NACCQ modules in Schools?

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In recent years Manukau Institute of Technology has offered a range of DipICT Level 5 modules in local high schools to fill a gap caused by the lack of bursary and 6th form certificate qualifications and to raise the profile of computing and IT within schools. Other NACCQ providers have done similarly.
DipICT L5 modules, taught by teachers accredited with our CIT department, have also provided school students with credit transfers into the NACCQ staircase and our local BIS degree.
The advent of the NCEA has and will continue to generate a credit-driven choice of subjects for high school students. Presently NACCQ modules are not aligned to the NCEA credit framework so their perceived value to students could very likely diminish; the current vacuum to be filled by a host of proprietary qualifications which do count towards NCEA or unit standards.
This paper will include and invite discussion on the following points:

- The merits or otherwise of having a NACCQ qualification in schools that could lead to further IT study with the local tertiary provider of DipICT L5.
- The possibility of getting NACCQ modules on to the NCEA framework thereby generating NCEA credits
- A look at competitive (and complementary?) proprietary credit-generating qualifications
- Implications of current curriculum alignment work between NACCQ modules and unit standards
- Is a national marketing initiative needed to enhance the profile of the DipICT/NDBC suite of qualifications in an increasingly competitive and crowded marketplace?

Keywords

NACCQ, NZQA, DipICT, NCEA credits, proprietary qualifications, curriculum alignment

1. BACKGROUND

In 2002 the Department of Computing and Information Technology (CIT) at the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) accredited teachers from an East Auckland secondary school to deliver a set of DipICT Level 5 modules that would sufficiently challenge their able students at Year 12. A cluster of four modules (HF500, SO500, DT500 and SP610) were initially offered under our Schools Partnership scheme with STAR funding. These modules provided not only credit transfers for our DipICT L5 course but also for a prerequisite to a Systems Development paper in our degree. Subsequently a large number of students who completed the modules enrolled in that paper as part of their Year 13 school year. Our department saw that this Schools Partnership scheme was an excellent way of raising our profile in schools; enabling a group of senior students from a non-traditional catchment area to experience MIT campus life.

A number of local high schools now teach these Dip ICT L5 modules (or alternatively IN500 and IN600) as an option in their senior school curriculum. Further expansion is however likely to be crimped by student demand to study NCEA credit generating subjects. Exploring the possibility of offering existing modules, or their credit producing equivalents, to enhance the profile of NACCQ qualifications within secondary schools deserves consideration.

2. NACCQ MODULES AND THE NCEA FRAMEWORK

It may initially seem odd that school students at level 2 or 3 on the NCEA framework could be allowed to achieve credits for a level 5 qualification. Yet the MIT experience suggests that most senior school students, especially those with computing experience (many had done ICDL previously) found the level of difficulty appropriate. An additional attraction of offering level 5 modules in secondary schools is that their students would be that much more advanced on the NACCQ qualification staircase and therefore more likely to continue on it at

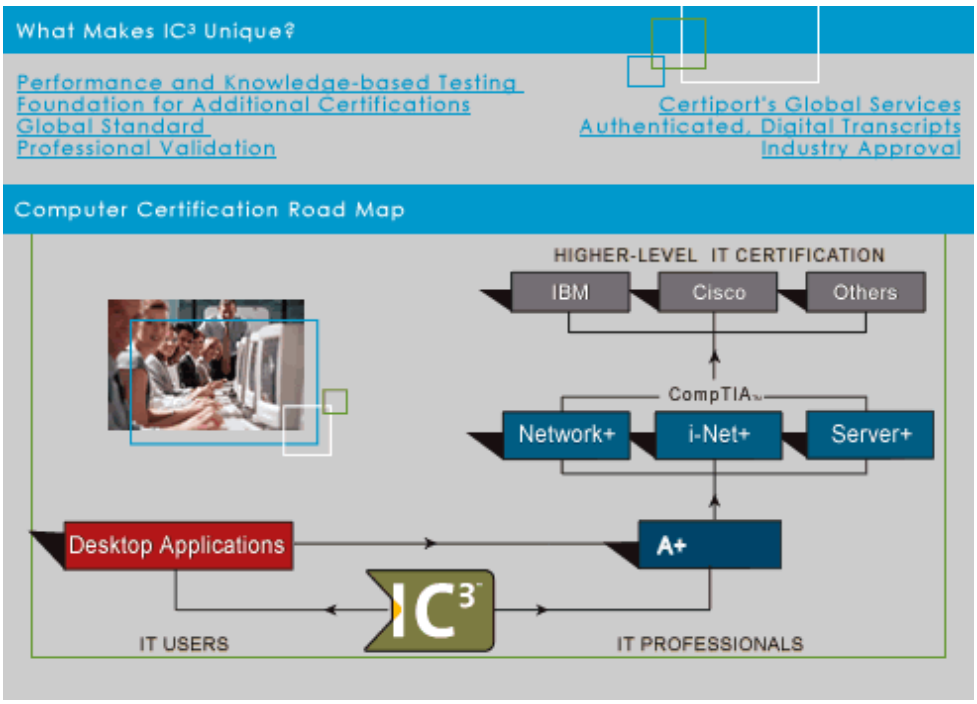

Figure 1: Computer Certification Road Map

the tertiary level. Granted, there may be considerable bureaucratic obstacles to NACCQ modules being on the NCEA framework given the present climate. However, if NCEA could be persuaded at some stage to offer some degree of equivalency between credit levels e.g. a 7 credit module at level 5 equals nn level 3 credits) this concept may yet prove to be feasible. In the meantime the existing CIC, or its equivalents at the local level, can be offered in a repackaged format, assessed as unit standards. The question is: Should there be more effort in promoting these NACCQ qualifications to schools if they, perhaps more so than some higher profile proprietary qualifications, meet student needs and importantly encourage further study with existing NACCQ providers?

3. PROPRIETARY CREDIT-GENERATING QUALIFICATIONS

Qualifications such as A+, ICDL and the like have filled a vacuum in the secondary school sector. In addition, many tertiary providers offer these courses to give a particular flavour to their NACCQ qualifications. Past conference papers have outlined the potential benefits of further aligning our flexible module structure with the most popular industry offerings. This initiative could be complemented by NACCQ using its past experience at writing unit standards to align or generate sufficient lower level units of learning suitable for secondary schools. None of these initiatives are without cost; but they merely reflect a trend that alternative providers have decided to pursue at the secondary school level. As recently as March 2004 Microsoft Office Specialist Certification attained NZQA status and was granted credit inclusion by NCEA for levels 2 (12 credits) and 3 (23 credits). This was the result of a two year pilot programme trialled in schools in conjunction with a PTE. So clearly the way is open for qualification owning entities to seek alignment for their qualifications on the NCEA framework. This would appear to be especially true for providers who seek participation in government sponsored projects. Corporate providers obviously are willing to commit significant resources to get accreditation at this level so that they can capture a wider potential market for those who wish to ascend a computing qualification staircase. But notice whose staircase it is. See Figure 1: Computer Certification Road Map

If our programmes do not have sufficient profile despite having good commonality with proprietary qualifications then students will likely be funnelled in

a certain direction. So perhaps the most important step on the staircase is indeed the first step.

4. CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT

A key factor behind much of current CA work has been the growth of computing courses offered by private training establishments. PTEs obviously seek further pathways for their graduates - many of their lower level graduates wish to come onto the NACCQ staircase. It has been MIT's experience that not a great number of credits can be given for students graduating from say, a Level 5 National Diploma in Computing to go into a DipICT L6. There is obviously a mismatch between our Level 5 qualification and various nominal Level 5 diplomas e.g. communication skills being an obvious omission from many a provider's idea of what a Level 5 computing qualification should contain. Unfortunately these qualifications confuse in many people's minds what is required for a professional career in the IT industry. As well as promting pathways for PTE graduates, our CA process at MIT last year enabled us to produce a list of computing unit standards that schools could teach as suggested prerequisites for entry into our local CIC programme.

On the national level, last year's work by the SIG has provided valuable information for NACCQ institutions when confronted with cross credit applications from PTE graduates. Some of our providers can then make custom enrolments into DipICT L5 to allow for missing modules to be attempted while more advanced modules are covered. Further alignment work will be needed as new unit standards are introduced and as we produce more modules on our framework.

5. A CASE FOR MARKETING NACCQ QUALIFICATIONS

NACCQ is acknowledged as the sole national ICT advisory body recognised by NZQA and it has successfully produced a staircase of nationally recognised high quality ICT programmes. But its programmes are hardly household names. This might not be relevant were it not for the fact that other providers are now aggressively marketing alternative education pathways into the computing industry. Proprietary qualifications no doubt have their place, but they should not be allowed to completely fill the vacuum created by an absence of computing achievement standards at the senior secondary school level for example. There is possibly a role for our organisation to promote some form of packaged qualification (interchangeable with unit standards and thus able to generate NCEA credits) as a genuine alternative that would potentially gain the cachet of the better known qualifications in this sector. Better still would be to have NACCQ modules, at the appropriate level, recognised on the NCEA framework. At the very least the commonality of our NACCQ modules with certain alternatives should be trumpeted. Promotion of NACCQ's considerable strengths would also lend weight to our consultations with relevant decision makers.

It is also becoming more important to distinguish our qualifications from some other essentially ersatz offerings. There is a real potential for the whole industry to be hurt as computing qualifications generally fall out of favour due to disappointing student experiences with courses and providers.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has briefly outlined the potential benefits of having a ground floor NACCQ offering available to secondary school students as a viable alternative to other qualifications. At the same time there is probably much to be gained from continuing to align our qualifications with those of other providers. Probably all the ways to attract students to start onto our staircase or at least transfer onto it haven't been exhausted, so further discussion at this conference could be helpful. There is also the question as to what is feasible given our priorities, available resources and current education policy realities. However, the landscape can alter rapidly, enabling new initiatives to proceed and not others. Ideally in weighing up alternative strategies NACCQ will continue to influence as well as adapt to its changing environment.

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