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Breaking new ground: New Zealand Certificates of Steiner Education

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The New Zealand Certificates of Steiner Education (CSE) are secondary qualifications at levels 1, 2 and 3, recognized by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. They give access to tertiary education in New Zealand and beyond. The impulse for new qualifications grew from a wish to have important aspects of the taught Steiner curriculum recognized and valorized, that these aspects be credit bearing toward tertiary study, an option not offered by existing qualifications. The certificates were developed over an 18-month period and were implemented by the (then) four New Zealand Steiner schools with high school classes. The CSE are based on a suite of learning outcomes which give teachers a substantial degree of assessment autonomy, allowing them to tailor assessment modalities to the student or class being taught. Since 2012, the qualifications have been offered overseas and are now used as a pathway to university by Steiner schools in a growing number of countries. This article draws on the experiences of one of the developers of the qualification and two teachers in schools using the certificate in the UK, and outlines some of the challenges faced when breaking new ground in the advancement of Waldorf education internationally.

KEYWORDS

assessment, Steiner Waldorf, NZCSE, SEDT, New Zealand

Background

There has long been a tension in the upper classes of Steiner Waldorf schools between the delivery of a full 'Steiner' curriculum and the requirements for state qualifications (see, among others, [Vries, 2014](#); [Hoffmann and Götz, 2016](#)). Specific elements of a Steiner education, such as practica (including farm experience, surveying, work experience, and community work), eurythmy,¹ class plays and the Class 12

¹ Eurythmy is a form of movement initiated by Rudolf Steiner. It is performed to both the spoken word as well as music. It is a curriculum subject in Steiner schools, is practised as a stage art and has therapeutic applications.

project² have often not been able to be credit bearing for state qualifications. Because of this, these subjects have tended to either loose priority in the minds of students ('Does this count toward the exams?', see [Hoffmann and Götz, 2016](#)), been timetabled out in favor of subjects which are formally assessed, or resulted in students completing additional work which they receive no formal credit for. Moreover, exam pressures in the final school year have trickled down and affected lower classes as well ([Rawson, 2012](#)).

This chapter looks at how the experience of Steiner secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand led several of them to work with this challenge, leading to the creation of the *New Zealand Certificates of Steiner Education* (NZCSE, or CSE), state-recognized qualifications in secondary education, accepted for entry into all universities in New Zealand and increasingly offered overseas ([New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2023](#)).

The chapter falls into three main sections. Firstly, we give some New Zealand context – educationally, socially, and regarding Steiner education. The second section looks at the history of the certificates, outlining how a small group of schools chose to disengage from the state qualification system and then to engage intensively with it in order to create a new set of nationally and internationally accepted qualifications. In the third and final section we hear of the experiences of students and teachers from two schools in the UK which have taken up the certificates. To conclude, we look at future prospects and challenges which lie ahead.

The New Zealand context

New Zealand is a small country in the southern hemisphere. With around 5 million inhabitants, its population is similar to Switzerland, Ireland, Singapore and Costa Rica. There are some 825,000 students of school age, with approximately 70,000 completing their schooling every year ([Education Counts, 2021](#)). The founding social contract of the country, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the Treaty of Waitangi, 1840) intended to establish principles of partnership, active protection and redress between Māori and the colonizing British of the time ([Orange, 2012](#)), acknowledging very early on in the colonial history of the country the existence and equal status of different ways of understanding and being in the world ([Anderson et al., 2015](#)). This openness to diversity extends into the area of education. As well as state schools, around 12% of all students attend what are known as state-integrated schools ([Ministry of Education, 2021](#)). These are schools with 'special character', established under the *Private Schools Conditional Integration Act* of 1975 ([New Zealand Government, 1975](#)). Special character schools have a strong underlying ethos or philosophy. The large majority are Catholic, but they also include schools of other Christian denominations, as well as Muslim, Jewish, Montessori and Steiner schools. They are 'integrated' into the state system and receive the same level of funding as state schools but, importantly, their ethos is protected by an agreed 'statement of special character' which guarantees that their

identifying characteristics will be respected by the Crown. They can additionally ask for 'attendance dues' to help cover running costs or additional staff.

Nine of the ten Steiner schools in New Zealand are integrated into the state system including four of the five high schools. As a small but influential body of schools, the Steiner schools of New Zealand have sought to engage positively with state authorities to promote, represent and advocate for the healthy development of Steiner education in contemporary, diverse contexts. This has included responding to pressures on the Steiner curriculum caused by mandatory standardized testing (primary, currently not being applied) and preparation for external exams (secondary).

At the same time as these pressures were being felt in New Zealand, colleagues in Europe were facing similar issues and looking to create what was known as the European Waldorf Diploma ([Hardorp, 2011](#)). This was worked on intensively for several years without reaching a format in which it could be adopted by schools.

History of the certificates of Steiner education

From the mid-90s, Taikura and Raphael House Steiner Schools (in Hastings and Lower Hutt, respectively) decided not to offer state examinations or qualifications in their high schools, but to teach a curriculum which better encompassed their Waldorf educational values. Students who wanted to continue their studies at university level applied for discretionary entry with a portfolio of their work from school and were admitted to university on a case-by-case basis. Discretionary entry was also a common pathway for overseas students to enter New Zealand universities and the two Steiner schools were able to use this pathway successfully.

However, in 2008, funding to New Zealand universities was cut by the government of the time, which in turn led to universities offering fewer places to students and the entry requirements rising. With fewer places on offer, priority was given to those with state qualifications rather than those seeking entry through the discretionary pathway. Steiner schools became concerned that entry through this pathway was becoming more difficult and that their students would likely also need state qualifications in the future to study at university. The schools believed that preparing students for state qualifications would have a negative effect on the teaching of a broad and widely accepted Steiner curriculum ([Rawson and Richter, 2000](#); [Boland and Rawson, 2024](#)). This became the catalyst for the development and design of a set of nationally recognized Steiner secondary qualifications. Additionally, the schools wanted the full breadth of overall achievement and competence of their students to be officially recognized and validated, and to do it in a way which reflected the special character of a Steiner education more accurately.

To do this, a working group was formed by the Executive of the then Federation of Rudolf Steiner Schools in New Zealand to take up a new project to develop a state-recognized Steiner high school qualification. Funds for the project came from New Zealand Steiner schools. The group initially comprised Karen Brice-Geard (chair, and principal of Raphael House Rudolf Steiner School), Mark McGavock (associate principal, Taikura Rudolf Steiner School) and

² The Class 12 project is the capstone achievement of a Steiner education. It typically takes the form of a comprehensive, self-directed, and independent study or creative work (see [Dovzhenko et al., 2020](#) and [Stehlik, 2019](#), among others).

Donna Skoropada [former Taikura teacher and quality assurer with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)].

from Rudolf Steiner schools with a Level 3 CSE in the same way as they would holders of the state qualification, the NCEA.

Designing of CSE

The first step in designing what has now become the *New Zealand Certificates of Steiner Education* was to embark on a consultation process with schools, parents, teachers, students, and alumni to better gain an understanding of what each of the (then) four Steiner high schools taught, what their curricula covered, and what kind of assessments each was using. Through this process of consultation, it became apparent that three qualifications needed to be developed, one for each for Classes 10, 11 and 12 (ages 16, 17 and 18), and that each qualification would need to be flexible and broad enough for each school to be able to implement them without requiring major change to much of their existing curriculum.

With the decision to design three qualifications, at levels 1, 2 and 3 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (aimed at Classes 10, 11 and 12), came the early decision that developing Learning Outcomes (LOs) which arise out of the subject content for the different classes, supported by assessment criteria, would best suit the needs of the qualifications. Learning outcomes were chosen because of the flexibility that they offer. Assessing by learning outcomes places the student at the center rather than a curriculum or body of content which is taught (Hipkins and Cameron, 2018). The goal (outcome) is pre-set, but how that goal is attained and by what path is up to the teacher. They allow teachers to adapt their teaching methods and content to meet the needs of individual students and changing circumstances. They put the focus onto the student's progress and achievement rather than external assessments. Additionally, they provide students with clear expectations so they can track their own progress, which in turn can enhance motivation and self-directed learning. As Geoff Masters states, "one of the best ways to build students' confidence as learners is to help them to see the progress that they are making over extended periods of time" Masters (2017).

Over a period of 18 months, the three draft qualifications were developed with learning outcomes and assessment criteria for each level and each subject. Quality assurance and school coordinators' documents were written along with numerous articles on the qualifications to inform schools, teachers and students as well as the wider Steiner community. Consultation continued at all levels to refine the learning outcomes and numerous meetings were had with NZQA, the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and Universities New Zealand—Te Pōkai Tara.

In September 2010, applications were lodged with NZQA for three separate qualifications. Three months later, formal approval was given with confirmation that the certificates would be listed on the New Zealand Qualification Framework (NZQF) as recognized, quality-assured secondary school qualifications. They remain one of just two secondary qualifications on the NZQF, the other one being the main state qualification, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

The working group also applied to Universities New Zealand—Te Pōkai Tara for *ad eundem statum* (admission at an equivalent level) which was granted in March 2012. This meant all eight New Zealand universities would (be required to) accept graduates

What they are and how they work

The certificates are assessed by means of a growing set of learning outcomes (LOs). The creation and revision of these LOs is made by the New Zealand-based Qualifications Committee which meets twice a year and an independent body – its members all have long experience of Steiner education. The Qualifications Committee responds to requests from schools to revise LOs or create new ones for specific purposes or subjects.

When the NZCSE is implemented in a high school, it brings with it a quality management system which ensures transparency for all high school assessments and requires an assessment and moderation plan for classes 10, 11 and 12. Teachers are required to internally moderate a selection of their students' work on an annual basis. These moderation processes are an essential and necessary part of the life of a high school and help develop teachers' awareness of teaching and learning as well as good assessment practices. In addition to internal moderation, 30% of assessments are externally moderated at level 1 and level 2, and 100% of level 3 assessments are moderated when a school begins to offer it for the first time.

This detailed and rigorous moderation system ensures the robustness of assessment results and international consistency. Where the curriculum is based on developing personal or inner qualities or is more reflective in intent, a school may offer other forms of attestation in addition to the teachers' assessment. These processes help parents, students and schools work collaboratively together for the best interest of the students.

International development of the CSE

In 2012, the Federation was contacted by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education (ECSWE) who had been developing a European Waldorf Diploma (EWD) for the previous 8 years. They had read an article about the development and the approval of the CSE in New Zealand and invited Karen Brice-Geard and Mark McGavock attend the Easter Teachers' Conference in Kassel, Germany in 2013 to give a presentation and talk about the qualifications. Teachers from the United Kingdom were at the conference which led to a trip to the UK, to discuss the possibility of the qualifications being offered there as well. While attending the UK teachers' conference that year, the EWD working group of ECSWE decided to put aside their work toward a European Waldorf Diploma and instead work toward the implementation of the CSE. A significant reason for this was that, by using the Lisbon Recognition Convention (Council of Europe, 1997), students achieving a CSE Level 3 endorsed with university entrance (UE), can apply and gain entry to universities in signatory countries beyond New Zealand.

At the same time, two schools in the UK (St. Michael's in West London and the South Devon School) declared that they wanted to start implementing the CSE after their summer break. Mark and Karen visited these schools to train the teachers and get the schools ready to start. Shortly after this, the first request was received from

a German school. Since then, the CSE has been taken up by more schools in the UK, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Australia.

Moving from the Federation to the Steiner Education Development Trust (SEDT)

As interest in the CSE grew, it became clear that the New Zealand Federation was not resourced to oversee, manage, and develop an international secondary school qualification, and that a not-for-profit, charitable organization would need to be established to take on this important task. Several individuals were approached based in New Zealand with backgrounds in business, finance and Steiner education, leading to the Steiner Education Development Trust (SEDT) being established in September 2014 (Steiner Education Development Trust [SEDT], 2023).

SEDT has a board of independent directors who have a long association with Steiner education and are ultimately responsible for its governance and operation. It employs a General Manager as well as country managers in the UK, Germany and Austria. The independent Qualifications Committee, comprising experienced Steiner high school teachers, ensures moderation quality assurance and oversees the development of additional LOs as needed. Outside New Zealand, this awarding process involves a Credit Recognition and Transfer process, to ensure parity and consistency with NZQA requirements.

There are currently 22 schools offering the CSE: 15 in Europe, two in Australia and five in New Zealand, with interest and requests for information and visits from other schools in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America. As the CSE develops and grows over time, it is hoped that it will become further recognized and valued worldwide as a specifically Steiner qualification on a par with other internationally recognized secondary school qualifications such as the International Baccalaureate and Cambridge International A Levels.

Implementing CSE in schools: two case studies

There follow two brief case studies from schools in the UK which implement CSE. They give insider viewpoints of how it is to use CSE qualifications, both as a teacher and as a student.

St Michael Steiner School, West London. Amanda Bell

In the summer of 2012, while London prepared for the Olympics, the St Michael Steiner School moved from its original site on the top floor of a state primary school in Wandsworth, Southwest London, to a 200-year-old vicarage set in three acres of wood and parkland two miles south of Heathrow Airport. The physical transition and consequent clear-out of what had built up over the first 11 years of the school's life facilitated the mental shift that was necessary as we prepared to open our first ever high school class.

Our preparation included attending the International Refresher Course for Steiner upper school teachers in Kassel, Germany, which, serendipitously, was focusing on Class 9 that year. We recognized the rising 15-year-old's need for a curriculum based around practical skills and experiential work, in striking contrast to what most of them would have been getting in the first year of their GCSE³ courses offered by most UK schools. Practical work had been a central aspect of our curriculum from the beginning, so we had skilled, experienced staff, and our new grounds offered the opportunity for interesting and challenging projects that would give the students the experience of contributing something valuable to the community, rather than just focusing on their own ambitions. We felt well prepared to provide what our students needed. The issue we faced was assessment or, more precisely, qualifications. Much as we would have liked to educate our students without the intrusion of formal assessments, it was important for the long-term survival of our nascent high school that they could get into British universities.

We had discussed options with the students concerned and their parents during the planning stage. Having investigated the impact of offering GCSEs and A-levels with teachers at other British Steiner schools, we felt that the gap between what we thought was right for the students and what (and how) we would have to teach for these exams was too great. The parents and students of that first Class 9 were committed to Steiner education; as a pioneer class, they were used to a degree of uncertainty about the future and had already thought through the consequences of not taking a mainstream route to further or higher education. This flexibility of the parent body was a gift that freed our decision-making, which, consequently, was able to remain idealistic in the early stages. The pragmatic questions came later from parents with children in the lower school approaching secondary school age,⁴ and at Open Days from prospective parents who had not been party to the initial planning process. The school has parents who have come toward the school to avoid rigorous testing regimes in state education as well as parents drawn toward Steiner education itself. When parents are faced with the prospect of their own children leaving school without widely recognized qualifications, ideals begin to clash with pragmatism; even committed parents can become conventional. There can be a security in doing what everyone else is doing, and stepping away from that can suddenly seem reckless when applied to your own child. It became clear that, if we started offering GCSEs and A-levels, parents' and students' expectations would prevent us from ever giving them up. It was not something we could use as a stopgap.

³ General Certificate of State Education, the UK's standard school qualification taken at 16 years old.

⁴ The transition from primary to secondary education in the UK is at the end of year 6, which is Class 5 in Steiner schools, when the children are 11 years old. Before we had a high school, two or three children usually left after Class 5 because their parents felt their children would be disadvantaged if they transferred to mainstream at 14. Since the high school opened, this has happened less and less. In 2020, no-one left Class 5 to go state schools. It is not clear whether this is because we are offering the CSE, or because we have a high school, but since our students have begun graduating from Class 12 with their CSE and going to the universities of their choice without any difficulty, parents and students no longer question its validity. Every year, we hold a meeting for parents of middle school children about the CSE, but increasingly we find they already know about it and have no concerns. It has become part of what we do.

In 2012 we decided not to offer any formal qualifications, instead investigating pathways for our students to university without them. There were some avenues of possibility. The Acorn School in Nailsworth, Gloucestershire, had been following such a path for several years. The problems we foresaw were when we looked at options for students who did not want to go to university. Whereas schools in more rural areas can develop relationships with local schools and colleges, this is not feasible in London. It appeared that we would have to advocate for our students case by case, with no guarantee of success.⁵ We considered just offering GCSEs in English and Math, which seemed to be prerequisite everywhere, although for places on competitive courses it looked as if having two GCSEs could be worse than none. Having none indicates that there has been a clear decision to take a different path; having just two can look like under-achievement.

Fortunately for us, we went to the Kassel conference again in 2013 and met Karen Brice-Geard and Mark McGavock. They were promoting what was then called the Steiner School Certificates and it became clear that it would be possible for us to let go of the notion of offering GCSEs. We breathed out and everything happened very quickly after that: Mark and Karen visited St Michael's, explained in detail how the certificates work, gave us some training and we signed up in mid-July, ready to begin with Level 1 assessments in Class 10 from September 2013.

Looking back, adopting CSE in the school was a leap of faith, taken mostly because it felt right and came at exactly the right time. Many voices in the British Steiner movement were raised in alarm at what we (along with the South Devon and Norwich Steiner schools) were doing. We swam against the tide for quite a while and the only support we received came from New Zealand and Germany. However, this meant that we formed closer links with people in the movement outside the UK as well as with colleagues at South Devon and Norwich. These relationships have continued to broaden and enrich our work; we are now joined by colleagues in Cardiff.

What appealed to us most about CSE was its flexibility. Assessment criteria are set by the moderators in New Zealand and generally ask students to demonstrate skills or understanding: for example, an ability to describe, explain, evaluate or analyze; to demonstrate practical and artistic skills: creativity, presentation, leadership, planning and problem-solving. These skills can be assessed through almost any content. Teachers write the assessment tasks themselves, based on what they want to teach and what they want the students to get out of the lessons. For example, *'Examine human interactions with the environment and natural resources'* asks students to *'describe/explain/discuss the social/environmental impact of using and/or developing a natural resource, including differing perspectives of people.'* This has been applied to pre-history, looking at the impact of the development of agriculture on ancient societies, as well as to current ecological issues such as water supply and food production in Global Issues and Geography lesson blocks. Assessment tasks and a sample of marking are

moderated, first internally by a colleague and then externally in New Zealand. This is a lot of work for teachers, but it requires that we take an interest in our colleagues' work, which means that we are aware of what is being taught and expected of students in other lessons.

Assessment always has an impact on teaching; it is impossible, as a teacher, not to have in the back of your mind the assessment criteria and the need to ensure that the students have the necessary skills and understanding by the time they reach the deadline. That said, we do our best not to allow the assessment to dominate. It requires some skill and experience—as well as intuition and good fortune—to write an assessment task that will really reflect what the students learn before the block has started. Often, we fall short simply because what arises in lessons and reveals itself as the real heart of the block is largely unpredictable. In the worst cases, the assessment feels tacked-on and irrelevant or we find ourselves shoe-horning the lesson into the assessment task; this has happened to all of us at one time or another.

The success of CSE, both in terms of assessing learning and of not driving our teaching, depends on how well the assessment tasks are designed and implemented. It takes time to learn how to write a good assessment task; some teachers are better at it than others, so effective mentoring is necessary. One of the best outcomes for us of working with CSE has been the development of the 'critical friend' relationship between colleagues. This works against the common experience of secondary education being thought of and taught in siloes (Patnoudes, 2018) with little cross-pollination between subject areas. It has had positive repercussions in all aspects of our work and models a collaborative and supportive, rather than competitive, way of working for the students. A good assessment task will be clearly written, so that the students know what they have to do and uncertainty doesn't become a source of anxiety; it will work with the tasks being set by other teachers, so that a balanced range of skills is assessed across the curriculum; it will allow for different modes of assessment to enable all students to achieve; it won't try to assess everything that has been taught but will sample the students' knowledge and give them scope to explore or extend topics independently.

Through this last attribute, we can avoid shoe-horning by setting assessment tasks that provide an opportunity for students to follow their own interests. For example, when the above assessment task was applied to a pre-history block, one of the students' research projects—into the effects of the advent of agriculture on Paleolithic societies—led her to investigate and write about the effects on society of intensive food production today. In doing so, she came to an understanding of the relationship between population growth and food production across thousands of years. An aspect of the history curriculum resonated with what she had studied in ecology and geography, and she began to experience the connections that exist between all subjects. Another student was curious about a connection between painted caves and cathedrals and investigated possible spiritual purposes of cave painting. Others went in different directions and, when they shared their research, they brought together a range of different aspects of the same subject, each of which was of particular interest to an individual student. The different threads they had followed wove for the whole class a fabric

⁵ Three students from the first cohort decided to leave after Level 2 (Class 11) to take specialized courses at local colleges. The same thing happened the following year. However, the raising of the school-leaving age to 18 in 2015 meant that these students now had a right to places at local schools and colleges to complete their education, and the lack of GCSEs was no longer an obstacle.

richer than anything the teacher could possibly have produced or imagined alone.

Although in Humanities and Arts, the CSE assessment criteria can be applied to any content in this way, in Sciences and Math, our teachers have found the topics much more prescriptive. Our Math teacher writes:

The courses that I teach are journeys of exploration and discovery in which putting mathematics into an historical context and tracing the threads of an unfolding tapestry of patterns, connections and relationships allows pupils to develop an intuitive grasp of processes and principles and so discover concepts, which in turn leads to intellectual understanding. The aim is to engage, inspire and foster understanding of mathematics. As Hardy says, “A mathematician, like a painter or poet, is a maker of patterns. If his patterns are more permanent than theirs, it is because they are made with ideas” (Hardy, 1941/1992).

My initial experience of working with the CSE in mathematics was one of liberation; the complications, constraints and compromises imposed on delivering a Waldorf Upper School mathematics program by simultaneously preparing pupils for public examinations had been removed. I quickly discovered that this was not quite the case. Although assessment criteria are broad, that breadth is often contradicted by the proscriptive nature of the accompanying Guidance for Teachers, which in essence is a curriculum based upon applying principles to solving problems.

Revision and renewal of assessment criteria by the teachers who are using them is an integral part of the structure of CSE and our own teachers have done some of that work, mainly to address differences between what we teach in certain classes and what is done in Steiner schools in New Zealand. For example, we teach Projective Geometry in Class 11 as well as Class 12, and Embryology in Class 11, whereas both are taught in Class 12 in New Zealand, so there were no available assessments for those subjects at Level 2. The wider issues described above remain: the nature of Steiner math and science teaching is fundamentally different from that of mainstream education, and the fact that this is not reflected in the available assessment criteria means that the special quality of our teaching in these subjects is undermined by the assessments. On the other hand, the content demanded by universities in these subjects is also much more prescriptive than in the humanities, and if the purpose of the assessments is to get the students into universities, they are doing their job.

For most of our students, CSE Level 1 is their first experience of having their work formally measured against someone else's and, generally, they look forward to it with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. The results usually confirm what the students already know, from feedback and reports, about their abilities, but not always. We can only assess the product of their effort, not their personal progress or the effort itself. For those who work hard to achieve at all, this stands in stark contrast to the

encouraging and supportive feedback they have had in the Lower School. Others discover that they can ‘do well’ without much effort, which is a drawback. Students’ work can be assessed in many ways, including through oral presentations, independent research, projects, portfolios, class discussions and interviews as well as through written work, so if assessment tasks are well planned, this can level the playing field to a great extent. However, it is very easy to think (conventionally) of written work as the default method of assessment, to adopt other methods for students who do not write well and allow the ‘high flyers’ to use writing (their favorite method) all the time so that they always achieve the highest grades. However, for their own development, these high-achieving students also need to experience challenge sometimes, even at the cost of an Excellence grade. Teachers and students need to understand the value of this so that the grade does not become the focus of their education. Conversely, those who struggle most of the time do not need an additional challenge and can be guided to the best ways in which to show what they know and can do. All students thrive from knowing that their teachers ‘see’ them and are designing assessment tasks with them in mind, so CSE does not have the negative aspects of objectivity—the ‘facelessness’ of conventional exams—and can more effectively reflect the character and style of their (Steiner) education.

One of our students who graduated in 2018 and is now studying Liberal Arts with Languages at King’s College, University of London writes about her experience at university:

When you get results and feedback for essays it’s all on a digital platform and tends to be very abstract. People are often afraid to speak up if they have questions regarding their grade as we don’t really get to know the marker personally. In Steiner schools, students and teachers interact and I feel this gave me the confidence at King’s to organize meetings to discuss my essays so that I could improve where needed.

In our school, all subjects are taught in blocks, so the familiar ‘main lesson’ experience, with a mainly oral exposition of content, recall and discussion continues. By Class 12, most students want challenging tasks and serious critique of their work. Continuous assessment allows us to provide ongoing feedback and for students to work with that throughout the year to improve their work. We can design tasks that stretch or support them in the right way, so that education becomes a dialogue between students and teachers, driven by the students’ interests, questions and desire to learn. This seems to prepare them well for university.

Seminars are very similar to how we did main lessons, through discussion in small groups. I was surprised how rarely people spoke up when asked to share their thoughts on a subject. Seminar leaders seem to have a hard time getting students to discuss or speak at all, even in groups as small as five students. I was never afraid to discuss a concept with another student, as we did this often in school, so I felt very comfortable. The intimacy of the group and actually being able to interact with the seminar

leader makes me feel like I am back in St. Michael's and tends to be where I feel I am learning the most.

The overall structure of CSE and the assessment criteria generally provide for the development of many skills that are appreciated by our students when they go to university:

I am very grateful that we were taught how to reference and create bibliographies properly for the CSE as I saw the stress this caused friends on my course who had never had to do it before. Universities don't teach you how to reference but it is a requirement, and they expect you to work it out yourself. In Liberal Arts you have to use different referencing styles depending on which department you are writing an essay for. I was relieved that I knew how to do this already.

We have deadlines all through the year, similar to CSE. This way of being assessed was easy for me to transition into as I was used to it and knew how to stay focused and work hard at different times of the year. My course-mates who had only ever had end-of-year exams in school really struggled with completing mid-term assignments.

I took my first ever proper exam this year in Olympia in a room filled with 600 students. I was very, very nervous but, although never having sat an exam before, I can only really say that it made me work harder over the study period. It was fine. I have handwritten essays before and all I had to do was revise the subject and practice under timed conditions.

We have been working with CSE for 7 years now, and we have graduated students every year for the past 5 years. We prepared letters of introduction to CSE which accompanied each student's application, and they applied through the usual route,⁶ to five universities of their choice. All of them were offered a place by at least two of their chosen five, and most received four or five offers. In some cases, predictably where they applied for science subjects, the universities asked for more information about the curriculum the students had followed, and two turned our students down on the basis that the CSE was not an acceptable qualification. We could have fought this using the Lisbon Recognition Convention, however, both students received offers from other universities which they wanted to take up. So, to date, CSE has 100% success rate in achieving what we wanted from it, in terms of getting our students into university. Its success in not interfering with our teaching is perhaps less than that but, apart from in the areas already mentioned, this is mainly down to the ability of teachers to implement it well. This ability, in turn, depends on good training, collegiality, ongoing mentoring, the development of good working relationships with students and, ultimately, good teaching. The fact that its success depends on these things

means that they must develop in our schools, and that can only be a good thing.

The Acorn School, Nailsworth, Gloucestershire. Christine Cook

The Acorn School was founded in 1991 by Graeme and Sarah Whiting to provide its students with a forward-thinking, holistic education enabling them to realize their potential in a supportive environment. Children start at the age of 6 and can go through to the age of 18. The class sizes are intentionally small, with a maximum of 16 students in the lower school. The teacher/student ratio in the high school means that each child is seen and supported by the teaching team. The school prides itself on offering an exciting and fulfilling educational experience that, through the broad curriculum and excellent teaching, sees our young people become confident and conscientious achievers.

A central principle of the school is that assessment is student focused and originally assessments were created and moderated internally. All graduates from The Acorn School over the last 30 years have had 100% entry acceptance rate to university courses they applied to without taking national exams, instead presenting their work and portfolios.

In 2019, the school decided that a recognized qualification would make the transition easier for students to take their next steps beyond school either into further education or employment and for those who wished to change career direction at a later stage in their lives. So the team at The Acorn School began to explore which qualifications, if any, they would potentially use. Having worked with NZCSE for 6 years in another school setting, I joined The Acorn School tasked with implementing it in the school.

NZCSE allows the Acorn's broad and creative curriculum to continue, as well as offering a progressive and rigorous model of achievement and standards. It offers our students an internationally recognized qualification in their last three school years of school. The ongoing assessment throughout the year is far preferable to a series of high-pressure exams in the summer term. The implementation of the NZCSE brought an increased level of professionalism and transparency around teaching, learning and assessment into the school that was at the same time both challenging and liberating. With the NZCSE, the school can provide a fully creative learning journey, tailored to the students' interests, and allows for a curriculum to be delivered that can remain flexible, relevant, and current while giving students the opportunity to achieve a high level of accreditation.

The NZCSE was implemented in our school in September 2021. In October 2022, the NZCSE was officially added to the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) online application form allowing our students the same University access process as other recognized Level 3 qualifications nationally and internationally.⁷ In Autumn 2022, our first Class 12 students each received an average of four or five university offers (out

⁶ Through UCAS (The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) which centralizes and manages the application process for British universities.

⁷ Such as the German Abitur, US high school diploma, International Baccalaureate or Scottish Highers.

of five), including to Russell Group universities⁸, and plan to study a wide range of subjects from human biology, social anthropology, zoology, English, business and management, fashion styling, and art. In July 2023, the first Class 12 cohort (18 years old) graduated having successfully completed their final year Level 3 NZCSE Certificates with the highest possibly rating – each received a Level Three Certificate, achieved with Distinction with University Entrance.

As a school which values education and a student-centered approach to learning, we recognized that this could remain intact using the NZCSE assessment framework instead of an exam system that proscribes a curriculum. Subject specialist teachers can thus deliver a rich, broad, flexible, and challenging educational experience giving each student the chance to develop themselves, their interests, and skills in many subject areas. They were also able to build transferable skills and personal confidence to take with them onto the next steps in their lives and fulfill their career aspirations with an excellent university entrance qualification.

During our school's recent Ofsted⁹ inspection in May 2023, inspectors rated The Acorn School as “Outstanding” in all five categories: quality of education, sixth-form provision, behavior and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. The inspectors noted in their report that our students’ “attitudes to learning are very strong and they are highly motivated” to achieve high standards for themselves at whatever level they are able and that “staff used assessment precisely” by monitoring and facilitating that progress through the teaching and learning cycle in a very clear and supportive way. They also highlighted that “The curriculum in the sixth form is deep and broad. It is academically demanding, and students have very strong subject and cross-curricular knowledge.” Ofsted found that our “school's curriculum is very ambitious for all pupils” and the assessment chosen allowed the students to be challenged and thrive.

The NZCSE supports the school's strong educational curriculum aims and ensures the future pathways that our talented student body wishes to explore. It is always a fine balance to strike, as inspiring education is not about the ultimate qualification. The balance we strike with the NZCSE is that we can continually create a curriculum that is contemporary, original and that involves, develops, and challenges the students' interests leading them toward continuous and greater progress, rather than a pass or fail. It does take more time and makes demands of the teachers' creative input, but it is worth those demands when you are able to retain creative freedom to teach and inspire young people so they can become competent achievers, who are able to fulfill their place in the world with confidence.

Review of progress so far

From these reports from St Michael's and The Acorn School, it is clear that many of the original hopes of the New Zealand

Federation have been able to be achieved with the implementation of the certificates.

The first of these was to provide qualifications which would allow teachers to teach the content they wanted from the Steiner curriculum while at the same time being widely recognized, so offering pathways into tertiary study. A parallel hope to this was to legitimate and valorize the Steiner high school curriculum by gaining official recognition that it allows students achieve at an equal standard to students using other curricula. Furthermore, the certificates aspired to address any lack of consistency in assessment through quality assurance mechanisms which also appears to be the case in practice.

That said, there are many challenges which exist and need to be worked through. In many countries, Steiner high schools have gained recognition and built their reputation for academic excellence by their students excelling in state qualifications. In practice, this often means that preparation for these state exams begins in earlier years which can then mean that the Steiner curriculum becomes diluted to some extent, which is something which the CSE specifically aims to counter. However, familiarity with and respect for well-established qualifications is a significant consideration when implementing the CSE. Similarly, SEDT has found that qualification authorities vary considerably in their openness to alternative approaches to assessment. This varies between countries, and even within them.¹⁰

Concerns have also been voiced by teachers that the quality management system which is necessary when implementing the NZCSE requires teachers to change much of their (often conventional) assessment methods, and that undertaking a significant amount of internal moderation is something which they do not wish to take on. This has been expressed most strongly by those who have taught in the schools for a number of years or who are nearing retirement.

The hope that the certificates could lead to greater creativity in assessment methods and reduced dependence on summative assessment is something which is still being worked on. Initially, when designing assessment, teachers often draw on tried-and-tested approaches – tests, workbooks. As the CSE becomes more deeply embedded in a school, more imaginative approaches begin to emerge, such as cross curricular work, projects, portfolios, and performances. Learning outcomes which facilitate entry into non-academic pathways (the trades for instance) are still being designed. One of the most promising, non-intrusive assessment methods which is used increasingly is ‘naturally occurring evidence’ – evidence that you have met learning outcomes which can be attested and proven without formal assessment events being set up. Work is continually underway to increase the breadth and efficacy of these means of assessment so they do not interfere with student learning but can operate alongside it seamlessly.

¹⁰ In the federated model in Australia, each of the seven states and territories is free to set its own regulatory requirements for school registration for years 11 and 12. For example, the New South Wales Education Standards Authority strictly restricts the patterns of study a school needs to follow in order to deliver Higher School Certificate subjects, while the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority has successfully negotiated with SEDT and Samford Valley and Noosa Steiner schools, enabling all Steiner schools in Queensland who offer years 10, 11, and 12 to use the NZSCE as an equivalent to the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE).

⁸ The Russell Group is an organization of 24 universities in the UK that have a shared focus on research and academic achievement. It includes the original six red brick universities and seven more that joined since 2007.

⁹ The Office for Standards in Education.

In the words of two students following their Abitur year in a German Steiner school (Hoffmann and Götz, 2016).

How are you supposed to get a feel for the complex world if exam pressures prevent you from discussing it? . . . When, through [state exams], non-Waldorf content is pushed into the upper school in order in the end to make individuals comparable, everything which has been carefully guarded becomes secondary and freedom is completely undermined. We are taught this freedom for 10 years and then miss the chance to experience how we could deal with it as individuals. . .

It would be nice if, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of our schools, a campaign for "Courage for Waldorf" saw the light of day, so that our children do not have to go through the. . . Abitur or other state examinations at Waldorf schools one day.

Ensuring on-going development for Rudolf Steiner high schools

If Steiner education is going to be recognized as a credible, robust, and effective alternative education pathway for students, right through to tertiary study, a new impulse is needed. The single-most significant point of difference for Steiner high schools is that students receive a rich, nourishing and developmentally based curriculum program throughout their schooling. However, this can be compromised when Waldorf education becomes a patchwork pathway when blended with state qualifications. Steiner schools in many countries are pushed or compelled by outside forces to become like other schools rather than the schools they want to be. The Certificates of Steiner Education offer an important point of resistance to these outside pressures.

Looking ahead, the NZCSE provides not only a long-awaited direct pathway into university and higher education, but also the concomitant opportunity to facilitate a complete Steiner curriculum from Class 1 through to Class 12 uninfluenced by state qualification pressures. This is hugely significant for the Steiner School movement, but especially for the thousands of students who

will benefit from a cohesive and seamless educational journey to their choice of university, or other course of study.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

KB-G: Writing – original draft. AB: Writing – original draft. CC: Writing – original draft. NB: Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

KB-G is the educational director of the Steiner Educational Development Trust which administers the New Zealand Certificates of Steiner Education.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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