

**Communication between the New
Zealand Qualifications Authority and
secondary schools – effective or not?**

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Abstract

The introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement required the positions of School Relationship Manager to be created by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and Principal's Nominee to be nominated by secondary schools. These designated personnel are responsible for communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools. There is an assumption that there is effective communication between people in these roles. This thesis attempts to investigate the validity of this assumption.

The aim of this research was to identify, from the perspective of School Relationship Managers, Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department, the factors that contribute to effective communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools. This qualitative research involved a focus group interview with five School Relationship Managers, one-to-one interviews with three Principal's Nominees from three schools and three focus group interviews with a total of nine Heads of Department from three schools.

The findings highlighted that regular face-to-face communication, honesty, trust and collaboration are key ingredients for effective communication. The conclusion drawn from this study is that a symbiotic association exists between relationships and effective communication because they sustain and feed off each other. Appropriate modes of communication are necessary and straightforward language is important. The main recommendation to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools is to continue to create new relationships and nurture existing ones so that effective communication is perpetuated. Another recommendation is to use appropriate methods and clear language to communicate so that the emphasis of the message is conveyed correctly and without ambiguity.

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Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES AND ABBREVIATIONS.....	iv
CHAPTER ONE – BACKGROUND, RATIONALE AND ORGANISATION	
<i>Background.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Personal experience</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Importance of communication between the New Zealand Qualifications</i>	
<i>Authority and secondary schools</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Rationale.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Research aims and questions.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Thesis organisation.....</i>	<i>8</i>
CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW	
<i>Secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Assessment in NCEA</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Relationships and communication</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Leadership and communication.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Barriers to communication</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Defensiveness and organisational learning</i>	<i>23</i>
CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY	
<i>Epistemology</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>Qualitative methodology</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Methods.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Validity and reliability</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Ethics</i>	<i>35</i>
CHAPTER FOUR - FINDINGS	
<i>School relationship manager perspective on communication with</i>	
<i>secondary schools.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Principal’s Nominee perspective on communication with the</i>	
<i>New Zealand Qualifications Authority.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>Heads of Department perspective on communication with Principal’s</i>	
<i>Nominees and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>Strategies used to overcome challenges to effective communication.....</i>	<i>53</i>
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	
<i>Factors that contribute to effective communication.....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>Challenges to effective communication</i>	<i>64</i>
CHAPTER SIX – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
<i>Factors that strengthen communication practice</i>	<i>70</i>
<i>Overcoming challenges to engage in effective communication</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Recommendations to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority</i>	<i>73</i>
<i>Recommendations to secondary schools</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>Recommendations for future research.....</i>	<i>77</i>
References	78
Appendices.....	81

Lists of tables and abbreviations

Table

Table 4.1	<i>Strategies used to overcome challenges to effective communication</i>	<i>54</i>
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List of Abbreviations

MoE	Ministry of Education
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
NCEA	National Certificate of Educational Achievement
SRM	School Relationship Manager
PN	Principal's Nominee
HOD	Head of Department

Chapter One

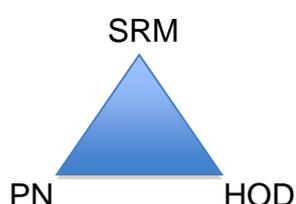
Background

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is a crown entity that was established under part 20 of the *Education Act* (1989). The role of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is to ensure that all national qualifications are credible by quality assuring them through a vigorous process of moderation. NZQA also ensures that secondary school assessment is fair and valid and that programmes offered by non-university educational establishments are accredited. The biggest national qualification in New Zealand is the secondary qualification, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement was introduced in 2002 because the previous secondary qualification did not recognise a “wider range of competencies and skills” (NZQA, 2012b). The National Certificate of Educational Achievement gives clear and more accurate evidence of achievement because it assesses a student’s skill. Different skills are assessed in internal and external assessments. Internal assessments are conducted in school and teachers make judgments against a set of criteria. External assessments are conducted in the form of examinations written at the end of years 11 to 13. To ensure the robust management of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority appointed School Relationship Managers (SRM) to manage every secondary school. School Relationship Managers belong to the Secondary Quality and Liaison business unit within the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The role of the School Relationship Manager is to conduct audits in schools to ensure internal assessment is valid, fair and robust and external assessment requirements are met. In addition to the compliance role, School Relationship Managers liaise with a nominated member of the school staff on other issues regarding administration of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. A School Relationship Manager is responsible for the transmission of information from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to the school and vice versa.

A Principal's Nominee (PN) is a member of the school staff who liaises with the School Relationship Manager and is responsible for administration of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. In other words, the Principal's Nominee is the point of contact at the school. The Principal's Nominee is also responsible for disseminating information from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to Heads of Departments (HOD) at the school. A Head of Department in a secondary school is responsible for, in addition to teaching, managing the teaching programs and assessment in a subject or group of smaller subjects.

The creation of the Principal's Nominee and School Relationship Manager roles to manage NCEA has formed various relationships. Between schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority there exists an external relationship, which is a relationship between the School Relationship Manager and the Principal's Nominee and between the School Relationship Manager and Heads of Department (HOD). Within each school there are internal relationships between the Principal's Nominee and Heads of Department.



Personal experience

In my past roles as a teacher and subsequently Assistant Head of Science and Head of Chemistry, I have experienced communication shortcomings with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. When I arrived in New Zealand as an immigrant teacher, the biggest challenge was not the subject content, but the decoding of the terms that were associated with the National Certificate of Educational Achievement and the terms used by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The terms used were unique to the New Zealand context and I was not accustomed to them. Furthermore, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website was difficult to navigate and a glossary of the terms and phrases used was not available. Consequently, I constantly asked

questions, only eventually becoming familiar with the terminology used. It was frustrating and made me feel inefficient and incompetent especially in front of a classroom full of students. Subsequently, as Assistant Head of Science and Head of Chemistry, the frustration shifted from seeking meaning to terminology used in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement to attempting interpretation of messages from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The moderation reports that I received from the National Assessment Moderator were ambiguous, inconsistent and too lengthy. The message seemed to be lost amongst the words used. As a leader of a subject, I was facing questions from teachers in my department as well as the senior management team as to the meaning of certain phrases and messages in the moderation reports. Moderators were conspicuous by their anonymity and moderation Best Practice Workshops were rare. Although the Principal's Nominee was doing her best to assist, the satisfaction of face-to-face communication with the moderator was desired, but to no avail. The lack of communication with the National Assessment Moderator was discouraging and as a Head of Department I felt a lack of support. These personal experiences motivated me to apply for the position of National Assessment Moderator so that I could use my experiences to assist teachers and Heads of Department.

In my present role as the National Assessment Moderator for Chemistry employed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, I see communication from a very different point of view. From my present perspective, there have been changes to improve the communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools. Moderation reports have become shorter and have more clarity by focusing on specific errors made by teachers in making assessment judgments. However, the issues raised in moderation are still communicated to schools very sensitively and this approach has the potential to convey ambiguous messages as the language and terminology of the Achievement Standards and New Zealand Curriculum is used. The number of Best Practice Workshops has increased and moderator newsletters are published every term. Attendance at the Best Practice Workshops is not compulsory and consequently, schools that need to

attend do not. The moderator newsletters provide information about and advertise current events in moderation, like Best Practice Workshops. As a National Assessment Moderator, I have published clarification documents that unpack the requirements of the Achievement Standards but to my dismay I have discovered that many teachers have not read them or even know of their existence. It appears that the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is doing its best to communicate effectively with schools and is aware of the importance and benefits of effective communication with secondary schools.

Importance of communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools

The introduction of *Tomorrow's Schools* in 1989 gave schools autonomy over their budgets and employment decisions but also made them accountable for educational opportunities and student achievement (Wylie, 2009). The change to a standards based secondary qualification system that involved external moderation compliance combined with the responsibility of student achievement implied that schools needed to communicate with the quality assurance body, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is important because it affects how teachers interpret the intentions and requirements of Achievement Standards and how schools manage national assessment. The interpretation of the intention of Achievement Standards and their requirements is vital to student achievement. Ineffective communication between schools and NZQA will result in incorrect interpretations and unsatisfactory management of national assessment and inevitably have a negative impact on student achievement. Ineffective communication will also influence overall school performance and this will influence the academic reputation of schools. A poor academic reputation will negatively affect student rolls and the prospect of international student enrolment. The Ministry of Education funds a school based on its student roll and the number of teaching positions is also calculated on student roll (Ministry of Education, 2012). A decrease in student rolls can negatively influence school funding and the extreme possibility of teacher redundancy could be experienced. The international student market is a financial breadbasket for many New Zealand

secondary schools as it supplements the Ministry of Education funding and contributes to better facilities in the school which leads to greater educational opportunities for students. However, international students choose schools that have a reputation for academic excellence. To be in the market for international students, it is extremely important for schools to have an exceptional record of student achievement. Effective communication with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is important for secondary schools as it contributes to positive student achievement and this influences the number of international students who arrive. Effective communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority also serves to enhance the reputation of a New Zealand school qualification as credible and internationally recognisable.

To maintain the credibility of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, agreement rates for internal assessments between National Assessment Moderators and teachers should be at a particular acceptable percentage. Agreement rates are calculated by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and measure the extent to which moderators and teachers agree on whether samples of student work meet the minimum criteria to be awarded credit (NZQA, 2012a). This desired percentage, determined by a group of academic experts, is the yardstick by which success and credibility of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement internal assessment is measured. For this percentage to be reached and maintained, it is important for the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to communicate effectively with schools. This involves communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees and between National Assessment Moderators and Heads of Department.

Rationale for this study

There is an assumption that there is effective communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees, between Heads of Department and Principal's Nominees and between School Relationship Managers and Heads of Department so that the relationship between NZQA and secondary schools is effective. In my previous role as Head of Chemistry,

colleagues perceived and talked of tension between teachers and NZQA. One cause of this tension could probably be a lack of effective communication between NZQA and secondary schools. This could cause frustration for teachers, Principal's Nominees and School Relationship Managers from NZQA. Poor communication could result in problems for students and parents further down the line. In my present role, employed by NZQA as a National Assessment Moderator for the assessment of internal Chemistry Achievement Standards, I have encountered issues possibly related to poor communication from another perspective. The communication issue appears to be two-way. The communication issues can be related to a lack of clarity of the NCEA Achievement Standards, requirements for university entrance, literacy and numeracy requirements, credit attainment and course endorsement at the various levels (Merit and Excellence) of achievement.

Although the standards are designed, written and owned by the Ministry of Education (MoE), the requirements and interpretations of Achievement Standards are determined and communicated to secondary schools by NZQA. Nusche, Laveault, MacBeath and Santiago (2012) comment that NZQA is involved in the process of student assessment, through moderation of internal assessment, managing external assessment and the evaluation processes at secondary schools. Clear, effective communication is necessary for NZQA to carry out its core responsibilities and for schools to fulfil their legislative obligations. However, it appears that communication is not as effective as it should be because there seem to be discrepancies in interpretations and requirements of standards. There also seem to be misunderstandings around the requirements of managing external assessment.

What contributes to effective communication between secondary schools and NZQA is not known. Identifying the factors that contribute to effective communication is important because it will provide explicit direction to schools regarding administration and management of NCEA. My thesis '*Communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools – effective or not?*' has attempted to identify these factors

by focusing on one aspect of communication between NZQA and secondary schools. This was done by focussing on the School Relationship Manager, Principal's Nominee and Head of Department perspectives because they are the focal points of communication between secondary schools and NZQA. Their perspectives will give some insight and understanding into the challenges they face in relation to effective communication and how they overcome them. This study hopefully will assist to identify and recommend strategies to improve communication between secondary schools and NZQA and ensure that schools and NZQA meet legislative requirements.

Research aims

The overall objective of this study was to identify, from multiple perspectives, factors that contribute to and challenges that affect effective communication between NZQA and secondary schools.

The three research aims proposed for this study were:

1. To identify factors that contribute to effective communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).
2. To investigate the challenges to effective communication practices.
3. To analyse what strategies are used to overcome challenges associated with effective communication practices.

Research questions

The three questions that guided this study were:

1. What factors contribute to effective communication practices between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)?
2. What challenges do schools and NZQA experience in relation to effective communication?

3. What strategies are used to try and overcome these challenges?

Thesis organisation

This thesis is organised into six chapters.

Chapter one provides a background to this research and describes the rationale for this study. It also outlines the research aims and questions that guided this study.

Chapter two critically examines wider literature to establish the importance of effective communication in official relationships by comparing and associating the New Zealand school context with a range of studies in other fields. Issues related to relationships and communication are also examined. New Zealand and international literature have also been examined to seek an explanation of the relationship between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and secondary schools and expectations of communication concerned with assessment practices related to the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).

Chapter three is the methodology underpinning this study that discusses and justifies the methodological approach employed. This chapter also describes the two methods, one-to-one interviews and focus group interviews, for collecting data and how the data gathered were subsequently analysed. The chapter finally describes how validity and ethical principles were managed.

Chapter four provides a summary of the findings of the one-to-one interviews and focus group interviews. The chapter is organised into three sections: School Relationship Manager perspective of communication, Principal's Nominee perspective of communication and Heads of Department perspective of communication. Finally, the strategies employed by each group to overcome challenges to effective communication are presented.

Chapter five discusses the significant findings that emerged from analysis of the data. The significant findings are discussed and structured according to the themes categorised under the headings of the research questions.

Chapter six focuses on drawing conclusions from the answers to the research questions and then goes on to make recommendations to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and secondary schools. This chapter is divided into two sections: conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter Two

Literature review

In this chapter the literature is reviewed to seek an explanation of the relationship between New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and secondary schools and expectations of communication concerned with assessment practices related to the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). A wider literature is reviewed to establish the importance of effective communication in official relationships, by comparing and associating the New Zealand school context with a range of studies in other fields. Issues related to relationships and communication are examined. Finally, the literature is examined to establish barriers to effective communication.

Secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was established under the auspices of the *Education Act* (1989). NZQA was tasked with the responsibility of providing leadership in assessment and qualifications. According to the *Education Act* (1989, Section 246A) one of the functions of NZQA is:

to ensure there are mechanisms in place to guarantee that relevant schools and tertiary education providers that provide programmes or training schemes that, in the view of the Authority, require national consistency have assessment and moderation procedures that are fair, equitable, and consistent, and comply with the appropriate standards.

(Government of New Zealand, 1989).

The implementation of a standards based qualification, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2002, changed assessment practice at secondary schools. NCEA is comprised of internally and externally assessed Achievement Standards and Unit Standards. Achievement Standards are New Zealand Curriculum based while Unit Standards are competency based. The implementation of NCEA came with drawbacks.

These drawbacks, according to Hall (2005), were issues related to manageability of NCEA and included “teachers’ workloads, communication between schools and NZQA and the cost to schools from the implementation” (p.236).

NCEA consists of Achievement and Unit Standards that are assessed internally by teachers at school and Achievement Standards that are assessed externally in national examinations at the end of the year. Grades awarded to students by teachers for internally assessed standards are moderated by New Zealand Qualifications Authority National Assessment Moderators. Randomly selected student work is sent to NZQA where National Assessment Moderators verify that teacher judgments are made against the standard. However, according to Rawlins (2010) and other researchers, “there is frequently tensions between summative and formative assessment practices” (p.3). To manage these tensions, NZQA established the positions of Principal’s Nominees in secondary schools and School Relationship Managers employed by NZQA. The Secondary Education Group was formed in 2001 to oversee the introduction of NCEA and one of the business units that made up the Secondary Education Group was School Liaison, Monitoring and Reporting. School Relationship Managers were part of this group (State Services Commission, 2005). School Relationship Managers are employed to quality assure the administration of NCEA at secondary schools and to build a working relationship with the school. A Principal’s Nominee is any member of the school staff who is nominated by the Principal to, in addition to other responsibilities, “maintain and monitor quality assurance practices within the school to ensure the validity and credibility of assessment for qualifications” (NZQA, 2012a). The School Relationship Manager and Principal’s Nominee work in conjunction with each other and engage in a relationship that links NZQA and the school.

In a research study of communication practices in business relationships, Mason and Leek (2012) advise that “effective communication practices underpin success factors such as trust, co-operation and commitment” (p.319). Similarly, in the relationship between secondary schools and NZQA,

effective communication is required to underpin trust that management of assessment is conducted fairly. What is expected is a favourable working relationship between the points of contact: the School Relationship Managers and the Principal's Nominees, and an adherence to rules and regulations regarding assessment practice (NZQA, 2013).

To ensure good quality assessment practice and ensure validity of assessment at secondary schools, there is a need for communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees. In a marketing research study of the relationships between buyers and sellers, Hung and Lin (2013) found that communicating "shared values and understanding" (p.1223) leads to "increased buyer satisfaction and increased confidence in the seller's reliability and integrity" (p.1223). This is also relevant in the communication between the School Relationship Manager and the Principal's Nominee. When understanding of requirements and shared values of good assessment practice are communicated, then it is assumed that the School Relationship Manager will be satisfied and confident in the integrity of the Principal's Nominee to successfully manage assessment practice. Consequently, communication is important in judgements made about the reliability of good assessment practice at the school.

According to the *Education Act* (1989 section 252), NZQA has the power to grant secondary schools the consent to assess Achievement and Unit Standards, conduct assessment practice and award NCEA. However, this is a possible risk because incorrect assessor judgments for internally assessed Unit and Achievement Standards and incorrect assessment management could undermine the credibility of the qualification and NZQA must be confident that schools are capable of meeting their responsibilities. According to Hung and Lin (2013) in their research study on communication and marketing, "effective communication can develop a common understanding of the message from both participants' perspectives and is essential in order to reduce perceived risk and uncertainty, shape expectations, resolve any misunderstandings, explain the options and build both participants' knowledge bases" (p.1223). Similarly, in the context of this research, effective

communication between NZQA and secondary schools is important to reduce risk and any misunderstandings of expectations of both parties. Effective communication between NZQA and secondary schools is also important in that it can build knowledge and capability in both organisations. Secondary schools, through the Principal's Nominee, need to communicate with NZQA via the School Relationship Manager for advice regarding queries around assessment and moderation (NZQA, 2013). This communication not only helps to build the school's knowledge base but also provides experience for School Relationship Managers and helps in broadening their knowledge base. For successful management of assessment practice, secondary schools should share the same comprehension of messages from NZQA. As in the marketing example, effective communication may also ensure a common understanding of messages regarding assessment of NCEA between NZQA and secondary schools.

Assessment in NCEA

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was implemented in 2002 as a national qualification because "in the past students performance in a wider range of competencies and skills was often not taken into account" (NZQA, 2012b). The introduction of the NCEA has raised issues of "validity, reliability and manageability" of assessment (Philips, 2007, p. 197). Assessment of Achievement and Unit Standards in NCEA is monitored, moderated and managed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) to ensure that it is "valued as credible and robust both nationally and internationally" (NZQA, 2012c).

Although the Achievement Standards are designed, written and owned by the Ministry of Education (MoE), the requirements and interpretations of Achievement Standards are determined and communicated to secondary schools by NZQA. Nusche, Laveault, MacBeath and Santiago (2012) comment that NZQA is involved in the process of student assessment through moderation of internal assessment, managing external assessment and the evaluation processes at secondary schools. Therefore, clear and effective

communication is necessary for NZQA to carry out its core responsibilities and for schools to fulfil their legislative obligations. Effective communication is also essential to the outcomes of assessment of NCEA. However, there is no research in this area, therefore we must look to other professions for guidance.

In a medical research study on physician-patient communication, Stewart (1995) found that “patient health outcomes can be improved with good physician-patient communication” (p.1429). Similarly, assessment outcomes for secondary schools can be improved with effective School Relationship Manager-Principal’s Nominee communication. Stewart (1995) suggests that physicians should ask “a wide range of questions” (p.1429). These questions should include “understanding of the problem, expectations of therapy and perceptions of how the problem affects function” (Stewart, 1995, p. 1429). In the context of communication between a School Relationship Manager and a Principal’s Nominee, questions of understanding, expectations and perceptions around assessment of NCEA should also be asked.

In her research, Stewart (1995) makes many suggestions in physician-patient communication regarding health outcomes that are also relevant to School Relationship Manager-Principal’s Nominee communication around assessment of NCEA. For instance, Stewart (1995) suggests that, “patients should be encouraged to ask questions and given clear verbal information and that they should share in decision making when a plan for management is formulated” (p.1429). Likewise, Principal’s Nominees should be able to ask questions regarding anything that is likely to cause misunderstanding and be given precise information in terms of assessment of NCEA. Also, similar to patient participation in deciding a plan of management for their health, Principal’s Nominees should be able to contribute to any strategy that is designed to evaluate their management of NCEA. Contributions and asking questions is only possible when there is effective communication between the School Relationship Manager and Principal’s Nominee. Effective communication can also serve to build rapport and create relationships (Hung and Lin, 2013).

Relationships and communication

While no literature exists on the specific focus of my study, the importance of relationships in effective communication is established in other contexts.

Effective communication plays a pivotal role in establishing and sustaining relationships (Hung & Lin, 2013). In their study on communication and marketing, Hung and Lin (2013) report that “communication is the most effective relationship-building strategies across all elements of a relationship” (p.1225). Although this research was conducted in a business environment, the finding is relevant in the context of the relationship that develops between a School Relationship Manager and a Principal’s Nominee since they are the official points of contact between the organisations that they represent. Hung and Lin (2013) further advise that “relationships are essentially formed by interpersonal communication” (p.1225). This is not only true in the case of the relationship between the School Relationship Manager and Principal’s Nominee but also between the Principal’s Nominee and Heads of Departments in a school. Communication is central in their roles and it ensures formation of relationships and these relationships are critical if desired outcomes, such as maintaining a valid quality assurance practice so that qualifications gained by students are credible and are to be achieved.

Mason and Leek (2012), in a study on communication practices in a business context, emphasise that “effective communication contributes to developing and maintaining business-to-business relationships” (p.319). Effective communication, according to the authors, establishes values such as “trust, co-operation and commitment” (p.319) and it is these values that underpin relationships. The findings by Mason and Leek (2012) can be applied to the relationship between School Relationship Managers and Principal’s Nominees. Since the personnel in the role of School Relationship Manager and Principal’s Nominee remain fairly constant, it is important that a good relationship be developed and maintained. Mason and Leek (2012) also suggest that past and present communication practices impact on business relationships. This suggestion is relevant to the relationship between the

School Relationship Manager and the Principal's Nominee, since this relationship has the characteristics of a business relationship in that there is interaction involving exchange of information, a compliance aspect and accountability. Therefore, developing and maintaining a good relationship requires effective communication. Mason and Leek (2012) advise that "effective communication practices underpin success factors such as trust, co-operation and commitment" (p.319). Although this advice is aimed at business-to-business relationships, it can be applied to the relationship between a School Relationship Manager and Principal's Nominee as this relationship is also built on the principles of "trust, co-operation and commitment" (Mason & Leek, 2012, p. 319). The values of trust, co-operation and commitment expressed by Mason and Leek (2012) is supported by Mahoney (2013), when he says organisations that allow for dialogue with their clients can find it easier to build relationships with them and have an "open" system.

Through communication, all organisations have relationships with their stakeholders. Stakeholders are people who are linked to the organisation, either as a supporter or a critic. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has a relationship with secondary schools because it is responsible for the quality assurance of a school's assessment practice (Government of New Zealand, 1989). According to the *Education Act* (1989 section 246A), NZQA has a mandate "to oversee the setting of standards for qualifications in relevant schools". The *Education Act* (1989 section 246A) goes on to say that NZQA may "consult any persons, authorities, and bodies as it considers appropriate for the purposes of performing any of its functions" (Government of New Zealand, 1989) Hence, NZQA communicates with secondary schools and this makes secondary schools stakeholders. The relationships that exist between organisations and stakeholders can be "positive, negative or neutral" (Mahoney, 2013, p. 95). Schools may have different relationships, either positive or negative or a mixture, with NZQA. The state of a school's relationship with NZQA is linked to various variables like support for professional learning and support regarding National Certificate of Educational Achievement moderation (Wylie, 2012). These relationships

depend on how communication occurs between secondary schools and NZQA.

According to Nusche, Laveault, Macbeath and Santiago (2012) the New Zealand school education system is based on confidence in schools and school leaders and collaboration rather than imposition. As a result of this trust and collaboration, there is an assumed agreement of trust and collaboration from schools and a perceived good relationship between schools and NZQA (Nusche, Laveault, MacBeath, & Santiago, 2012). Collegial, transparent relationships are important as they could ensure success for both NZQA and secondary schools. Nusche et al. (2012) recommend that for schools to “keep pace with the most recent developments in student assessment, teaching and learning, communication of information is essential” (p.60). However, Nusche et al (2012) also identify that NZQA “is limited in terms of their capacity to communicate best practices” (p.60) and this limitation may prevent collegial, transparent relationships. According to Baker (2000)(Baker, 2000) “building good working relationships is the main cause of success” (p.xiv). Therefore, to be successful in attaining their goals both secondary schools and NZQA should forge a relationship that is amiable, effective and professional. For this to occur, both the message and the medium, whether that is face-to-face, email, telephonic or written, are vital.

Mason and Leek (2012) also suggest that in business relationships “personal contact may increase positive perceptions of the relationship atmosphere” (p.322). This can be applied to the relationship between School Relationship Managers and Principal’s Nominees where regular face-to-face communication can serve to create a feeling of a constructive and personal relationship. Mason and Leek (2012) report that communication with personal contact creates trust and a favourable relationship atmosphere. Similarly, regular personal contact like face-to-face communication between the School Relationship Manager and the Principal’s Nominee can create a positive atmosphere and build a relationship based on trust because face-to-face communication is a rich medium as it creates natural discussion, highlights

hidden cues and allows a personal focus. Relationships built on trust lend themselves to two-way communication and agreement.

In a medical research study on communication between a patient and health care professional on the process of prescribing and medicine-taking, Stevenson, Cox, Britten and Dunbar (2004) advise that in concordant relationships, patients and the health care professional “participate as partners to reach an agreement on when, how and why to use medicines, drawing on the expertise of the health care professional as well as the experiences, beliefs and wishes of the patient” (p.236). According to Stevenson et al. (2004) concordance results from two-way communication that is based on sharing experiences and concerns. Concordance is also relevant to the relationship between the School Relationship Manager and Principal’s Nominee. Any discrepancy, on the part of the school, in managing national assessment would need a concordant arrangement between the School Relationship Manager and Principal’s Nominee for a solution. This will require competency and proficiency on the part of the School Relationship Manager and the Principal’s Nominees’ knowledge of the school’s situation and its philosophy and culture. The relationship between patient and health care professional can also be compared to the relationship between the Principal’s Nominee and Heads of Departments at secondary schools. A solution to any mis-judgement in assessment matters requires joint intervention by the Principal’s Nominee and Head of Department. A joint venture is based on a relationship that is underpinned by concordant communication (Stevenson, Cox, Britten, & Dundar, 2004). In a joint venture, the Head of Department provides the subject expertise while the Principal’s Nominee represents school policy and leadership.

Leadership and communication

In an educational setting the concepts ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ are often used in tandem but they are distinctively different. According to Yukl (as cited in Bush, 2003) the concept of leadership is based on choice and the context in which it is considered. Leadership can have a variety of meanings

but in the context of this study, it is defined as “the process of influencing others to achieve task-related goals” (Elkin, Jackson, & Inkson, 2008, p. 197) and management is defined as the maintenance of the process that achieves the goals. For this influence to occur, a leader must initiate strong channels of communication (Robinson, 2006). This is reinforced by Quirke (2002) when he says that “effective leaders have to communicate in a way that inspires others and builds a sense of commitment” and “successful leaders understand the importance of good communication” (p.27).

In a research study on how effective communication of a school leader affects school climate in the United Arab Emirates, Halawah (2005) suggests that “creating a collaborative environment and open communication is a critical factor for successful school improvement” (p.341). Halawah (2005) refers to open communication between a school principal and his staff. Similarly, open communication between a School Relationship Manager and a Principal’s Nominee can be a critical factor for a successful improvement of assessment practice in a school. According to Halawah (2005) “better school climate was expected in schools where effective communication between school principals and his/her teachers exists” (p.341). Since the School Relationship Manager provides leadership of assessment practice to Principal’s Nominees who, in turn, lead assessment practice at schools, this finding can be applied to the context of effective communication between a School Relationship Manager and a Principal’s Nominee. Effective communication between these two roles has the potential to ensure sound conditions for valid and credible assessment practice in secondary schools. In addition to effective communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal’s Nominees, effective internal communication in secondary schools also has the potential to ensure successful assessment practice.

In a 2011 public relations research study on internal communication between management and employees by Ruck and Welch, the authors suggest that “effective internal communication is a prerequisite for organisational success” (p.294). This suggestion is relevant to the context of this study because the effectiveness of communication of NZQA requirements from the Principal’s

Nominee to the Heads of Departments within a school impacts on how successfully requirements around assessment practice are implemented and the success of schools in managing national assessment. Ruck and Welch, (2011) also advise that “communication within organisations is linked to higher levels of performance and service” (p.294). This can be applied to a school where valid and credible assessment of the national qualification is linked to the communication between a Principal’s Nominee and Heads of Departments. This indicates that effective communication can support valid assessment practice. Conversely, any barrier to effective internal communication of NZQA requirements can impede credible assessment practice.

Barriers to communication

Barriers to effective communication often occur “when people with diverse perspectives and opinions must collaborate to achieve the organisation’s common mission” (Sloan, 2011, p. 3). A barrier to effective communication is generally something that prevents reception and transmission of messages and notices (Chase, O’ Rourke, Smith, Sutton, Timperley & Wallace, 2003). On an individual scale, anything that causes interference with a person’s understanding is an impediment to effective communication. According to Chase et al. (2003) barriers to communication “can occur at any stage of the process and can be physical, semantic or psychological” (p.23). The barriers that can directly affect effective communication are problems with equipment related to communication like “telephone lines, computers, other electronic devices” (Chase et al., 2003) and semantic obstacles like not being familiar with language. According to Chase et al. (2003) “ignorance of grammar is often the biggest barrier” (p.25) faced by people. There is also a general assumption that “language transfers thoughts and feelings from person to person; speakers and writers insert thoughts and feelings into words; words contain thoughts and feelings; listeners and readers extract thoughts and feelings from the words” (Sligo, 1994, p. 46). These assumptions lead us to believe that if the words are correct then “from a senders point of view communication will succeed” (Sligo, 1994, p. 46). The inference made by

Sligo (1994) is that sometimes the words used in correspondence may not necessarily communicate the correct message.

On the other hand, LeMay and Schwamberger (2007) argue that “communication is more than just words” (p.65). They add that meaning is obtained when listeners interpret what the speaker is saying. Meaning can be negatively influenced by “tone of voice and visual clues” (LeMay & Schwamberger, 2007, p. 65). Unclear, lengthy and roundabout messages contrive to create barriers to effective verbal communication. While written communication provides opportunity to consider what to say, how to say it and the audience for whom it is intended, it has its own barriers to being effective (LeMay & Schwamberger, 2007). According to LeMay and Schwamberger (2007) illogical sequence of ideas, informality, spelling errors and incorrect punctuation can create misinterpretation and misunderstanding and render the piece of written communication ineffective. However, language and grammar are not the only barriers to effective communication. Barriers to effective communication can also be physical like body language, tone and communication methods.

The use of incorrect communication methods can also be detrimental to communication of information. In their study, Mason and Leek (2012) used the media richness theory to examine how communication media can affect effective communication and task performance and found that in business communication, “the use of different media affects task performance” (p.321). They suggest that not using suitable communication mediums can be a barrier to effective communication. This is relevant to the communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal’s Nominees and between Principal’s Nominees and Heads of Departments. The use of an inappropriate communication medium can impede the transfer of important information. Mason and Leek (2012) suggest a “lean medium” (p.321) such as email or memo be used for the communication of straightforward information but they suggest a “rich medium” (p.321) like face-to-face communication for sensitive, important information. This suggestion is also relevant to School

Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees. Important information from NZQA that requires discussion or negotiation should be conveyed face-to-face. The reason for face-to-face communication is that it provides opportunity for instant feedback, has the potential to convey a number of signals, it allows for the use of regular language and permits a personal focus (Mason & Leek, 2012). Similarly, all important information for Heads of Departments should also be conveyed by the Principal's Nominee through a "rich medium" (Mason & Leek, 2012) like face-to-face while general, elementary information can be communicated through a "lean medium" (Mason & Leek, 2012) like email. Whichever medium is used, linguistic and psychological barriers to effective communication should be avoided.

Other semantic barriers like "idioms, technical jargon and tone" (Chase et al., 2003, p. 25) and psychological barriers like "culture, religion and values" (Chase et al., 2003, p. 26) can also be barriers to effective communication. Many teachers at secondary schools are overseas trained, new to New Zealand, new to teaching and may have not yet become accustomed to local expressions, figures of speech, and terms used in everyday communication and also terms used in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (PPTA, 2007). The communication around clarification of standards and requirements for managing national assessment from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to secondary schools must contain adequate detail but at the same time be free of ambiguous phrases. Ambiguity in communication is a main cause of misinterpretation and according to Papa, Daniels and Spiker (1997) "ambiguity occurs as a consequence of inappropriate or confusing use of modifiers and qualifying phrases" (p.24). Although organisations work hard to prevent ambiguous communication, messages may become unintentionally ambiguous. Papa et al. (1997) advises that "simple, concrete language is the key to reducing ambiguity" (p.24). Ambiguity can also be created by long sentences and complicated wording.

Defensiveness and organisational learning

Communication from New Zealand Qualifications Authority to secondary schools is important as it informs the Principal's Nominee about "maintaining and monitoring quality assurance practices within the school to ensure the validity and credibility of assessment for qualifications" (NZQA, 2012a). In other words, schools learn from the communication. The communication ensures that schools learn how to achieve their goals more effectively. Defensive procedures are strategies that are adopted by organisations to ensure that they are not placed in a compromising situation (Argyris, 1985). Argyris goes on to say that defensive strategies used by organisations contribute to no learning. From my experience as both a teacher and now a National Assessment Moderator, schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority often become defensive in their communication. According to Cardno (2012), this defensiveness is a barrier to effective learning. When schools become defensive and prevent learning from occurring, there could be a negative impact on their management of national assessment and general implementation of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. This defensiveness is often not realised as being an obstacle to learning and according to Argyris (as cited in Cardno, 2012) "defensiveness is not recognised as counterproductive to learning" (p.44). In New Zealand schools, defensiveness can adversely affect assessment practice and management of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement.

Management of NCEA involves two-way communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The literature reviews highlights the need for effective communication and therefore supports the research topic. I conducted this study to further investigate the effectiveness of the communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. The following chapter presents the research methodology.

Chapter three

Methodology

Introduction

This chapter explains the epistemology, methodology and research methods that underpin this study and describes the participants involved in the study. It also provides a rationale for why specific methods were selected. Data collection and data analysis are explained, as well as the steps taken to ensure validity and reliability of the study. Finally, ethical considerations are addressed.

Epistemology

All research studies are governed by how knowledge manifests itself, its attainment and how it can be conveyed. There are two epistemological assumptions of knowledge. The first of these assumptions is that knowledge is something that can be gained and that knowledge is “hard, objective and tangible” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 6). The second assumption is that knowledge is something that must be a unique encounter for an individual and that knowledge is of a “softer, more subjective, spiritual or even transcendental kind, based on experience” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 6). Depending on their epistemological position, the researcher will classify their approach to the study as either scientific or interpretive.

If researchers align themselves with the assumption that knowledge is hard, real and can be communicated physically then they will adopt a scientific approach and a positivist paradigm to their research study. Positivist researchers use detailed, step-by-step procedures to make predictions by combining “deductive logic with precise empirical observations” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 26). A scientific approach is based on following precise methods and quantification and focuses on reliability of data. Although it involves observation, the values of the researcher have no relevance for fear of manipulation of the data. This approach lends itself to quantitative research

where “consistency is valued above all else” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 29). Critics of the scientific approach accentuate that it has a “mechanistic and reductionist view of nature” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 17) and “excludes notions of choice, freedom, individuality, and moral responsibility” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 22).

In direct contrast to the scientific approach is the interpretive or humanist approach. The interpretive approach makes the assumption that knowledge is “personal, subjective and unique” (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p. 6). Researchers who align themselves with this approach espouse an anti-positivist paradigm. I have adopted this approach because the nature of my topic demands a personal account of the participants and my reporting of the findings will be constructed according to the experiences and views of the participants. According to, Cohen, Manion & Morrison, (2007), anti-positivist researchers “understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants” (p.19). This can only be accomplished when the researcher gets involved with the participants by “sharing their frame of reference” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 19). The interpretive approach involves structured investigation of significant activities of people “through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 26). One criticism of this approach is that the influence the researcher has on participants can be a significant factor in the outcome. This is echoed by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) when they say that an important factor is “the power of others to impose their own definitions of situations upon participants” (p.25). Other criticisms of the interpretive approach, highlighted by Cohen et.al (2007) are that researchers have “narrowly micro-sociological perspectives” and create “artificial boundaries around subjects” and “abandoning scientific procedures of verification” (p.26).

Qualitative methodology

The research problem that directs this study does not require “trends or explanations to be made”, rather, it “needs to be explored to obtain a deep understanding” (Creswell, 2012, p. 19). A research study that has a problem that requires exploration will tend to lean towards a qualitative approach. Research problems that imply an understanding can be gained by means of “conversation and observation in natural settings rather than through experimental manipulation under artificial conditions” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 113) lend themselves to be answered qualitatively. Also, in this study, the researcher is the “principal data collection instrument” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 123) which is a characteristic of qualitative research.

The features of the responses that are essential to answer the research questions for this study entail an interpretive paradigm. The responses of the participants were interpretations of their experiences. These experiences were unique and personal to each participant and the aim was to appreciate these experiences and attempt to comprehend them. Creswell (2002) articulates this when he says that the intention of research “is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation being studied” (p.8). The focus of the interpretive approach is “to understand the subjective world of human experience” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 21). The fundamental focus of this study was on the personal account of each participant. This meant gaining an understanding of each participant’s own experience.

An investigation into the experience of human beings will result in them communicating their version in their own distinctive way. A study of human experience, according to Denzin & Lincoln (2005) “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices” (p.3). The views, interpretations and experiences of each person are personal and subjective and the words used to describe these will vary from one individual to another. The verbal construction of a person’s experience cannot be analysed statistically but they are arranged into “larger meanings of understanding”, such as “codes, categories and themes” (Creswell, 2012, p. 19). Investigating human

experiences means looking at their interpretation of a situation and according to Creswell (2012) “a central phenomenon is the key concept, idea or process studied in qualitative research” (p.16). Also, the human experience of situations is precious and the descriptions of these precious moments are invaluable when developing conclusions. This is articulated by Denzin & Lincoln (2005) when they say, “rich descriptions of the social world are valuable” (p.12). Consequently, an approach that relies on recognition of the value of experiences and interpretations rather than experimental examination will be required to conduct an investigation into human experience of a phenomenon. “The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 10). Therefore, a qualitative approach has been chosen.

Qualitative research has a variety of perspectives, multiple data collection methods, data analysis and interpretation tools which homogenize to make it pragmatic (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998). A checklist of procedures, relating to qualitative research, provided by Creswell (2002) include: adopting a phenomenological approach; using open-ended questions in one-to-one and focus group interviews; collecting participant meanings; validating the accuracy of the findings and making interpretations of the data. These procedures, further examined in the description of methods, were adhered to in this research study to make certain that the methodology collaborates with the methods.

Methods

Qualitative research can entail the use of a pot-pourri of pragmatic tools to collect information. It is common for a qualitative research study to make use of more than one method to collect data.

Selection of schools

The first step was selecting schools to be invited to participate. From the list of all Auckland secondary schools, those with less than 500 students were eliminated because these schools will not have the required number of Heads of Departments to make up the focus group. The schools (those with more than 500 students) were arranged in an Excel spreadsheet according to their code (each school has a unique code, e.g. 034, 3004, etc., allocated by the Ministry of Education) and then sorted in ascending order (lowest code to highest). The random function in Excel was then used to make a random selection. Excel was used because it has a function to select the variables (in this case, the schools) randomly. This was done until all schools were allocated a position. The ideal was that the first three schools that responded will be chosen. However, I experienced tremendous difficulty to engage schools in this project. Schools were reluctant to participate for various reasons, the most common being workload. I was beginning to get despondent and even explored the prospect of approaching schools from beyond the Auckland border but decided against it. However, after persisting and arranging meetings with principals, three schools finally agreed to participate. Once the schools were identified, the following methods of data collection were used: one-to-one interview and focus group interviews.

One-to-one interview

The one-to-one interview was conducted with one member of each school. A total of three participants, one from each school, were interviewed. Every New Zealand secondary school has a member of staff who is a designated Principal's Nominee and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) established this position. A Principal's Nominee is any member of the school staff who is nominated by the Principal to, in addition to other responsibilities, "maintain and monitor quality assurance practices within the school to ensure the validity and credibility of assessment for qualifications"(NZQA, 2012a). One-to-one interviews were conducted with the Principal's Nominee of each of the participating schools. These interviews were structured because they

were focused “on a given set of pre-defined questions that are covered in turn” (Hinds, 2000, p. 47). However, the questions were open-ended. Prior to the interview important information such as location of the interview, the recording process and transcription and analysis was made available to the interviewee. The interviewees were “advised of the potential audience of the research, and given assurances about anonymity and confidentiality” (Hinds, 2000, p. 48). An interview schedule (Appendix 1) was used that allowed the “same series of pre-established questions” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 701), in the same sequence, to be asked. Responses were of an open nature. A digital recorder was used in the interview.

The interview was selected as a method because of the comprehensiveness of the data required. According to Hinds (2000) “use interviews when in-depth information is required” (p. 47). An interview is also used when “the subject matter is potentially sensitive” (Hinds, 2000, p. 47), and in this research study, descriptions provided by the participants has the potential to be sensitive. Although extracting information through verbal communication is not easy, Fontana & Frey (2005) state that “interviewing is one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans” (p. 697). Another reason for choosing interviews as a method to collect data is that the results are “a true and accurate picture of the respondents’ selves and lives” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 698). The dates and times of the interviews were not rigidly set as I needed to respond to the participant’s request to have interviews at their convenience. I adhered to participant’s requests because I did not want them to lose interest in the research study. Although, my questions were framed and set out logically in the interview schedule, the questions did not always follow the same sequence. As a novice researcher, I discovered that the structure and order of questions depend on how the conversation is proceeding. Although the essence and wording of the questions was the same for the different interviews, the order in which they were asked sometimes varied. This could not be helped as I allowed the participants the freedom to speak at will. Following the interview, organisation of the data began.

According to Creswell (2012) “organisation of data is critical in qualitative research because of the large amount of information gathered” (p. 238). The data obtained was first organised by research site. Transcription of each interview was done “as soon as practically possible following data collection ” (Hinds, 2000, p. 49), because , as suggested by Hinds (2000) “it will still be fresh in your mind” (p. 49). Transcription of one interview began before and continued while the next interview was being conducted, in line with the suggestion by Creswell (2012) “when you are collecting data, you may also be analysing other information previously collected, looking for major ideas” (p. 238). Immediately after concluding an interview, I transcribed it. This enabled me to remember the interview clearly and made transcription much easier. It also helped with remembering any gesture or expression that was not recorded. Once transcription was completed, the transcripts were then made available to the interviewees for verification. The transcript sent to each Principal’s Nominee after the interview was an exact recording of the interview, not a summary. Thereafter, the task of analysing the data began. I planned to pursue the technique of hand analysis because the database was relatively small and I preferred to have a hands-on interaction with the data. “Hand analysis of qualitative data means that researchers read the data, mark it by hand, and divide it into parts” (Creswell, 2012, p. 239). However, the volume of the transcripts and the length of the interviews threatened to overwhelm me and I decided to purchase and use a qualitative analysis computer program (NVivo 10) to conduct analysis of the data. This was a diversion from my original plan of conducting hand analysis but nevertheless, I still had a hands-on interaction with the data. After organising and transcribing the data, further analysis commenced with uploading the transcripts and the audio files into the program. The next step was to create nodes. Node is the term used by the program that refers to categories. Once I established the nodes, coding of each transcript began. “Coding is a process of segmenting and labeling text for descriptions and broad themes in the data” (Creswell, 2012, p. 243). Using NVivo 10 as an analysis tool gave me the advantage of having all my data in a convenient location. It also allowed movement of data and created summaries for each category. This made analysis so much easier. I considered myself very fortunate compared to

researchers who, in the past, did not have the luxury of a computer program and had to conduct analysis manually. The advantage for me was that it narrowed my data into concise and easy to access electronic files rather than making use of copious amounts of paper copies strewn with data.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were used with the Heads of Department group from each of the selected schools and School Relationship Managers from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). The initial plan was for each Heads of Department group to consist of between six to eight participants. However, circumstances did not allow for this ideal. On the days when focus group interviews were scheduled, Heads of Departments were either away due to illness, busy with other tasks or decided not to participate for personal reasons. Consequently, the Head of Department group from each school had only three members.

A Head of Department is a teacher at a school that is the manager of a particular subject area. The Heads of Department group will be invited from each of the participating schools to be part of a focus group interview. My invitation will include all Heads of Department but these focus groups will not include the science or chemistry Head of Department because they may have some link to me, in my current or previous role. A focus group interview schedule (Appendix 2) was used that allowed the “same series of pre-established questions” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 701), in the same sequence, to be asked. However, asking the questions in the same order during interviews was not always possible. The discussion and prompts that followed responses influenced the order of questions. As a novice interviewer, I initially experienced intrinsic panic but soon realised that that some of the discussions around the answers preempted the questions. However, in all focus group interviews, I asked the same questions and used the same wording.

School Relationship Managers are employed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and are responsible for managing schools regarding their implementation and the award of the National Qualification that is the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. All Wellington based School Relationship Managers were invited to participate in a focus group interview. The two Auckland based School Relationship Managers were excluded from the sample to prevent any link between the schools chosen and the School Relationship Managers to obviate any impact on responses. The initial plan was for the School Relationship Managers group to consist of six participants. The School Relationship Managers were enthusiastic about participating in this research study. However, on the day of the scheduled focus group interview, only five were available. Most of the other prospective participants were out of the office on school visits. Consequently, the School Relationship Manager focus group consisted of five members. A focus group interview schedule (Appendix 3) was used.

Focus group interviews were chosen because; according to Hinds (2000) focus groups are used to “gain information relating to how people think” and “to explain perceptions of an event idea or experience (p. 50). Focus group interviews were a logical choice for this study because “it allows groups of peers to express their perspectives”(Morgan & Krueger, p. 15). It was also used because focus groups provide a “security of being among others who share many of their feelings and experiences” (Morgan & Krueger, p. 15). Since the objective was to gain as much information as possible, focus group interviews proved ideal because they often create “a cuing phenomenon that has the potential for extracting more information than other methods” (Morgan & Krueger, p. 17). Another reason for choosing focus group interviews as a data collection method was that the aim of the research was to “learn more about the range of opinions or experiences that people have” (Morgan & Krueger, p. 17). The aim of an interpretive approach is a “desire for more understanding of the human experience” (Hinds, 2000, p. 50).

Just before I started the focus group discussion, I sketched a seating plan of the room. This assisted during transcription. After the focus group interviews

were conducted, the process of transcription commenced. As suggested by Hinds (2000) this was done as soon as possible after the interviews. I found that it was best to do transcription of each focus group interview almost immediately upon returning home because the memory of the interview was still vivid. I could remember all the facial and other physical expressions that could not be recorded. When transcribing the data, I used a different font colour to represent each participant. This proved to be very useful during analysis. A summary of the focus group interview was then made available to each participant for verification. The process of categorising, coding and analysis followed.

Validity and reliability

To ensure that this study was valid and worthwhile, it was necessary to pay careful attention to validity, reliability and triangulation. This required me to make certain that this research study precisely expresses what it describes (Cohen et al., 2007). This is an important requirement for all types of research.

The two different types of validity considered in this research study were internal and external validity. Internal validity strives to prove that the explanation of the set of data can be supported by the data (Cohen et al., 2007). To achieve this, data collected or analysis in each school was provided by a one-to-one interview with the Principal's Nominee and a focus group interview with Heads of Departments. The use of two different methods ensured that the internal validity of the findings within each school was maintained. For all three schools involved in this research, I used the same methods to collect data. This consistent use of data collection methods further enhanced the overall validity of the study.

External validity refers to "the degree to which the results can be generalised to the wider population, cases or situations" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 136). In an attempt to achieve external validity, three secondary schools were used in this research study. Using three schools meant that my research study consisted

of multiple sites, as suggested by Cohen et al. (2007) and this enhanced the possibility of decreasing the invalidity.

One of the main potential sources for invalidity in research interviews is bias. In order to avoid bias in this research study, I carefully formulated the questions for all of the data collection methods. I also made sure that the line of questioning did not stray from the aims of the study when further probing questions were asked. When the order of questions during some interviews was altered due to the nature of the discussion, I made sure that the wording; tone and emphasis of the questions remained as planned and was the same for all participants. By being consistent meant that I ensured reliability because “reliability refers to consistency” (Davidson & Tolich, 2003, p. 32) Doing this also helped to make the research study more reliable since “changes in wording, context and emphasis undermine reliability” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 150). To further increase the reliability in this study, I piloted the questions that directed the one-to-one interviews and focus group interviews in mock interviews with colleagues, who provided timely, constructive feedback (Hinds, 2000).

Cohen et al. (2007) advise using an appropriate timescale to strengthen validity. A fundamental way to ensure validity of this research study was returning the transcripts from interviews and focus groups to participants for verification or amendment before analysis began. A summary of the focus group interview was sent to each participant, not the entire transcript. The full transcript was sent to each participant in the one-to-one interview. I also made certain that the transcript of each interview was an exact account of what was said by the participants.

Another technique that I used to guarantee validity of this project was triangulation. Triangulation involves the use of “two or more methods of data collection in the study” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 141) and serves to explain human behaviour from more than one frame of reference. In this study, I used two different methods to gather data and this ensured methodological triangulation. Using two methods attempted to guarantee that my view of the

communication between secondary schools and NZQA was not a biased one. This helped to make the research study more reliable.

Ethics

An information sheet (Appendix 4) requesting the schools participation in the study was sent to each school. This information sheet detailed the aims of the study, details of the methods of data collection and advised about anonymity and confidentiality. Accompanying the information sheet was a template (Appendix 5) for returning the decision of the school to participate in the study or not.

No school that has any link to me was invited to participate. School Relationship Managers (SRM) of Auckland secondary schools were not invited to participate in the research to prevent any link between the schools chosen and the SRM to obviate any impact on responses.

There is no relationship between the participants from secondary schools and the researcher. In the event of a Head of Department (HOD) having any link to me because of my previous role as Head of Chemistry at an Auckland secondary school, they will be excluded from the sample. Although I am an employee of NZQA, I have no direct relationship with any secondary school.

Participants from NZQA are work colleagues, because in my present role I am employed by NZQA as a National Assessment Moderator for the teaching and assessment of chemistry, but not from the same business unit and region. The School Relationship Managers (SRM) and I have no direct communication or interaction.

There was no impact or particular relevance to Maori as a particular group. In the event that there was a participant who was Maori, I consulted with the Office of the Deputy Chief Executive Maori at NZQA for information on protocol to deal with Maori participation.

A consent form (Appendix 6) was handed to each participating HOD and SRM at the beginning of the focus group interview. The consent form was signed by each participating HOD and collected. A consent form was also given to each PN at the beginning of the one-to-one interview. This form was signed by the PN and collected. The SRM was provided with a letter informing them about the purpose of the research. The consent form was signed by each participating SRM and collected. All consent forms are stored securely.

All the names of participants and schools are confidential. Responses were coded and recorded in way that does not link them to any individual or school. E.g. School A, B, C; HOD A1, A2, A3; PN A, PN B, PN C; SRM1, SRM2, SRM3. Any cultural belief of any participant was respected. If a participant did not want to answer a question because of a clash with their culture, they were not be forced or coerced into answering.

Intellectual and cultural property ownership has been respected, acknowledged and referenced in this research. Use of any phrases, from participants, in the write-up have been acknowledged and not claimed as my own.

There were no incentives provided to participants. Participation in this research project was totally voluntary.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to present a summary of the findings of the research data collected in three New Zealand secondary schools and New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) through interviews with three Principal's Nominees, focus group interviews and individual interviews with Heads of Departments from each school and focus group interviews with School Relationship Managers from NZQA. The findings are organised into three sections: School Relationship Manager perspective of communication, Principal's Nominee perspective of communication and Heads of Department perspective of communication. Finally, strategies used by each group to overcome challenges to effective communication are presented.

Section one

School Relationship Manager perspective on communication with secondary schools

A focus group interview was used to collect data from the School Relationship Managers. Six School Relationship Managers agreed to participate but only five were in the office on the day of the interview. Hence, the focus group consisted of five participants. School Relationship Manager responses throughout the presentation of findings will be identified as SRM1 to SRM5.

The role of the School Relationship Manager is diverse and covers all aspects of administration of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement. This is evident in their responses but succinctly; the role of the School Relationship Manager is according to one respondent concerned with being:

Guardian and guide for assessment of qualifications. (SRM2).

All the School Relationship Managers interviewed, commented on their role in communication with secondary schools. Most of the responses referred to communication with the Principal's Nominee but one School Relationship Manager made specific reference to communication with Heads of Department and teachers. This School Relationship Manager said:

We deal with middle management as well and sometimes with the individual teacher to advise, assist and give guidance (SRM5).

Referring to their role in communication, all the School Relationship Managers agreed that the focal point of their job was to provide information to schools via the Principal's Nominee. This was highlighted by SRM1, who said:

Cover areas from assessment practice, data communication, moderation, conduct managing national assessment reviews, communicating with the Principal's Nominee - ensuring that they receive updated information.

The School Relationship Managers also see themselves as a link between all the business units in NZQA and the school. They view themselves as the means to resolve any issue that the school has concerning quality assurance of NCEA, or any question relating to administration of NCEA. According to one School Relationship Manager:

We are a conduit to the larger organisation and they see us as the avenue to convey information or get answers for them. (SRM5).

However, the aspect of the role of the School Relationship Manager that underpinned all their other functions was the relationships that they build with schools and in particular, with Principal's Nominees. All the School Relationship Managers agreed that building relationships was a vital element to the success of their role and they saw it as part of the job. This was articulated very clearly by SRM3, who said:

We build a relationship with the school so that if they have something that they are uncomfortable with or unsure of something they got someone at NZQA that they can discuss it with for advice.

From the interview findings, the School Relationship Managers confessed to having good relationships with the Principal's Nominees. There was overwhelming agreement within the group that they enjoyed and cherished the relationships with Principal's Nominees. One School Relationship Manager reported:

I would hope that it is professional and collegial but warm as well. I value the relationships with the people we work with – the PNs. (SRM3).

However, all five School Relationship Managers stated clearly that although they enjoyed the relationship with Principal's Nominees, it does not affect their role in quality assurance. This was highlighted by SRM1, who said:

There is also a respectful distance because they know there is an audit function in what happens.

They also indicated that not all relationships with Principal's Nominees are smooth and there may be the odd one that is not positive. All School Relationship Managers agreed that about 98% of relationships are positive. As one School Relationship Manager said:

I had one negative incident but that passed and from there the relationship has continued to build. (SRM3).

However, all five School Relationship Managers identified the importance of building and maintaining relationships with Principal's Nominees as important to both roles because of the value it brings to them. One of the most experienced School Relationship Managers in the group summed up the importance of building strong relationships with Principal's Nominees by saying:

You often get a positive response via email from the PN and they state that they appreciate what you have done. (SRM4).

This School Relationship Manager also indicated a long and strong relationship encourages honesty, openness and trust.

They also ring up and declare problems and are very transparent in that regard. (SRM4).

Constant and regular contact is also viewed by the School Relationship Managers as vital components for relationships to be successful. What emerged from the focus group interview findings was that regular school visits as well as frequent communication with the Principal's Nominee help to build and maintain the relationship. The findings also indicate that email and phone communication are the most common modes of communication used by School Relationship Managers. All the School Relationship Managers interviewed agree that the use of email and mobile phone communication is most effective as it can be done remotely. One School Relationship Manager expressed this by saying:

I communicate by emails and mobile communication and that occurs all the time – from airport lounges, etc. (SRM1).

All five School Relationship Managers indicated that remote communication was possible because they use their own electronic devices. The School Relationship Managers reported that the technology provided by New Zealand Qualifications Authority was not sufficiently suitable to engage in effective communication and contact with schools when they were travelling. This what one School Relationship Manager said:

Sometimes we are on the road and cannot communicate electronically with PNs. NZQA does not provide us with the most up to date technology. We use our own devices. (SRM1).

However the School Relationship Managers did indicate that email is sometimes a barrier to effective communication because of the size of the inbox and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority filtering system. One School Relationship Manager said:

One of the barriers is emails that come from schools that our system deems as junk mail because they use the school logo. (SRM4).

The focus group interview findings also indicate that the School Relationship Manager's decision on the mode of communication is based on what is being communicated. Standard information in the form of general instructions, request for information, etc., is communicated by email. The interview findings reflect that when a discussion is required, School Relationship Managers use telephone communication. According to one School Relationship Manager:

When there is an explanation to communicate, sometimes it is hard to explain in an email and then I will use the phone. (SRM5).

The School Relationship Managers overwhelmingly agreed that communicating high-risk information is always done by face-to-face communication. This involves a visit to the school. The School Relationship Managers believe that sensitive information must be communicated empathetically because of the relationship that exists. All five School Relationship Managers agreed that face-to-face communication is necessary and important. As one School Relationship Manager stated:

You don't want to give information that would surprise a Principal's Nominee through email. (SRM3).

A second School Relationship Manager added:

The more high risk the information, then communication is face-to-face with the second best option being a telephone conversation. (SRM2).

Another School Relationship Manager also said:

If it is generic information we want everybody to have then, email. If it is something that the PN wants advice about then that will be phone but if it is a serious matter then I go and have a face-to-face. (SRM1).

Another finding from the focus group interview was the School Relationship Managers perception of regional communication preferences. They have discovered that Principal's Nominees in the different regions of New Zealand prefer to communicate using a particular mode. They were unsure whether this was due to cultural or historical behaviour.

One School Relationship Manager made this comment:

Some regions are very email orientated while other regions will prefer phoning. On average there are 30 emails to 1 phone call for me. (SRM2).

The School Relationship Managers interviewed reported that there are schools and regions with different cultures or special character and they did adapt their communication to fit. However, they did emphasise that while they respected all cultures and characteristics of schools, this did not impinge on their role. This was summarised by one School Relationship Manager, who said:

Part of our job is to be adaptable to recognise those cultures and to accommodate them and therefore adapt our communication to fit. Emails I send to the different regions are different. (SRM2).

Summary of findings

All of the School Relationship Managers interviewed, highlighted factors that they perceived to contribute to effective communication. The factors that contribute to effective communication were:

- relationships with Principal's Nominees,
- regular visits and frequent communication, and
- correct mode of communication.

The School Relationship Managers interviewed, also reported a number of challenges to communication with the Principal's Nominee and described the strategies they use to overcome them. The two most common challenges to effective communication were:

- time taken for Principal's Nominees to respond and
- technological barriers.

Section two

Principal's Nominee perspective on communication with New Zealand Qualifications Authority

One-to-one interviews were used to collect data from the Principal's Nominees. Three Principal's Nominees were interviewed, one from each school. Principal's Nominee responses throughout the presentation of findings will be identified as PN1 to PN3.

The Principal's Nominee is responsible for managing assessment in the school and to successfully carry out this function they need to communicate externally with the School Relationship Manager. The Principal's Nominee also communicates internally with Heads of Department. The Principal's Nominee acts as a conduit between the school and New Zealand Qualifications Authority. All three Principal's Nominees made reference to their dual communication role and their role as a link between the school and New Zealand Qualifications Authority. This is what one Principal's Nominee said about their role:

I oversee all of the communication between ourselves and NZQA, work closely with our School Relationship Manager and ensure all requirements of NZQA are fulfilled in a timely fashion. (PN3).

All three Principal's Nominees interviewed, reported that email was the preferred mode of communication when communicating with their School Relationship Manager. They also reported that face-to-face and telephone communication with the School Relationship Manager also occurs. Two of the three Principal's Nominees interviewed welcomed and appreciated face-to-face and telephone communication. One Principal's Nominee said:

Emailed the School Relationship Manager just before holidays. However, I do have his cell phone number, if there was something I needed to know absolutely urgently. (PN3).

One Principal's Nominee reported limited communication with the School Relationship Manager, about three phone calls in five years. This Principal's Nominee also reported that when there is communication with the School Relationship Manager it is more email communication than telephone or face-to-face communication. This Principal's Nominee stated a non-preference for telephone and face-to-face communication with the School Relationship Manager. This Principal's Nominee said:

Limited communication, when I need to know something – by email. Would never ring him up. I only get a phone call when there is an enquiry from him. (PN2).

When this Principal's Nominee was asked why this was the case, the reply was that there is no relationship with the School Relationship Manager. The Principal's Nominee said:

It's not a relationship manager. There is no relationship. It is just somebody when there is a problem. (PN2).

This Principal's Nominee further commented that there is a good professional understanding with the School Relationship Manager but nothing more. This Principal's Nominee said:

He can be quiet abrupt but I don't mind that. His feedback regarding Managing National Assessment, etc. is very good but he is not an easy guy to get on with. (PN2).

This was in direct contrast to what the other two Principal's Nominees reported. They reported that they are content with the relationship that exists between them and the School Relationship Manager and feel supported by the School Relationship Manager. The Principal's Nominees also realised that the relationship that they share with the School Relationship Manager did not give them an equal status and they also are aware of the accountability and quality assurance aspect of the relationship. One Principal's Nominee said:

There is an accountability there so, collegial yes but not absolute equals, no. (PN1).

One Principal's Nominee made a direct reference to the transparent and supportive nature of the relationship with the School Relationship Manager. This Principal's Nominee said:

Is it transparent? Yes. I feel that I am able to be completely honest with him. (PN1).

One Principal's Nominee did indicate that the relationship with the School Relationship Manager had evolved to such an extent that the School Relationship Manager bounces ideas of her and uses her experience to assist in interpreting data and researching some ideas, etc. This Principal's Nominee also reported a personal touch to the relationship by indicating that discussions and conversations with the School Relationship Manager occur over lunch.

All three Principal's Nominees reported that the School Relationship Manager does not display defensive behaviour and listens to their point of view. All three Principal's Nominees also reported no barriers to communication with the School Relationship Manager. One Principal's Nominee said:

No. There are no barriers. It is very open. He doesn't use technical jargon. No. Never being defensive. (PN2).

From the interview findings, all three Principal's Nominees appear to be satisfied with the clarity of the communication with the School Relationship Manager. All the Principal's Nominees find the language used by the School Relationship Manager to be clear, precise, professional and the tone appropriate. None of the Principal's Nominees interviewed mentioned that the School Relationship Manager uses any unfamiliar New Zealand Qualifications Authority acronyms or jargon. This is what one Principal's Nominee said:

The School Relationship Manager's language and tone are absolutely appropriate. Yes, utterly professional. (PN1).

The Principal's Nominees also indicated that that their questions, queries and requests were attended to within accepted timeframes. The Principal's Nominees understand the nature of the role of the School Relationship

Manager and they are fully aware that there can sometimes be a delay in responses. There is an understanding on the part of the Principal's Nominees that School Relationship Managers travel frequently from their office base and this impacts on response time. Overall the Principal's Nominees are satisfied with the timing and speed of responses to their queries, questions and requests.

This is what one Principal's Nominee said:

As I said, he always responds to the queries that I send. Sometimes there is a time lag but as I explained that is more to do with the geographical and travel circumstances. (PN3).

The Principal's Nominees interviewed did identify a few barriers that they perceived to be barriers to effective communication. One barrier was the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website. They felt that the website was not easily navigable and the language used was not easy to understand, especially for new teachers who are not familiar with terms used in National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). This is what one Principal's Nominee said:

Well if there was a really easy to find glossary. That would help. Especially, imagine a first year teacher going on to the website trying to find some info. I can imagine that they might get a little bit bogged down with some of the language. If there was an easy way to find explanations of terms. (PN1).

Another barrier to effective communication identified by the Principal's Nominees was the lack of subject specific communication. While they did appreciate that the School Relationship Manager was not an expert in all subjects, they did indicate that the lack of subject specific advice was a barrier to effective communication. This is what one Principal's Nominee reported:

There is guidance around generic issues – nothing subject specific. Weakest element in the school is Maths – no guidance from him on Maths. (PN2).

Summary of findings

The three Principal's Nominees interviewed reported overall satisfaction with the communication with the School Relationship Manager. They did indicate factors they perceived that contribute to effective communication. These factors were:

- relationship with the School Relationship Manager,
- mode of communication, and
- appropriate language and tone.

However, each Principal's Nominee identified challenges to effective communication that were unique to them or their school context and described ways that they try to overcome them. Some of the challenges to effective communication that Principal's Nominees identified are:

- difficulty with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website, and
- clarity of their own communication with the School Relationship Manager.

Section three

Head of Department perspective on communication with the Principal's Nominee and New Zealand Qualifications Authority

A combination of focus group interviews and one-to-one interviews were used to collect data from Heads of Department because of unavailability of the participants during the school day. A total of nine Heads of Department were interviewed, three from each school. Head of Department responses throughout the presentation of findings will be identified as HOD1 to HOD9.

A Head of Department in a New Zealand secondary school is a middle manager that is responsible for leading and managing a particular learning

area. Some learning areas are made up of a number of subjects. In addition to leading the educational programme, Heads of Department have a range of responsibilities. The response of one Head of Department encapsulated the role. This is what one Head of Department said:

Leading the educational program, develop the schemes of work, all of the things to do with moderation and being the middle person between my faculty and the person I report to – the Principal's Nominee. (HOD4).

This response indicated that Heads of Department are involved in communication with the Principal's Nominee as well as the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) subject National Assessment Moderators. Two Heads of Department also reported communication with the School Relationship Manager during a Managing National Assessment audit. Communication with the Principal's Nominee occurs most often as the Head of Department either provides information to the Principal's Nominee or receives information from the Principal's Nominee. Communication with National Assessment Moderators only occurs through moderation reports or when there is face-to-face communication at a moderation Best Practice Workshop facilitated by the moderator. Very rarely would there be email or telephone communication between the Head of Department and the moderator.

From the interview findings, those Heads of Department that experienced communication with NZQA National Assessment Moderators reported positively about language, tone used and professional support. This what one Head of Department said:

Very professional. Very straightforward and to the point. I have found them to be pretty concise normally. (HOD5).

In direct contrast there were a few Heads of Department who reported negatively on communication with NZQA National Assessment Moderators. They found that moderators did not listen to teachers and that they were not specific in their comments and advice to teachers. There is also a feeling that

the language and tone used by moderators in moderation reports do not highlight and celebrate excellent work. This is what one Head of Department said:

I would say that they should listen as well as communicate. They tell but they don't ever listen. It is one-way. (HOD3).

One Head of Department reported experiencing contrasting communication from year to year in moderation reports. This Head of Department said:

Sometimes we have received some very brief reports without too much guidance. On other occasions, the detailed information we got from the moderator has been pretty big. (HOD1).

This Head of Department indicated that inconsistent comments and information in moderation reports left teachers without proper guidance and created more uncertainty with regards to making assessment judgments.

Regarding communication of National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) information from the Principal's Nominee, all Heads of Department interviewed reported that the Principal's Nominee executed this task very efficiently. They referred to the diligent distribution of information and the willingness to assist with queries and clarifications. This is what a Head of Department from each school said:

Yeah, he is very good. He makes sure everything is very clear, cut and dry. (HOD3).

All the NCEA information is conveyed by email efficiently from the Principal's Nominee to Heads of Departments. (HOD9).

I am fairly happy with what I am receiving regarding communication and clarification. (HOD4).

All the Heads of Department that were interviewed also indicated that they did not experience any barriers to communication with the Principal's Nominee. The Heads of Department interviewed were adamant that the Principal's

Nominee was always available for conversation around any clarification or explanation. They also indicated that they were satisfied with the modes of communication implemented by the Principal's Nominee. All Heads of Department interviewed from the three schools showed a preference for email communication with seldom face-to-face communication when required. This is what one Head of Department said:

The Principal's Nominee is easily accessible for discussion at any time. I am happy with his methods communication of NZQA requirements - email. I have found no barriers to communication with him. (HOD7).

There were two Heads of Department that showed a preference for more face-to-face communication with the Principal's Nominee. They did indicate that this was essential for a speedy clarification if required and to stress the importance of the message or information. This is what one Head of Department said:

I prefer face-to-face for everything. There is so much confusion over an email and you don't know what's happening. It is always better to talk face-to-face. (HOD2).

A paradox emerged at this point because these two Heads of Department were nevertheless satisfied with the methods employed by their Principal's Nominee to communicate information to them.

Some of the Heads of Department interviewed did have reservations about the clarity of information that came to them from New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), via the Principal's Nominee. There was also a feeling amongst some of the Heads of Department interviewed that the language used is ambiguous and the NZQA website difficult to navigate. This is what one Head of Department said:

Tends to be, no it can be quite ambiguous. A lot of it is left to interpretation. (HOD3).

In direct contrast, some Heads of Department have had favourable experiences with the NZQA website and communication. These Heads of

Department are able to navigate their subject pages on the NZQA website and find the relevant information. One Head of Department even suggested that the ambiguous language could be used on purpose to allow teachers freedom to assess students in their context and to use professional judgement. This is what one Head of Department said:

I also follow the NZQA website and look for changes that happen because in my subject areas there is regular contact made on their website from moderators and other people responsible in the subject area. (HOD4).

From the interview findings, some Heads of Department also found that the wording of circulars to be ambiguous and sometimes too New Zealand-centric. One Head of Department indicated that there is difficulty in finding the meaning of the message. They reported that this made it difficult for new teachers coming into the country and into the profession. This is what one Head of Department reported:

The communication is poor. When you read the things they are very, very hard to read. They are not clear. You have to re-read them over and over again to be honest and you always not sure what's happening. (HOD1).

However, some of the Heads of Department interviewed did feel that there has been an improvement in the language used in NZQA communication over the years. This is what one Head of Department said:

Yes, there has been an improvement. I feel that the language has improved. (HOD6).

Communication and relationships are intertwined. A Head of Department should have communication, and a relationship, with the National Assessment Moderator/s of the subject/s under their jurisdiction because National Assessment Moderators provided subject and assessment specific advice and direction. From the interview findings, the Heads of Department had differing views and perceptions of the relationship that exists between NZQA National Assessment Moderators and Heads of Department. A few Heads of

Department perceived the relationship to be good. This is what one Head of Department said:

Fairly positive. They are not looking to create problems; they are looking to create solutions. (HOD5).

The majority of Heads of Department interviewed perceived the relationship to be poor or even non-existent. Some Heads of Department felt that although the communication from National Assessment Moderators was good, the relationship with Heads of Department was restricted. The common thread that ran through all the responses was that National Assessment Moderators were isolated from the teaching sector. This is what a one Heads of Department said:

I have no idea who they are. No working relationship. That's the whole point; they are supposed to be secret. (HOD3).

Summary of findings

The interview findings clearly indicate that a Head of Department in a secondary school is a busy person with a wide range of duties and who has no time to read through long wordy circulars and websites. The Heads of Department interviewed highlighted the following factors that they feel contribute to effective communication:

- clear, simple language, and
- modes of communication.

All nine Heads of Department reported overall satisfaction with communication with the Principal's Nominee. All Heads of Department interviewed indicated that they were content with the modes of communication utilized by the Principal's Nominee. The Heads of Department also stated that the Principal's Nominee was always available to provide clarification when information was not very clear. All the Heads of Department interviewed were impressed with the organised manner in which the Principal's Nominee operated and were absolutely sure that they were fully supported in their roles

by the Principal's Nominee. However, Heads of Department expressed dissatisfaction with communication from New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). This dissatisfaction focused mainly on:

- ambiguous language used in moderation reports, circulars and on the NZQA website,
- lack of face-to-face communication with National Assessment Moderators, and
- lack of relationship with the National Assessment Moderators.

Strategies used to overcome challenges to effective communication

This section presents the strategies used to overcome challenges to effective communication by School Relationship Managers, Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department. The following table (Table 4.1) identifies the strategies used by School Relationship Managers, Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department to overcome challenges to effective communication. The information in Table 4.1 clearly indicates that each group has developed strategies to overcome challenges to effective communication based on their context. These strategies have been developed over a period of time and are indicative of the professionalism of the members of each group.

Table 4.1: Strategies used to overcome challenges to effective communication

School Relationship Manager	Principal's Nominee	Head of Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up email requests with telephone calls. • Use <i>'high priority'</i> setting on the email. • Last resort would be to involve the Manager of the business unit when a response from a Principal's Nominee is not forthcoming. • Make use of own devices to communicate with Principal's Nominees remotely when away from the office base. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively scrutinise own written correspondence for language that could be ambiguous. • Contact Principal's Nominees in neighbouring schools for assistance to interpret information. • Call the School Relationship Manager if neighbouring Principal's Nominees could not help. • Contact the School Relationship Manager when information on the NZQA website cannot be found easily. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage teachers in the department to unpack messages in circulars. • Approach other Heads of Department in the school and subject associations to assist in interpreting information. • Contact the Principal's Nominee if all else fails. • Request assistance from teachers in the department to find information on the NZQA website. • Work late hours to try and find the required information. • Converse with Principal's Nominee and teachers in the department to interpret comments in moderation report. • Make use of the <i>'request for clarification'</i> process to gain further clarification from the National Assessment Moderator.

Chapter Five

Discussion of findings

Introduction

This chapter discusses the significant findings that emerged from the data gathered and analysed during this research. The chapter commences with a review of the research process and participants. The significant findings are discussed and structured according to the themes categorised under the headings of the research questions.

From each of three Auckland secondary schools that volunteered to participate in this research project, the Principal's Nominee and three Heads of Department were interviewed. A focus group interview was conducted with School Relationship Managers from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). The data was obtained in an attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to effective communication practices between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)?

2. What challenges do schools and NZQA experience in relation to effective communication?

3. What strategies are used to try and overcome these challenges?

This research study aimed to identify factors that contribute to effective communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, to investigate challenges to effective communication practices and to analyse strategies that are used to overcome challenges associated with effective communication practices. The data indicates that while there are some aspects of communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools that are effective, there are also other aspects that are not as effective. This chapter is organised into two

main sections – (1) Factors that contribute to effective communication and (2) Challenges to effective communication.

Factors that contribute to effective communication

Findings in chapter four indicated that all School Relationship Managers, Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department interviewed identified relationships as a significant factor in effective communication. The School Relationship Managers identified the building and maintaining of relationships as integral to the success of their roles. The literature indicates that organisations have relationships with all stakeholders. Stakeholders are people who are linked to the organisation, either as a supporter or a critic (Mahoney, 2013). The New Zealand Qualifications Authority has a relationship with secondary schools because it is responsible for the quality assurance of a school's assessment practice (Government of New Zealand, 1989). The personnel involved in this relationship are School Relationship Managers employed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and Principal's Nominees employed by schools.

From the interview findings, the School Relationship Managers spoke of the relationship between them and Principal's Nominees as a partnership – working together to improve and maintain the management of the national qualification, the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA). Coincidentally, this relationship is also described by Wylie (2012) as a “partnership between the school and NZQA, focused mainly on standards assessed internally by schools” (p.227). However, this description implies that the partnership is based on compliance but the School Relationship Managers interviewed, consider the partnership to be deeper. They regard the Principal's Nominees and themselves as being part of a team and that the efforts of both to be teamwork.

The School Relationship Managers are aware that a compliance approach does not encourage effective communication with Principal's Nominees. According to them, a compliance approach promoted one-way communication

and quelled dialogue. The relationship building approach, which they embrace, values effective two-way communication. The School Relationship Manager's view on relationships is similar to what Stevenson, Cox, Britten and Dundar (2004), found in their research on communication between patients and health care professionals. According to Stevenson et al. (2004) "the traditional model of adherence (also known as compliance) does not value patients' beliefs, concerns and preferences" (p.236). Stevenson et al. (2004) also found that concordant consultation between patient and the health care professional resulted in a partnership being formed, which combined the expertise of the health care professional and the practical experience of the patient. This corresponds with the finding that School Relationship Managers believe that their expertise in managing national assessment and the practical experiences of the Principal's Nominees can combine to reach agreement on contentious issues around managing national assessment. This appears as though School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees have evolved their partnership to team status, working together to resolve issues. Although this 'team' may not be comprised of members from the same organisation and who have the same organisational values, it does reflect teamwork because the School Relationship Manager and Principal's Nominee work together to solve compound issues that affect educational goals. This fits in with the assertion of Cardno (2012) that "teamwork provides the context for resolving many of the complex problems that act as barriers to the achievement of educational goals" (p.139). Teamwork is based on productive relationships (Cardno, 2012) and is achieved through effective communication.

Stevenson et al. (2004) also found that "two way communication is crucial if concordance is to be achieved" (p.240). The School Relationship Managers indicated that the two-way dialogue they have with the Principal's Nominee has served to improve their relationship. The relationship that has developed between the School Relationship Manager and the Principal's Nominee has resulted from frequent communication and regular visits. This is similar to the awareness of the "need for keeping an open climate and good communication" as reported by Halawah (2005, p. 340) in his study of the relationship between effective communication of high school principals and

developing a positive school climate. It is evident that School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees are aware of the role effective communication plays in their working relationship and they are also aware of the need for maintaining satisfactory communication. Both School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees spoke of the importance of maintaining openness and transparency as they found that these were fundamental ingredients for effective communication. A parallel can be drawn between this and the literature around relationships as both Cardno (2012) and Mason and Leek (2012) refer to the values of openness and trust as being significant in relationships.

The School Relationship Managers interviewed in this study all spoke enthusiastically about their role and how they took their title literally. They were of the opinion that one aspect of their role was to build and maintain a relationship between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the school. This echoes the literature that advises that communication is one of the basic requirements of effective human relations (Drucker, 2006). In other words, an important purpose of communication is creating and maintaining effective relationships. In the findings of my study, School Relationship Managers indicated that they valued regular communication with the Principal's Nominee, as they believed that periodic communication would strengthen the relationship with them. This corresponds with the findings of Hung and Lin (2013) in their study on relationship building in a business context. According to Hung and Lin (2013) communication is essential to relationship development because it develops common principles and understanding and of all relationship-building strategies: communication is the most effective strategy. Similarly, the School Relationship Managers identified development of shared knowledge of managing national assessment and common understanding of processes involved in assessment matters, through communication, as important in developing and maintaining a healthy relationship with Principal's Nominees. School Relationship Managers spoke of the need for a strong relationship with the Principal's Nominee and how this relationship can be reinforced by personal touch. The view of the School Relationship Managers that regular contact with the Principal's Nominee

creates a strong and positive relationship is further supported by the findings of Mason and Leek (2012) who suggest that in business relationships “personal contact may increase positive perceptions of the relationship atmosphere” (p.322).

Having good human relations ensures that effective relationships are productive relationships that produce desired results (Drucker, 2006). Productive relationships are essential and rely on “collaboration and trust, openness and dialogue” (Cardno, 2012, p. 12). Two of the three Principal’s Nominees interviewed reported a cordial relationship with the School Relationship Manager that is based on collaboration, trust and openness, which is a result of constant communication. These two Principal’s Nominees also indicated that they felt supported by the School Relationship Manager and valued the relationship. According to these two Principal’s Nominees, the support from the School Relationship Manager came in the form of belief and trust and that the relationship had developed due to effective communication practices. A parallel can be drawn with the findings of Mason and Leek (2012) in communication practices in a business relationship. According to Mason and Leek (2012), “effective communication practices underpin success factors such as trust, co-operation and commitment to develop and maintain business-to-business relationships” (p.319). Further to simply building the relationship on communication, the two Principal’s Nominees spoke of the commitment by themselves and the School Relationship Manager to maintain the relationship. This also aligns with the findings of Mason and Leek (2012) who found that constant and effective communication ensures a commitment to maintaining a business-to-business relationship. Similar to the findings of Mason and Leek (2012) the School Relationship Managers and the two Principal’s Nominees identified the importance of regular communication as a condition to maintain their relationship.

The Principal’s Nominee who reported an absence of a cordial relationship with the School Relationship Manager did, however, report that their relationship was a good working relationship. This Principal’s Nominee reported that the School Relationship Manager rarely communicated with him

but was confident with and trusted his management of national assessment at the school. The finding with this Principal's Nominee was in direct contrast with what Mason and Leek (2012) reported about the correlation between effective communication practices and trust, co-operation, commitment and enhancing relationships. While Mason and Leek (2012) suggest that effective communication supports "trust, co-operation and commitment" (p.319), and helps to build relationships, the finding with this Principal's Nominee suggests that a good working relationship does not necessarily require constant effective communication. The finding indicates that although there is a lack of communication between the Principal's Nominee and School Relationship Manager, there is a working relationship that exists and it is based on the virtues of trust, co-operation and commitment, as suggested by Mason and Leek (2012). The relationship between this Principal's Nominee and the School Relationship Manager is nevertheless productive and correlates somewhat with the advice of Cardno (2012) who says that productive relationships are based on "collaboration and trust, openness and dialogue" (p.12). The only difference to what Cardno (2012) advocates about productive relationships and the relationship between this Principal's Nominee and the School Relationship Manager is the paucity of communication in the relationship. However, this Principal's Nominee reported that he did not mind the lack of communication and it did not affect the working relationship he enjoyed with the School Relationship Manager. This Principal's Nominee was happy with simple email communication, when required, and content that the School Relationship Manager did not use a variety of modes of communication.

With the exception of one Principal's Nominee, all other participants in this research project identified modes of communication as a factor that contributed to effective communication. All participants reported that they enjoyed a variety of methods of communication and the choice of mode contributed to the effectiveness of the communication. The School Relationship Managers spoke of the importance and/or sensitivity of the message that determined the mode of communication they employed. According to the School Relationship Managers, email is used for conveying

standard information and requesting information but face-to-face communication is used when high-risk information is communicated. This is in accordance with Mason and Leek (2012), who advise that, “a rich medium such as face-to-face communication is necessary for negotiations, whereas a lean medium such as a memo is adequate for the exchange of a straightforward message” (p.321). The communication practice of the School Relationship Managers regarding modes of communication is also supported by McGrath and Hollingshead (as cited in Mason and Leek 2012) who suggest that “the type of media most appropriate for a specific task will depend on factors such as richness of the information being conveyed” (p.319). The School Relationship Managers also reported that they usually used a mode of communication that was historically successful in a particular school and/or region of the country. The flexibility of the School Relationship Managers to adapt their modes of communication to regions and/or schools corresponds strongly with the findings of McGrath and Hollingshead. The rationale that underpinned considering past communication practice and maintaining the status quo to ensure that communication was effective is similar to the suggestion of Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and Savigny (2001) (as cited in Mason and Leek 2012) who said “we need to consider each communication practice and artifact in relation to what has gone before and what is intended to come in the future” (p.319). The use of tried and trusted modes of communication by the School Relationship Managers to ensure that communication with the Principal’s Nominee is effective also concurs with the suggestion of Mason and Leek (2012) that “copying the temporal forms of successful, legitimate predecessors is thought to reduce uncertainty and enhance potential for effectiveness” (p.320). Hence, the School Relationship Managers spoke of replicating systems and communication strategies that have been successful with a particular school, Principal’s Nominee or region.

Two of the three Principal’s Nominees interviewed reported that they appreciated different modes of communication and that it not only made communication more effective but it also cemented their relationship with the School Relationship Manager. The Principal’s Nominees reported that face-to-face and telephone communication was important as it provided an

opportunity for immediate clarification and feedback. The two Principal's Nominees also indicated that face-to-face communication also increased collaboration with the School Relationship Manager. Face-to-face communication was a significant factor that contributed to effective communication. These two Principal's Nominees also reported that face-to-face and telephone communication added a personal touch to the communication. This view of rich communication media is supported by Mason and Leek (2012) who say that the criteria of rich communication media like face-to-face communication provide "availability for instant feedback ... and add a personal focus" (p.321).

In addition to the personal touch, the interview findings show that School Relationship Managers value face-to-face communication as a significant factor to effective communication because it increased collaboration with Principal's Nominees and created a cordial atmosphere that indicated that they had confidence in the Principal's Nominees. The Principal's Nominees also alluded to having increased trust in the intentions of School Relationship Managers; to being more supportive rather than discouraging as direct contact with them increased. The findings from interviews with the School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees are a parallel with what is advocated by Mason and Leek (2012) who said, "in face-to-face communication people establish greater rapport and higher levels of trust" (p.321). The interview findings also indicate that more issues at schools are resolved constructively when face-to-face communication between the School Relationship Manager and Principal's Nominee occur. Another parallel can be drawn here with the findings of Mason and Leek (2012) who also found that face-to-face communication leads to more positive results in negotiations and discussions.

Although the Heads of Department interviewed preferred email as a mode of communication when communicating with Principal's Nominees because of the busy nature of their role, they also indicated a need for some face-to-face communication as well. The Heads of Department indicated that face-to-face communication was essential for instant clarification of messages and for

conveying important messages, the key factors that underpin the success of their role. This view of the Heads of Department suggests that they feel that their performance will be more efficient if the mode of communication matched the importance of the message and this view is supported by the media richness theory. According to the media richness theory, “task performance will be improved when the task information processing requirements are matched with a medium able to convey the richness of the information” (Mason & Leek, 2012, p. 321). The Heads of Department spoke of the regular face-to-face communication with the Principal’s Nominee at weekly curriculum meetings and how this resolved most issues that required clarification.

On the other hand, the Heads of Department interviewed reported that the communication with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority subject National Assessment Moderators was not effective because of the limited face-to-face communication. They indicated that communication with the National Assessment Moderators would be effective if a rich communication mode like face-to-face communication was used. The inference from this indication is that while Heads of Department value the useful, constructive written feedback from National Assessment Moderators in moderation reports, they feel that their performance would be improved if they had the opportunity of face-to-face communication to clarify and discuss with National Assessment Moderators the written feedback received in moderation reports. This again links to the suggestion by Mason and Leek (2012) that “task performance will be improved when the task information processing requirements are matched with a medium able to convey the richness of the information” (p.321). The finding that face-to-face communication will enhance understanding of the requirements of Achievement Standards and consequently improve assessment judgments corresponds with the suggestion in the literature that there is correlation between a medium that effectively conveys information and performance.

The Heads of Department interviewed also spoke of a preference for clear and straightforward language in communication. They indicated that this is a significant factor that contributed to the effectiveness of communication as it

made interpretation of requirements simpler and their task of communicating information to teachers easier. The indication of the Heads of Department corresponds with the suggestion by LeMay and Schwamberger (2007) that unclear, lengthy and roundabout messages are challenges to effective communication. This is further supported by Papa, Daniels and Spiker (1997) who advocate that, “simple, concrete language is the key to reducing ambiguity” (p.24) and thus reducing challenges to effective communication. However, there are many other barriers or challenges to effective communication.

Challenges to effective communication

A key finding from the interviews was that the majority of Heads of Department interviewed identified the ambiguous language used in the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) written communication as a challenge or barrier to effective communication. Heads of Department felt that the ambiguous language prevents the transmission of important messages, notices and assessment information because sometimes they had difficulty in making sense of the message. This finding is consistent with the literature that anything that causes interference with a person’s understanding is an impediment to effective communication (Chase et al., 2003). Combined with the ambiguous language, Heads of Department also identified unfamiliarity of language as another factor that provides a challenge to effective communication. Unfamiliarity of language is a semantic obstacle and has been highlighted in communication literature as a barrier to effective communication, which supports what the Heads of Department have identified. This finding is reinforced by the literature as Chase et al. (2003) advocate that one of the challenges to effective communication is not being familiar with language. The literature complements the findings of the interviews that the unfamiliarity of language can prevent effective communication and can lead to sending and/or receiving ambiguous messages. From the interview findings and the corresponding literature on communication it is very clear that clarity is essential in communication.

The Principal's Nominees interviewed highlighted clarity of their own communication with School Relationship Managers as a significant challenge to effective communication. The Principal's Nominees acknowledged that they were aware that School Relationship Managers have many schools to communicate with, travel frequently and are generally busy people and realised that any query or question that they have should be sensibly constructed without any ambiguity. The findings indicate that Principal's Nominees have realised that if their communication was not clear and precise, it could negatively influence communication between them and the School Relationship Manager and that they do not make assumptions that using correct words would necessarily convey the correct message. This is consistent with what Sligo (1994) suggests that writers of messages cannot assume that if the words are correct then "from a senders point of view communication will succeed" (p.46). The literature also suggests that the message should be examined for any phrase or word that could render it ambiguous or unclear before sending (Sligo, 1994). The Principal's Nominees spoke of thinking about what they want to say, then writing it out succinctly. They also spoke of reading the message carefully, making sure that the essence of their communication was clear before sending. The actions of the three Principal's Nominees, in editing and proofreading their written communication with the School Relationship Manager before sending, suggest that it is congruous with the advice of the literature.

Principal's Nominees endeavour to ensure clarity of their communication with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. However, the time taken for their response to requests for information is reported by School Relationship Managers as a challenge to effective communication. The School Relationship Managers spoke of their desire to give and receive instantaneous feedback as they preferred not to hold up processes at the school or the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. This finding, although significant to the School Relationship Managers, does not correspond to any literature reviewed. There is no literature that identifies time taken for responding to queries, questions or requests as a challenge to effective communication. However, in the context of the communication between the

School Relationship Manager and Principal's Nominee, the time taken to respond by the Principal's Nominee, especially to a request for important information is a significant challenge to effective communication. This challenge to communication appears to be unique to the context of communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees and could be the reason why there is no literature that makes reference to it.

School Relationship Managers travel frequently from their office base to schools around the country and rely on technology for continuous communication with Principal's Nominees. From the findings of the focus group interview, School Relationship Managers identified the technology provided by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority as a significant challenge to effective communication. The School Relationship Managers reported that the devices supplied by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, as communication tools, are not technologically up to date and this impacts negatively on their ability to engage in effective communication from remote locations. This finding coincides with the literature that says problems with equipment like "telephone lines, computers, other electronic devices" (Chase et al., 2003, p. 23), can negatively effect communication. In the context of the School Relationship Managers and the impact of devices on effective communication, the devices supplied to them by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority do not have sufficient capacity to enable them to effectively communicate remotely. The School Relationship Managers interviewed also spoke of the capacity of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority email inboxes and outboxes as a significant challenge to effective communication. They discussed at length their frustration with the size of their mailbox and outbox and how they sometimes they cannot send or receive files because of the capacity of the email system or the email security that did not allow documents with school letterheads to come through. The School Relationship Managers explained that effective communication was hindered by the technological setbacks. Again, this finding links to the view of Chase et al. (2003) that problems with computers have a significant impact on effective communication.

From the interview findings, Principal's Nominees and some Heads of Department have identified the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) website as a significant challenge to effective communication. The findings indicate that Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department would like to use the website as a quick reference but they encounter challenges with navigating the website and language used. This relates to the literature on communication that semantic obstacles like not being familiar with language and problems with equipment related to communication like computers are a challenge to effective communication (Chase et al., 2003). In short, Principal's Nominees and some Heads of Department described the NZQA website as not user friendly in terms of finding information. They explained that sometimes they required some urgent information and expected to find it easily on the website. However, this was not possible as they were directed from page to page and still the information sought was not easily found. This, they said, took up too much of time and was a challenge especially when teachers required information. They also spoke of the language used on the website as not easy to interpret and they identified this as a challenge to effective communication. Apart from themselves, they spoke of the problem that first year teachers and teachers new to New Zealand will experience. On the other hand there were a few Heads of Department who found that information on the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website was fairly accessible.

Another challenge to effective communication that was highlighted by Heads of Department was the lack of face-to-face communication with the New Zealand Qualifications Authority National Assessment Moderators. While Heads of Department did acknowledge that National Assessment Moderators did facilitate Best Practice Workshops and did meet with teachers, they felt that more face-to-face communication was required to clarify moderation report comments and interpretations of the requirements of Achievement Standards. The desire of Heads of Department to have more face-to-face communication with National Assessment Moderators is in keeping with the interaction approach advocated by Hakansson (as cited in Mason and Leek 2012). The interaction approach demonstrates that people engage in

communication for different types of exchange. In the context of this study, the Heads of Department want clarification and feedback. When viewed against the interaction approach they appear to seek “information and social exchange” Mason and Leek (2012, p. 320). Since effective communication practice builds “trust, co-operation and commitment and contribute to developing and maintaining business-to-business relationships” Mason and Leek (2012, p. 319), a lack of face-to-face communication between Heads of Department and National Assessment Moderators would indicate no working relationship. This was endorsed by most of the Heads of Department who spoke of having no relationship with National Assessment Moderators. The conclusion drawn from the tone and expressions of Heads of Department during the interviews was that they would prefer to have a working relationship with National Assessment Moderators. Since Heads of Department have reported no relationship with National Assessment Moderators, a conclusion can be drawn that very little or no communication prevails between them. On the other hand National Assessment Moderators publish on the NZQA website a newsletter every term and clarifications of the internally assessed Achievement Standards. Consequently, from the point of view of NZQA, there is communication with the teaching sector that includes Heads of Department.

In addition to wanting information from moderators, all the Heads of Department have identified the lack of a working relationship with National Assessment Moderators as another challenge to effective communication. Most of the Heads of Department talked about how they had no idea who the National Assessment Moderators were and one Head of Department suggested that keeping their identities secret was a motive to by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to keep them isolated. There is a strong indication that a working relationship between the Heads of Department and National Assessment Moderators will ensure that educational goals are met. When this occurs, there is an implication of teamwork, as teamwork “resolves many of the complex problems that act as barriers to the achievement of educational goals” (Cardno, 2012, p. 139). This implication of teamwork can only occur if a productive relationship exists between the Head of Department and National Assessment Moderator. From the literature on communication,

there is evidence that the best strategy to build a relationship is communication. According to Hung and Lin (2013), “communication is one of the most effective relationship-building strategies across all elements of a relationship” (p.1225). The lack of a working relationship can also be linked to the lack of face-to-face communication between Heads of Department and National Assessment Moderators. Heads of Department have inferred that written communication via moderation reports is not the mode of communication that they prefer and it does not develop a relationship with the National Assessment Moderator. This inference is supported by Mason and Leek (2012) who say that “if the wrong communication medium is used, the interaction episode may be perceived as problematic and negatively affect the relationship” (p.321). There is clear evidence that because the wrong communication medium is used, the relationship between Heads of Department and National Assessment Moderators has been negatively affected.

This chapter has discussed the significant findings of the research topic on communication between NZQA and secondary schools. From the discussion it is evident that relationships are crucial to effective communication and communication is essential to relationship development, use of different modes enhance communication and clear and straightforward language contributes to effective communication. The discussion also highlighted technological barriers, lack of face-to-face communication and response times as challenges to effective communication. The conclusion in the following chapter identifies factors that strengthen communication practice and how challenges to effective communication are overcome.

Chapter Six

Conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

This chapter focuses on drawing conclusions from the answers to the research questions discussed in Chapter Five and then goes on to make recommendations to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools. The chapter is divided into a conclusions section and a recommendations section.

Conclusions

This section draws conclusions based on discussion of the research findings and is organised into two sections – (1) factors that strengthen communication practice, (2) overcoming challenges to engage in effective communication.

Factors that strengthen communication practice

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there are three significant factors that contribute to effective communication practice.

Firstly, it is evident that effective communication is essential between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools and there are many factors that contribute to effective communication. However, it can be concluded that relationships, as identified by all three groups, is the most significant single factor that contributes to effective communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools. The implication is that current relationships need to be maintained and new relationships need to be built to strengthen communication practice. The building of new relationships and maintaining of existing ones require communication. This is echoed by Mason and Leek (2012) who suggest that the use of satisfactory communication and appropriate media will contribute to building and developing relationships and thus improve communication practice.

The second factor that strengthens communication practice is modes of communication. Principal's Nominees preferred a variety of communication modes because they felt that it had a two-fold effect. The implication is that by using different modes of communication the relationship with the School Relationship Manager was improved and this in turn strengthens communication practice. Another implication is that using different modes of communication in different contexts made communication more effective. These implications are supported by the media richness theory that states that an incorrect communication medium can negatively affect a relationship and that the use of incorrect media adversely affects effective communication practice (Mason and Leek, 2012).

The third factor that contributes to effective communication practice is clear language. Clear language alleviates ambiguity and ensures effectiveness of the message. The implication is that Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department want information that is not ambiguous and is simple to understand. In other words, Principal's Nominees and Heads of Department prefer clear, straightforward and simple language. Papa et al. (1997) support this implication by encouraging the use of simple and clear language in communication to prevent ambiguity and strengthen communication practice.

The three factors identified are important to consider if communication practice is to be strengthened. However, there are some challenges that need to be overcome in order to engage the factors that strengthen effective communication.

Overcoming challenges to engage in effective communication

Overall there is no single challenge to effective communication. The School Relationship Managers have few challenges to effective communication. The challenges that School Relationship Managers experience are timely responses from Principal's Nominees and challenges involving technology.

The School Relationship Managers preferred Principal's Nominees to be more diligent with answering questions and responding to requests for information. They also understand the importance of constant communication with Principal's Nominees but are restricted by the quality of communication tools provided by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority.

Lack of clarity in communication is a challenge faced by Heads of Department and Principal's Nominees. Heads of Department highlighted ambiguity in the language used in written communication from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority as a challenge while Principal's Nominees identified clarity of their own communication with the School Relationship Manager as a challenge to effective communication. Heads of Department and Principal's Nominees would like to use the New Zealand Qualifications Authority website for finding information but the complex nature of its construction and ambiguity of the language used is a challenge. There is no working relationship between Heads of Department and National Assessment Moderators and this was a challenge to communication around improving assessment judgments and interpretation of the requirements of Achievement Standards. Heads of Department felt that a lack of communication, which resulted in a lack of a working relationship with National Assessment Moderators implied that they were left to their own devices in terms of interpretation of Achievement Standards and making assessment judgments. The implication is that no relationship is equal to no communication.

Recommendations

Conclusions drawn from this study of effective communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools have provided the foundations for the following recommendations. Because there are differences between the two contexts, recommendations to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools are different. For secondary schools, it is important to note that the recommendations are school context specific and a one-size-fits-all approach may not be appropriate. If the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools intend to improve their

communication practice then these recommendations can be used as a point of reference.

Recommendations to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority

The recommendations to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority have been classified into general recommendations and recommendations to the School Relationship Manager.

General recommendations

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority website provides useful information for teachers, Heads of Department and Principal's Nominees. The continuous provision and updating of this information must continue. However, the language used on the website is ambiguous. To improve the website and enhance its effectiveness as a communication tool, the following could be done:

- All information regarding a particular topic should be found in one location and users should not be directed from one page to another.
- Ensure that the existing glossary of terms and phrases used in the National Certificate of Educational Achievement be more easily accessible.
- Use clear, simple language to convey information.

The School Relationship Managers are passionate about their roles and are the consummate conduits for the Principal's Nominee by being in constant contact with them. The constant contact is most welcomed by Principal's Nominees and must be maintained. However, to further improve communication between School Relationship Managers and Principal's Nominees, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority should:

- Provide School Relationship Managers with the latest telecommunication devices that can be used from remote locations.

- Enable more capacity for email inboxes and outboxes so that large files of information can be sent and received by School Relationship Managers.

The current model of Best Practice Workshops run by National Assessment Moderators provides some chance for face-to-face communication with the sector and this must continue. However, to improve the confidence of Heads of Department and, in a wider context, to improve agreement rates between teachers and National Assessment Moderators the New Zealand Qualifications Authority should:

- Allow National Assessment Moderators to accompany School Relationship Managers on their managing national assessment audits at schools to provide subject specific guidance in making assessment judgement and development of assessment resources.
- Create more opportunities for National Assessment Moderators to build working relationships with Heads of Department.

School Relationship Manager

The Principal's Nominees are satisfied with the communication between themselves and the School Relationship Managers. They are also pleased with the level of support for general management issues that School Relationship Managers provide. The recommendation to School Relationship Managers is that the communication and general support must continue. It is also recommended that the relationship with Principal's Nominees be maintained and further strengthened, as relationships are a significant factor in effective communication.

Principal's Nominees are happy with the modes of communication used by School Relationship Managers. They are satisfied with email communication for general information and face-to-face or telephone communication for more sensitive topics. It is recommended that this continues. Principal's Nominees also value the regular contact with School Relationship Managers whether it is

telephonic or visits. It is recommended that regular contact be maintained as it contributes to effective communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools.

Different regions in the country prefer particular modes of communication. School Relationship Managers are aware of this and make provision for it. This is good as it strengthens communication and School Relationship Managers must continue to use modes of communication that are suitable for the clients.

Recommendations to secondary schools

The recommendations to secondary schools are made to specific groups – (1) Principal's Nominees, (2) Heads of Departments and (3) Principals.

Principal's Nominees

The School Relationship Managers were adamant that they valued communication with Principal's Nominees and that they preferred regular communication. Principal's Nominees regularly ask questions when they require assistance. This must continue as it also contributes to building and maintaining the relationship. Regular communication, according to Hung and Lin (2013), is the most effective approach to building a relationship. However, it is recommended that:

- Principal's Nominees consider the issue at hand and frame their questions carefully so that School Relationship Managers can give a quick response.
- Language in questions should be clear and the questions itself should be precise to prevent any ambiguity. This will ensure a quicker resolution.

Response times to questions and requests from School Relationship Managers are inconsistent. Some Principal's Nominees reply within accepted time frames while there are some who do not. The delay in communicating a

reply not only contributes to ineffective communication but also holds up processes that can lead to further ineffective communication. This practice requires improvement and it is recommended that:

- Principal's Nominees make timely responses to requests for information and questions that come from the School Relationship Manager.

Heads of Department

Presently, Heads of Department experience difficulty with the interpretation of the requirements of Achievement Standards. They also do not have a working relationship with National Assessment Moderators. Interpretations of requirements of Achievement Standards must improve and working relationships with National Assessment Moderators must be built. It is recommended that:

- Heads of Department should make every effort to attend the Best Practice Workshops facilitated by National Assessment Moderators and engage in professional dialogue with them, which will assist in correct interpretations of the requirements of Achievement Standards.
- Use the Best Practice Workshops as a platform to establish a working relationship with National Assessment Moderators.

Heads of Department regularly attend subject association meetings and network with other Heads of Department and teachers. This is good practice as it develops a shared understanding of Achievement Standard requirements and must continue. However, it is recommended that:

- Heads of Department make use of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority '*request for clarification*' process for any Achievement Standard interpretation issue because these requests are answered directly by National Assessment Moderators.

Principals

According to Halawah (2005), creating a collaborative environment is critical for successful school improvement. Most principals initiate and encourage collaboration in their schools. This is admirable practice and must be sustained. However, it is recommended that principals:

- Create an atmosphere where open, transparent and clear communication thrives.
- Should encourage regular face-to-face communication between Heads of Department, between Heads of Department and Principal's Nominees and between Principal's Nominees and School Relationship Managers as this creates and maintains working relationships.

Recommendations for further research

My research revealed some unexpected and interesting findings like the lack of communication with the National Assessment Moderators. For future research, it will be interesting to interview NZQA National Assessment Moderators and investigate:

- Communication perspectives of NZQA National Assessment Moderators.
- Job scope of the National Assessment Moderators.
- Constraints placed on them with regards to advice and direction that they can give to teachers and Heads of Department.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Interview Schedule – Principal’s Nominee (PN)

Communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools – effective or not?

Institution: _____

Date: _____

Interviewee: _____

Position: _____

Interviewer: _____

Digital recording number: _____

1. Briefly describe your role as PN in the school.

Prompt:

- 1.1 How long have you been in this role?

2. Can you describe your last communication with NZQA?

Prompts:

- 2.1 What was the nature of the communication?
- 2.2 Why did it happen?
- 2.3 How did it happen?

3. Can you comment on the clarity of the communication?

Prompts:

- 3.1 Was there any ambiguity?
- 3.2 Did you understand all the information provided?

4. Considering your communication with NZQA, can you comment on the responsiveness of your point of contact?

Prompts:

- 4.1 Was the NZQA person helpful?
- 4.2 Did you feel supported?
- 4.3 Did the communication help to answer your question?

5. Can you comment on the nature of the relationship between you and the SRM?

Prompt:

- 5.1 Is it a collegial relationship?
- 5.2 Is the SRM transparent?
- 5.3 Do you find the SRM to be collaborative?
- 5.4 Do you think that you and the SRM have a good working relationship?

6. Considering your communication with NZQA, can you comment on your perception of the message conveyed?

Prompts:

- 6.1 Was the language and tone used by the SRM appropriate?
- 6.2 Reflecting on when you first communicated with the SRM in this role, has there been a change in language and tone in communication?

7. Can you comment on any barriers that you experience when communicating with the SRM?

Prompts:

- 7.1 Do you experience any difficulty in making contact with the SRM?
- 7.2 Does the SRM use acronyms and technical jargon?
- 7.3 Are any local expressions that are unfamiliar to you used?

8. In any communication, has the SRM become defensive?

Prompts:

- 8.1 Was your point of view being listened to?
- 8.2 Did you get the impression that the SRM was trying not to put NZQA in a compromising situation?

Appendix 2

Interview schedule – HOD focus group

Welcome

I am Kamaseelan Govender and will be the moderator of this focus group. I will be facilitating proceedings.

Our topic is: *Communication between New Zealand Qualifications and secondary schools – effective or not?*

The results of this focus group will be used for evaluating communication between NZQA and secondary schools.

You were selected because you are a middle manager who communicates with NZQA.

Guidelines

There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view.

The session is being tape-recorded, one person speaking at a time.

We are on a first name basis.

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views.

I ask that you turn off your mobile phones but if you are expecting an important call, please set the device to silent, take the call outside and return to the group as soon as possible.

Questions

1. What is your role as HOD in the school?

Prompt:

- 1.1 How long have you been in this role?

2. Have you communicated directly with NZQA?

Prompts:

- 2.1 With whom did you communicate?
- 2.2 What was the nature of the communication?
- 2.3 How did it happen?
- 2.4 Did you initiate this communication?

3. How are NZQA requirements around assessment communicated to you?

Prompt:

- 3.1 Is this communication clear?

- 3.2 Is this communication consistent?
- 3.3 Do all HODs have the same conception of the requirements for:
- a) university entrance
 - b) literacy and numeracy
 - c) subject endorsement?

4. NZQA determine requirements and interpretations of the standards. Are these requirements and interpretations communicated clearly to you?

Prompts:

- 4.1 Who is responsible for communicating this information to teachers?
- 4.2 How is this information communicated to the teaching sector?

5. The validity of NCEA is underpinned by external moderation, which is the responsibility of NZQA. What relationship do you have with NZQA through moderation?

Prompts:

- 5.1 Who is responsible for external moderation?
- 5.2 Is there any support provided by NZQA for assessment?

6. Moderation reports are communication tools. What is your view on moderation reports?

Prompts:

- 6.1 Comment on the language and tone in these reports.
- 6.2 Comment on how supportive/helpful these reports are.

7. Comment on the attitude of the moderators.

Prompts:

- 7.1 Are the moderators collaborative?
- 7.2 Do the moderators appear to build good working relationships with teachers/HODs?

8. Are there any barriers that you have experienced in your communication with NZQA?

Prompts:

- 8.1 Are NZQA moderators easily accessible for advice/guidance?
- 8.2 Are NZQA assessment documents easily found on the website?

9. Suppose that you had the opportunity to comment to NZQA on their communication with the teaching sector, what would you say?

Appendix 3

Interview schedule – SRM focus group

Welcome

I am Kamaseelan Govender and will be the moderator of this focus group. I will be facilitating proceedings.

Our topic is *Effective communication between New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools*.

The results of this focus group will be used for evaluating communication between NZQA and secondary schools.

You were selected because you are the point of contact between NZQA and secondary schools.

Guidelines

There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view.

The session is being tape-recorded, one person speaking at a time.

We are on a first name basis.

You don't need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views.

I ask that you turn off your mobile phones but if you are expecting an important call, please set the device to silent, take the call outside and return to the group as soon as possible.

Questions

1. What is your role as SRM in NZQA?

Prompt:

- 1.1 How long have you been in this role?

2. Can you describe your last communication with a PN?

Prompts:

- 2.1 What was the nature of the communication?
- 2.2 Why did it happen?
- 2.3 How did it happen?

3. Reflecting on communication with schools, can you comment on the responsiveness of the PNs?

Prompts:

- 3.1 How long do they take to get back to you if they miss your first call?
- 3.2 How quickly do they respond to requests for information?
- 3.3 Are they often asking for guidance regarding national assessment matters?

4. Can you comment on the nature of the relationships between you and your PNs?

Prompts:

- 4.1 Are they collegial relationships?
- 4.2 Are all PNs transparent?
- 4.3 Do you find the PNs to be collaborative?
- 4.4 Do you have a good working relationship with all your PNs?

5. Can you comment on any barriers that you experience when communicating with PNs?

Prompts:

- 5.1 Do you experience any difficulty in contacting PNs?
- 5.2 Do PNs use any acronyms relative to their school that you are not familiar with?

6. In any communication, has the PN become defensive?

Prompts:

- 6.1 What did you feel about your point of view being listened to?
- 6.2 Did you get the impression that the PN was trying not to put the school in a compromising situation?

7. If you had the opportunity to comment on the manner in which PNs communicate with you (NZQA), what would you say?

Appendix 4



Title of Thesis: Communication between the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools – effective or not?

My name is Kamaseelan Govender and I am currently enrolled in the Master of Educational Leadership and Management degree in the Department of Education at Unitec Institute of Technology. I am seeking your help in meeting the requirements of research for a Thesis course, which forms a substantial part of this degree.

The aim of my project is to:

1. To identify factors that contribute to effective communication between secondary schools and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).
2. To investigate the challenges to effective communication practices.
3. To analyse what strategies are used to overcome challenges associated to effective communication practices

I request your participation in the following way. I will like to use XXX College as a research site to conduct an individual interview with the PN and a focus group interview with the Heads of Departments (except the HOD Science and Chemistry). I will also be asking you to sign a consent form regarding this event (attached). Also, please be advised that this research does not involve students.

Neither you nor your organisation will be identified in the Thesis. I will be recording the contribution of those being interviewed and will provide a transcript (or summary of findings if appropriate) for them to check before data analysis is undertaken. I do hope that you will agree to take part and that you will find this participation of interest. If you have any queries about the project, you may contact my supervisor at Unitec Institute of Technology.

My supervisor is XXX and may be contacted by email or phone.

Phone: (09) XXXXX

Email: xxxx@unitec.ac.nz

Yours sincerely

Kamaseelan Govender

Appendix 5



PRO-FORMA CONSENT FORM - ADULTS

TO:

FROM:

DATE:

RE: Communication between New Zealand Qualifications Authority and secondary schools – effective or not?

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project for the *Master of Educational Leadership & Management*. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered. I understand that neither my name nor the name of my organisation will be used in any public reports, and that I may withdraw myself or any information I have provided for this project without penalty of any sort.

I agree to take part in this project.

Signed: _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER:

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from (date) to (date). If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 6162). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.