potential for improving access through assessment design.

We began our investigation with an initial literature review, and early scoping interviews formed the groundwork for a more intensive investigation into SAC provision as it currently functions.

We also investigated possibilities for a more inclusive approach to accommodating diversity in assessment, specifically from the perspective of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), considering assessment design from first principles.

Our snapshot investigation of the current situation involved a quantitative analysis of 2019 and 2020 SAC applications for NCEA, and a qualitative study using interviews and focus group meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Education, NZQA,<sup>3</sup> RTL<sup>4</sup> service, and teachers and school leaders from eight schools, selected to be broadly representative of schools across the country and including schools from rural and urban areas.

## What the numbers tell us about demand for SAC

In 2019, 12,450 SAC applications were approved by NZQA, compared with 14,417 in 2020. In 2020, on average, 7.5% of the total NCEA cohort had a request for SAC approved. There were clear decile-related differences: 11.2% of approvals went to students in decile 10 schools, with a low of 4.9% for decile 1, 2, and 3 schools. Proportionally more applications were received on behalf of students of European ethnicity (10.0%), compared to students of Māori (6.0%), Pacific (4.0%), and Asian (2.3%) ethnicities.

SAC applications are categorised within four possible conditions: medical, physical, sensory impaired, and learning. Learning difficulties constitute by far the largest category—77% of all applications in 2019 and 70% in 2020. Readers, writers, and separate accommodation are the three largest categories for SAC approvals.

## How SAC currently works in schools

NZQA has the responsibility for approving a student's use of SAC, but they can only do so when schools make student-specific, evidence-based applications. The way in which the schools in our sample organised SAC varied considerably in four key areas:

- systems used to identify eligible students
- how applications are managed
- how logistical issues are dealt with in providing SAC
- how SAC is resourced in schools.

Schools valued the support they received from NZQA, who have streamlined the process and made it more supportive. Nevertheless, the rising demand for SAC has created an increasing administrative workload for schools and NZQA.

We learned from our schools that SAC arrangements were frequently assigned to the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) or Head of Learning Support, who received varied levels of

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<sup>3</sup> New Zealand Qualifications Authority.

<sup>4</sup> Resource Teacher Learning and Behaviour.

support to carry out this task. Some schools could afford to use licenced testing tools to identify students who might be eligible for SAC. In addition, schools with well-developed learning support tracking and monitoring systems were better placed to manage SAC provision and accommodate students with SAC requirements. All the schools in the sample reported difficulties resourcing SAC. Difficult-to-resource areas included finding suitable reader-writers to assist students, and spaces for separate accommodation. Several schools in the study used teacher aides already assigned to junior school learning support to assist with SAC for their senior students. Some schools expressed concern about the likely increase in school-based assessments, as signalled through the NCEA change programme. If these changes increase demand for SAC still further, the current resource constraints will be exacerbated.

Uncertainties around SAC entitlements for the new literacy and numeracy standards were flagged as a concern by several schools in our sample. If students are unable to achieve either of the new literacy and numeracy standards, they cannot gain an NCEA qualification so long as these are positioned as co-requisites. This has serious consequences for students who require SAC for reading and writing if there are SAC entitlement changes for these standards.

While SAC provision remains essentially a “bolt-on” to NCEA, there are some changes we recommend that might improve it, making it more equitable and more manageable for schools. These are listed later in our recommendations. However, a longer-term solution needs to be considered, preferably a solution that considers how assessments could be designed to make them more inclusive, reducing the need for SAC, without compromising the credibility or validity of assessments.

## **Developing a medium-term plan**

Although access to additional supports such as SAC must always be available to ensure equity, increased student agency and locus of control of their assessments can be restored. It is important to identify ways in which assessments can be designed and delivered to enable SAC to change from a “bolt-on” model to becoming a part of an inclusive design model. We drew from research and examples of good practice to investigate how this could be achieved, and we applied what we found to selected examples of assessments that have been developed for the NCEA change programme. We recognise that such an important change will take time and have signalled this as a medium-term goal in our recommendations listed at the end of this summary.

## **The potential of digital assessments to reduce demand for SAC**

During our interviews, schools told us that the introduction of text-to-speech functionality in digital assessments could be a “game changer” for many students who require the assistance of reader-writers in assessments. We investigated and reported on two overseas examples where this has been done. Digital assessments have already been introduced by NZQA but the roll out and subsequent uptake of digital assessment is still at an early stage.

Growing participation in digital assessments suggests there is considerable potential for more widespread access to text-to-speech functionality to reduce the demand for SAC. In 2021, 6.5% of all external assessments across 24 subjects were administered digitally. Decile-related differences in participation showed much higher numbers of results from decile 8–10 schools compared with decile 6–7 schools, and considerably lower results for decile 1–2 schools. (These data only cover externally assessed standards. In principle, any schools could design their own digitally delivered internal assessments if the design of the achievement standard allows for this.)

## Universal Design for Learning: An opportunity with caveats

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is the design or construction of learning and assessment experiences to be more inclusive by removing potential barriers to participation in any specific context. When UDL is applied to assessment, the aim is to ensure that every student has a fair chance to show what they know and can do. This approach to design is intended to ensure that no construct-irrelevant variables get in the way. Ideally “universally designed” assessment approaches have accessibility built in—that is, these approaches enable all learners to benefit from fundamental design features that allow for greater accessibility. For example, difficulties in decoding formal written text might prevent a student from providing an answer that they actually could give if they were invited to do so in a different way, or with appropriate supporting technologies. Examples of such support might include:

- use of text-to-speech technology in place of reader-writers
- use of digital assessment options and writer-assistive technology in place of a writer
- removal of time and space constraints through design of authentic assessments with built-in flexibility.

These types of universal accommodations increase options for students, but to be really effective they should be accompanied by an assessment design process that clarifies what is being assessed, and what should not be targeted because it is construct-irrelevant. Evidence centred design (ECD) is one such assessment design approach. ECD begins with a curriculum analysis that clearly specifies the focal knowledge, skills, and abilities to be assessed and shapes these as an “assessment argument”. This assessment argument can be used to eliminate construct-irrelevant variables at the initial design stage, and then continues to be applied right through to making valid and reliable judgements about student work. Furthermore, the curriculum itself needs to be universally designed in order to build inclusive foundations for the work to follow. The literature is clear that UDL is most effective in eliminating inequalities when it is applied across the whole learning system.

Applying a design process such as ECD has implications for aligning the NCEA Refresh of Achievement Standards (RAS) with the Curriculum Refresh process. Currently new achievement standards are being developed before the relevant part of the national curriculum has been refreshed. As noted, the success of ECD relies on continuity at every stage of assessment design and delivery. There is a risk that construct-irrelevance could creep back in when assessment design and delivery are handled by different teams.

Our investigation identified one school-wide approach to enacting inclusive assessment, which we included as a case study in our final report. Though not specifically a UDL model, their practice was congruent with UDL principles and embodied the coherence that comes from systematic and aligned attention to every aspect of their learning programme. Here teachers learn together, building pedagogical content knowledge, focused on richly contextualised integrated learning, and on the design and execution of innovative assessments enabling inclusivity. The clear message emerging from this case study is that UDL and ECD cannot be “bolted on” to existing practice. Instead, they need to become an integral part of how each school’s learning environment functions. For UDL to be successful and beneficial, each school needs support and guidance through professional development and learning to enable the model to function uniquely for the school and its community.

We reviewed a range of internally assessed achievement standards, prepared as part of the Level 1 Review of Achievement Standards (RAS). We were informed that the subject expert groups (SEGs) had undertaken some professional learning about the use of UDL principles, and so we looked for evidence of the application of UDL strategies to the assessment process. We could see that SEG teams had tried to apply some UDL principles, but also that this did not appear to be an easy or coherent change for them to make to current practice. None of the three science standards that we chose to review in depth successfully modelled an inclusive but also valid and reliable assessment design.

## Hybrid learning: An opportunity for difficult times

The necessity to create more robust and sustainable models of hybrid learning in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic offers new opportunities to enact more inclusive assessment practices. A recent analysis of the opportunity afforded in current difficult times recommends a comprehensive audit of every aspect of school practice, because many (but not all) functions of a school can be carried out regardless of where they take place. Ensuring that learning is active, and that the naturally occurring evidence collected supports the claim that the students actually did the work themselves, is an example of the type of shift that can support hybrid learning while also offering the potential to make assessment more inclusive. The caveat to this opportunity is that learning intentions must be transparent to all—which circles back to the challenge of evidence-centred design and the importance of developing a clear assessment argument. This may explain why in most high-stakes contexts, assessment experts undertake this work.

### Short-term recommendations

- Make SAC testing software available to all schools and kura, so that they can make consistent and equitable judgements about SAC requirements for their students. Ideally this would be software designed for New Zealand students, including a version in te reo Māori, and would be funded for schools and kura.
- Include text-to-speech functionality in all digital examinations so that this accommodation is available to all who may require it. This should be an urgent priority.
- Fund training and support packages for schools that show them how to effectively identify, track, and manage their students' learning needs and identify potential SAC support as early as possible. Ideally schools and kura would receive access to an online system that could be tailored to their specific needs, leading to greater consistency and equity across schools. The RTLB service could be well placed to develop this type of support.
- Address key concerns around the availability of SAC for the proposed new numeracy and literacy assessments. If students are unable to pass these, they will become potentially locked out of an NCEA qualification, with restricted career and vocational options.

### Medium-term opportunities for more coherent system alignment

The short-term opportunities suggested above have a focus on modest resourcing changes. Such changes are necessary but not sufficient. Ultimately, teachers must be convinced that more inclusive assessment practices will work and will not disadvantage those who do not need this type of support. It is likely that there will be some resistance to anything they see as not fair, not robust, or that sends mixed messages about what matters. We saw hints of this resistance in some of the RAS pilot materials. This cluster of recommendations is made with the challenge of shifting practice in mind:

- Invest in a programme of ongoing professional learning about UDL, and its application to inclusive assessment design, for all secondary teachers.
- Foster a more visible alignment between curriculum and assessment design, to ensure inclusive practices are connected and embedded into assessment at the earliest opportunity.
- Continue to exemplify inclusive design in materials that support NCEA assessments and establish a quality assurance process to ensure these materials are fit for purpose and signal consistency of approach across subjects.
- Establish an oversight panel with responsibility for reviewing and ensuring inclusiveness in NCEA assessment design. The brief could include both quality assurance and strategic oversight of assessment design from an inclusivity perspective.

## Concluding comment: Looking towards a system-wide view of change

Our investigation of the current enactment and projected future demand for SAC has documented a system that is clearly becoming increasingly unsustainable. We heard that NZQA has been working hard to make the system more streamlined and practical to apply. But it also became very evident that while SAC remains a bolt-on to traditional assessment practices, it is unlikely that more transformative change can be anticipated.

There are important “hearts and minds” issues to address, for parents and others in the wider community, as well as for teachers. It is not so many years ago that high-stakes senior secondary school assessments were expected to be a gatekeeper, used to select and ration access to higher education. The very possibility of more inclusive assessment, supporting continuing learning for everyone who is able, is at odds with long-established sorting practices. It is important to note that we did not address specific questions in this area. However, our analysis of teachers’ beginning efforts to take account of Universal Design for Learning principles was telling. They did try to incorporate UDL in the design of assessment activities to support the new level 1 achievement standards, but these efforts were neither consistent nor effective.

There is undoubtedly rich potential in the more systematic application of a UDL approach to NCEA assessments. However, it is equally clear that this type of change cannot be transformative if it is applied to the current system “as is”. What has emerged from our study is the clear need to take the whole assessment/curriculum nexus back to first principles.

More inclusive assessment cannot be achieved by tinkering. It must begin with inclusive curriculum design, which then feeds into more inclusive assessment practices—both of which are supported by an ongoing, comprehensive programme of professional learning support for teachers.

The recent imperative to introduce hybrid learning pedagogies is another area of rich potential for making NCEA assessment more inclusive. This change has been imposed on the system by the impacts of the ongoing pandemic. NZQA has provided timely leadership, with advice about how traditional assessment practices might be adapted to cope.<sup>5</sup> But again, the more transformative potential lies in going back to first principles, to redesign a hybrid system that takes account of the need for change in all aspects of the work of secondary schools.<sup>6</sup>

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5 New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2002). *Assessment in uncertain times*. Author.

6 Wenmouth, D. (2022). *Getting started with hybrid learning: A teacher guide*. FutureMakers Ltd. <https://futuremakers.nz/getting-started-with-hybrid/>