

EDUCATION DEBATE THE SAME THE WORLD OVER

Jan Kerr, Administrator, ACSNZ, reports on her recent visit to Cambridge.

Having just returned from a visit to the UK, it is interesting to see that many of the education issues being discussed in the media are the same in the UK and New Zealand. Debates over standards, the “dumbing-down” of qualifications, the value of coursework and employer bodies bemoaning the lack of basic skills among school-leavers.

The highlight of my time in the UK was a visit to CIE Head Office in Cambridge to meet the CEO, Ann Puntis, and senior management. It is an impressive place and it was nice to meet the people I have been dealing with long-distance.



I discovered that over 200 schools in the UK are now offering Cambridge International Examinations in preference to the local UK qualification. Loretto School, for example, is the first school in Scotland to offer IGCSE in Science. James Torrance, the Head of Department, Science, says that the re-writing of the mainstream UK Science syllabus focussed on making Science more accessible, with less actual scientific content. He says the result has been that the new syllabus is less interesting and challenging but that the Cambridge IGCSE is both accessible and scientifically rigorous, hence the decision to move to CIE.

CIE is introducing a new alternative examination in the UK to the A-Level called the Pre-U. The purpose, according to newspaper reports, is to distinguish between super-bright students and those who are merely well-drilled by their teachers. The existing grade A will be replaced with 4 different achievement bands. The Pre-U examination will award nine grades or bands and is designed to be more challenging than A-Levels, which are widely reported to have become easier. It will be interesting to see how many UK schools pick up the Pre-U and offer it to their students.

In response to reports of students using the internet to cheat in coursework, a major change to the UK qualification GCSE was announced while I was there. Students will be banned from writing up coursework at home. Rather, they will be required to complete projects in class under exam-style conditions. This is to get around the fact that students can go online or ask their parents for help in completing coursework at home. The assignments to be done as coursework will be set by exam boards rather than teachers to ensure the tasks are “more rigorous”, according to the Daily Telegraph (15 June 2007).

Teachers have been accused of deliberately marking some students’ work to boost the schools’ position in the league tables, another cited reason for the move to have exam boards setting coursework. Teachers will still mark the work but it is hoped the new system will allow more effective moderation.

And lastly, a former head of the Confederation of British Industry, Sir Digby Jones, was reported as saying the lack of basic skills among school leavers is a “national disgrace” which threatens economic stability and has left Britain open to competitors from overseas. While this remark came across as somewhat xenophobic, it did strike a chord with our own statistics on the under-achievement of Maori boys, in particular.

Get them all doing Cambridge International Examinations, I say.