



**OFFICE OF FILM  
& LITERATURE  
CLASSIFICATION**

*Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tuhituhinga*

**Censor for a  
Day**

• **Term 3, 2009**

[www.censorship.govt.nz](http://www.censorship.govt.nz)

0508 CENSOR (236 767)

## From the Chief Censor

A significant proportion of New Zealand's movie-going audience consists of teenagers. It is important therefore that the Classification Office stays in touch with the opinions of teenagers. The Censor for a Day programme forms a vital part of this goal. We also hope that participating students take away both a knowledge of classification law and an understanding of how it is possible to balance the freedom of expression with social responsibility.

Bill Hastings, Chief Censor of Film and Literature



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## Introduction

The second and final Censor for a Day event of 2009, featuring the film *Jennifer's Body*, was held in cinemas in Wellington, Napier, New Plymouth, Wanganui and Palmerston North.

329 students were given a law lecture by Chief Censor, Bill Hastings, explaining New Zealand's Films, Videos and Publications Classification Act. The students then watched the film, which had yet to be released in cinemas, and filled out a form recommending a classification and descriptive note and explained the reasons behind their choices. The Chief Censor then led a discussion about the film, the students' recommended classifications, and about the classification system in general.

## The Film

*Jennifer's Body*, directed by Karyn Kusama, is classified R16 with the descriptive note 'violence, horror, sex scenes and offensive language'. It is essentially a 'comedy horror' intended – in the words of writer Diablo Cody – to 'pay tribute to some of the conventions that we've already seen in horror, yet, at the same time, kind of turn them on their ear'.

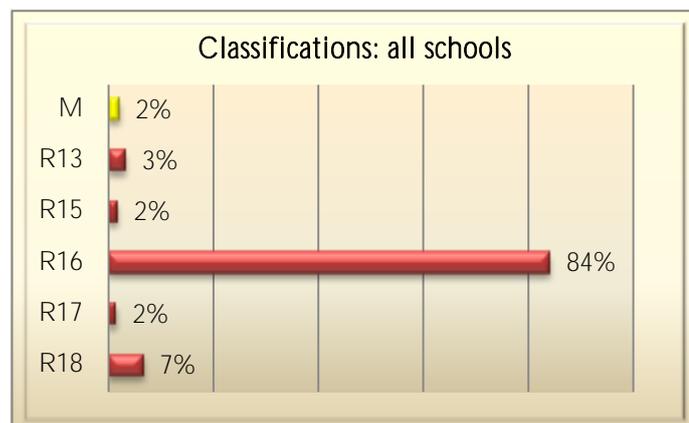
The plot involves the high school student Jennifer (played by Megan Fox) being transformed against her will into a flesh-eating demon, or succubus. The story is told from the point of view of Jennifer's best friend, nicknamed 'Needy' (played by Amanda Seyfried). The film largely revolves around their deteriorating relationship as Needy comes to terms with the fact that her best friend is eating her classmates; and that Jennifer is, in Needy's words, 'evil...and not just high school evil'.

A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* concluded that 'the movie deserves – and is likely to win – a devoted cult following, despite its flaws' and that these flaws were 'mitigated by a sensibility that mixes playful pop-culture ingenuity with a healthy shot of feminist anger'. Film critic Roger Ebert praised the film, saying that Cody's screenplay 'brings to this material a certain edge, a kind of gleeful relish, that's uncompromising. This isn't your assembly-line teen horror thriller...as a movie about a flesh-eating cheerleader, it's better than it has to be'.

## Survey Results: an Overview

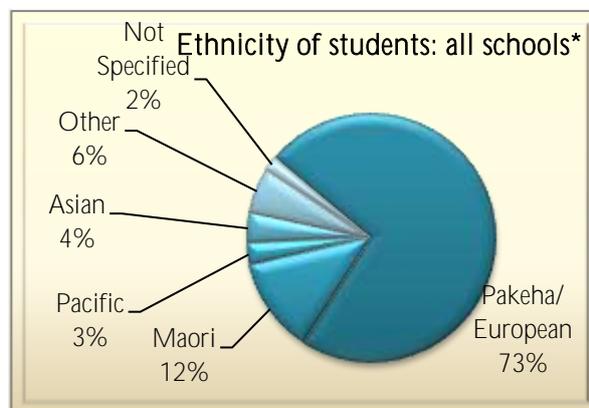
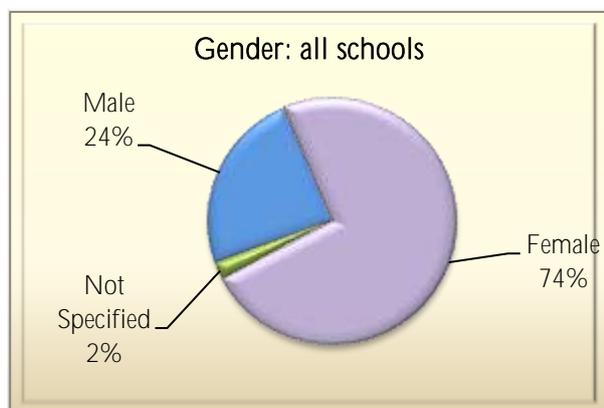
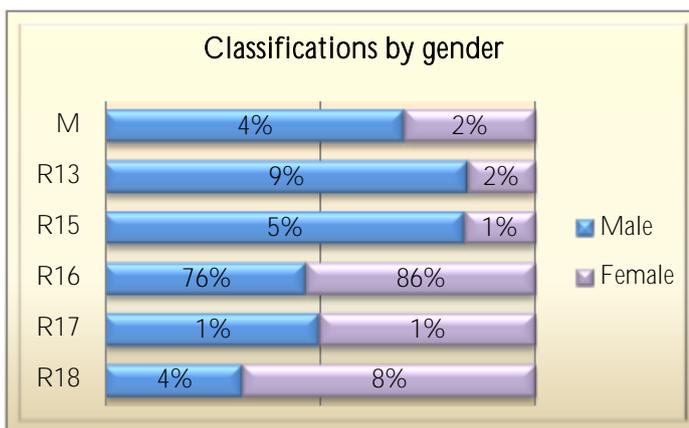
Students overwhelmingly felt that *Jennifer's Body* should be age restricted because of its treatment of sex, horror, crime, cruelty, violence and offensive language. The great majority recommended that the film be restricted to people aged 16 years and over. Only 2% did not recommend a restriction and felt that the M rating was more suitable – as one student put it, 'an R16 rating...would neglect the target audience, and the market for these films is generally those mature enough to enjoy the film without harm'.

There were significant differences between the classifications recommended by males and females. Overall, female students recommended higher classifications than



male students. While almost all participants recommended a restriction, males were proportionately twice as likely to classify the film as unrestricted (M), and females were twice as likely to classify the film as R18. A much higher proportion of male students opted for lower restrictions – such as R13 or R15.

Around three times as many female students participated in the event as male students. Just under three quarters of the students identified as Pakeha/ European; 12% identified as Maori, 4% as Asian, and 3% as Pacific Islanders. 6% indicated an ethnicity other than those above, while 2% did not specify an ethnicity.

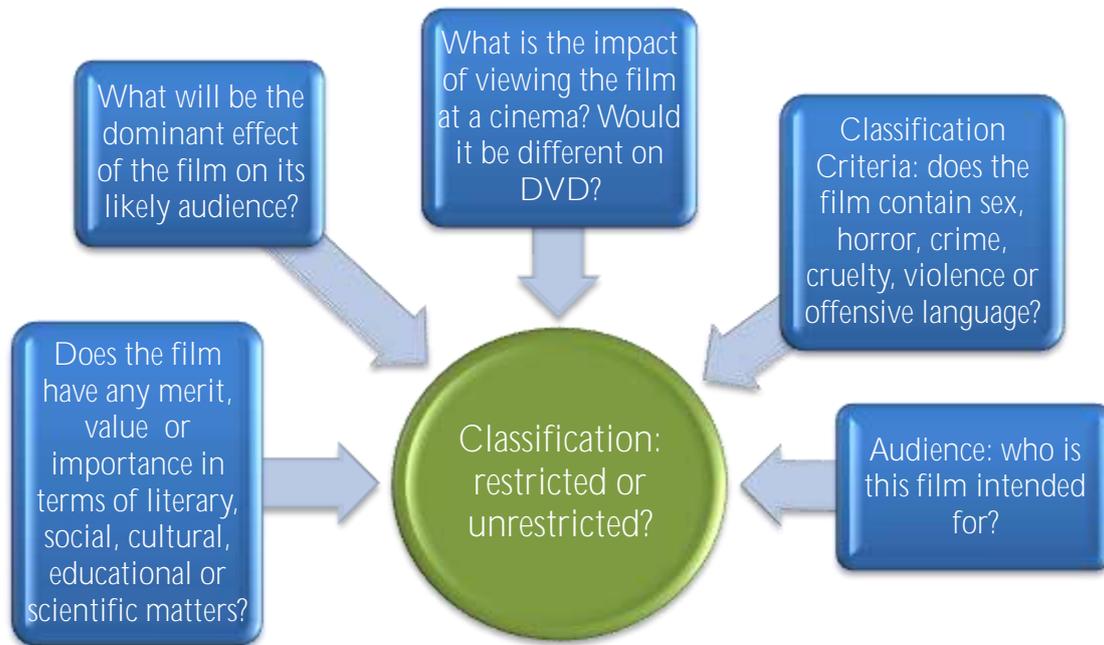


\*Some students indicated more than one ethnicity



### The Classification Exercise

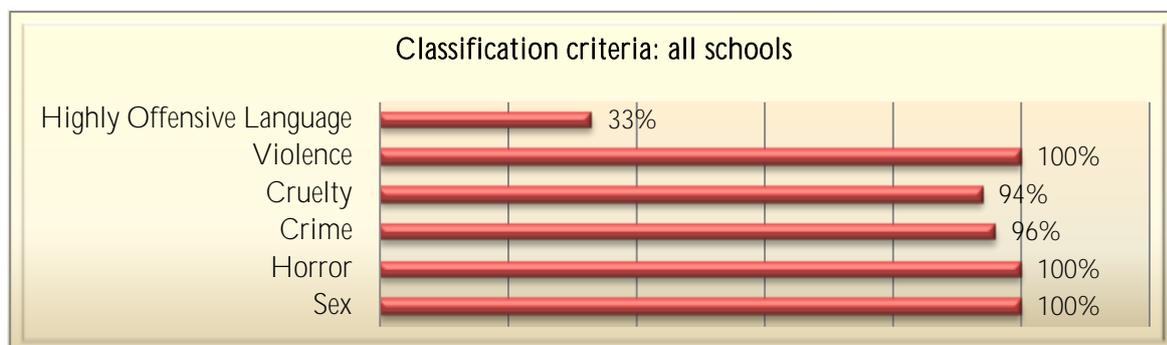
Students filled out the classification form – which is a pared down version of a 21-page Consideration Sheet classification officers use when classifying a film. The exercise involved students answering the following questions which relate to specific sections in the Classification Act. The students were asked to use their answers to these questions to decide on a suitable classification and descriptive note.



After evaluating *Jennifer's Body* using New Zealand's classification criteria, students decided on a particular age restriction – for example 'R16' or 'R18', or they decided the film should be unrestricted, for example, classifying the film as 'M' (recommended for mature audiences 16 years and over). While films can also be classified as 'G' or 'PG', no students chose these classifications for *Jennifer's Body*.

### Survey Results

In order for a film to be age restricted, or banned, it must in some way deal with material such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty or violence. Films can also be age restricted if they contain highly offensive language.



Almost all students agreed that *Jennifer's Body* contained the core subject criteria. Only a third, however, believed that the film contained highly offensive language.

### Material Considered by the Classification Office

While both the Classification Office and the students agreed that the film contained sex, horror, crime, cruelty and violence, the Office restricted the film to people aged 16 years and over because of the film's treatment of sex, horror, violence and highly offensive language – matters of cruelty and crime did not impact on the reasons for the classification. In the Summary of Reasons for Decision it was noted that:

*The gory nature of many of the depictions makes them likely to greatly shock and disturb children, and casual use of highly offensive language by some of the characters is likely to encourage children to think that such language is commonly acceptable. The film's treatment of sexual matters, particularly the way they are depicted alongside violence and death, may confuse or greatly disturb children, and may adversely influence younger teenager's attitudes to sexual relationships. Younger viewers may be inured to the effects of violence by repeated exposure to depictions of violence and horror, which may cause them to consider violent behaviour as normal or without consequence. Older teenagers and adults can put the film's more challenging content into the context of a farcical, unrealistic, comedic horror story.*

### Students' Views

Students had widely differing viewpoints about how potentially restricted content was used in the film. The following are some examples:

#### Sex

The following student's comment was generally agreed with: 'sex was presented in a few different ways: on an intimate level the audience viewed a couple having intercourse...however, Jennifer's references to sex were disgusting, as she used her body to lure her prey'. Another put it this way: 'The actual sexual activity shown in the film wasn't that offensive...I think the sexual references/innuendos shown through Jennifer were more offensive'. An aspect that was commonly brought up in discussion was that Needy and her boyfriend 'were using protection' during their sex scene, and that this was a positive message for young people. Another said that 'sex is dealt with as a natural part of adolescence...as well as a tool in life'. Another student felt that the sexual content of the film was 'practically porn', but still suitable for 16 year olds.

Many students were uncomfortable with the ostensible link between violence and sex in the film, as '[Jennifer's] primary "modus operandi" is seducing then eating victims'. When asked about the possible harm that could be caused if the film was unrestricted, many students thought that the sexual content would confuse or upset children, especially in combination with the horror and violence. One student singled out the same-sex kissing scene between Needy and Jennifer as potentially 'offensive to people with religious beliefs', another remarked that the scene should not be controversial, because 'it's not like it's not ok for gays and lesbians to have a good relationship'.

#### Horror

Students considered the film to be, above all, 'a horror film: it showed many codes and conventions of the genre'. While the horror scenes were considered to be quite strong by some students ('...seeing Jennifer drink blood out of a body was disturbing and made me feel physically sick.'), the possible harmful effect was mitigated somewhat because 'as things got more surreal it was more funny than scary' and that the 'horror

was not sustained – very slapstick in some ways’ and therefore should not be made R18. However, students commonly felt that the film’s horrific elements would disturb children and give them nightmares.

## Crime

Criminal activity indicated by students included murder, breaking and entering, underage drinking and illicit drug use. One student felt the film ‘glamourised’ cocaine by depicting its use in scenes with the band members at the end of the film.

## Cruelty

Many students mentioned Jennifer’s use of both psychological and physical cruelty before she killed her victims, noting Jennifer’s belief that they ‘taste better’ when they are ‘hopeless’.

## Violence

Many students felt that the comedic aspects of the film made the violence less shocking. A student who recommended the film be classified as R13 thought ‘you could laugh at [the violence]’ and this made it less harmful to young audiences. In contrast, a student who thought the film should be classified as R16 felt that ‘mixing comedy with horror makes it seem like violence can be fun’. Another said that ‘the violence by itself would be less of an issue, but this movie tries to make people screaming in pain and fear and begging for their lives funny’.

## Offensive language

While most students believed the film had offensive language, most did not think the language was ‘highly offensive’ – ‘you wouldn’t rate that film based on its language’ one student remarked.

## Religious content

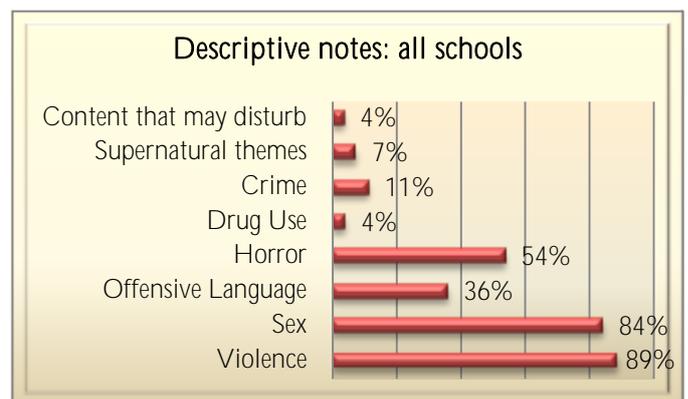
Some students felt that the occult and religious content of the film could be offensive to religious people, particularly Christians. One student gave an example from the beginning of the film where Needy remarks, about prayer, ‘I say it but it doesn’t work’. One student found it offensive that the film seemed to suggest ‘you can only come back to life as a demon’, another believed that condom use in the film could be offensive to Catholics. Overall, students did not focus on this aspect. As one student put it, ‘it’s not really anti-religious – unlike the *Da Vinci Code*’.

## Self harm

One student thought that the scene where Jennifer burns and cuts herself to demonstrate her demonic powers could negatively influence those under 16 – particularly as Jennifer is depicted as the ‘popular’ girl.

## The Descriptive Note

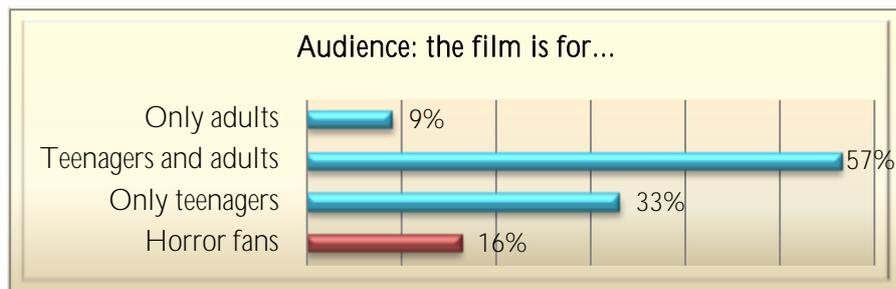
Descriptive notes inform the public about content within a film which may concern them. The descriptive note for *Jennifer’s Body* informs potential viewers that the film contains ‘violence, horror, sex scenes and offensive language’. When students were asked what descriptive note they thought the film should have, most noted ‘violence’ (89%), followed closely by ‘sex’ (84%), and then ‘horror’ (54%), and ‘offensive language’ (36%).



**Audience**

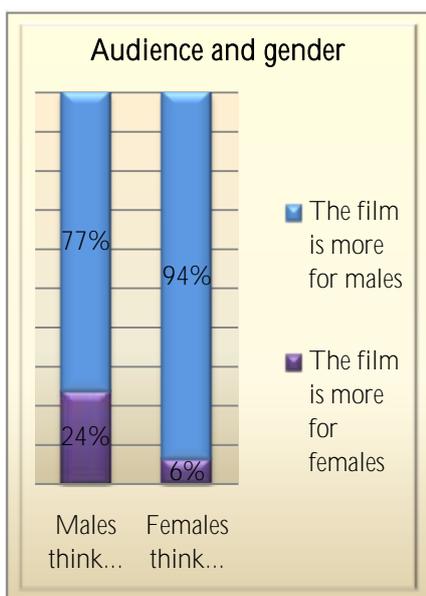
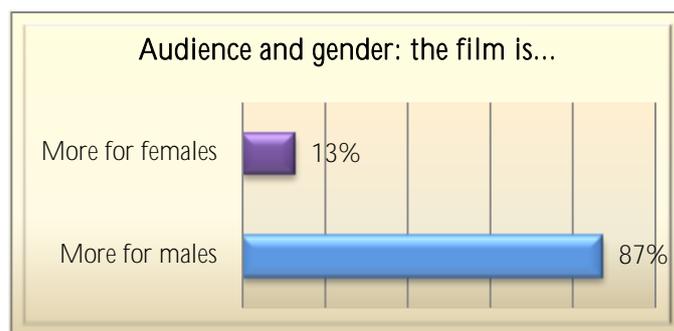
**Age**

Students were asked who they thought was the intended audience for the film. The majority felt the film was aimed at both a teenage and adult – mostly young adult – audience. Just over a third thought the film was aimed solely at teenagers, as the film is about high school students and uses language and references familiar to a teen audience. A minority (9%) believed the film was aimed at an adult audience over 18 years old. Sixteen percent of students also noted the film was intended for ‘horror’ or ‘scary movie’ fans.



**Gender**

Screenwriter Diablo Cody has said she wanted *Jennifer's Body* to explore ‘the intensity of female bonds’ and in particular the friendships of adolescent girls: ‘I wanted to show how almost horrific that devotion can be. It's almost parasitic’. She has said that, along with the director, she is an ‘outspoken’ feminist who wanted to ‘subvert the classic horror model of women being terrorized’ – she wanted the film to give females a sense of empowerment.



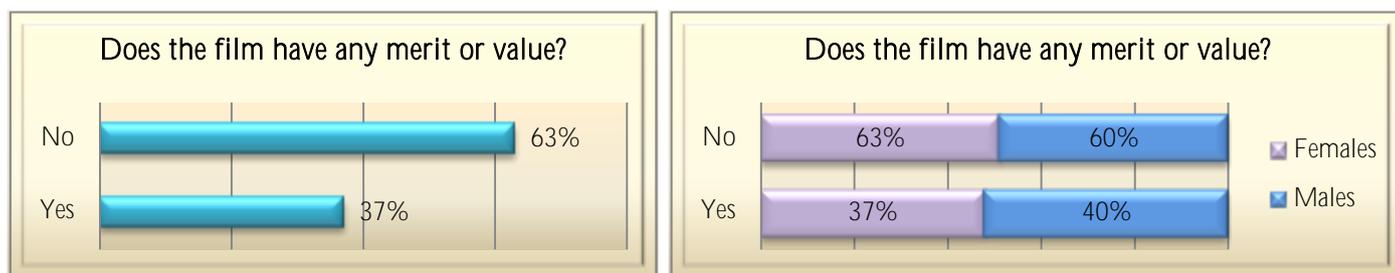
Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to see that, of the students who indicated that the film was intended more for males or more for females, the great majority indicated males. Just under a quarter of the male students felt the film was intended for females, and only 6% of the female students agreed. Students who indicated that *Jennifer's Body* was intended more for men and boys often cited the sensual kissing scene between Jennifer and Needy as being an example of unnecessary titillation intended to attract heterosexual males to the film. Students indicating the film was more for females noted that the killer being a girl hunting boys was ‘a good change’ from other horror films. Another student summed up many students’ general feelings, saying the film was for: ‘Boys because there are lesbian scenes, violence and Megan Fox; Girls because of cute dialogue and a good storyline’.

### Dominant Effect

When asked what the dominant effect on the film's likely audience would be, most students thought it would make people scared, make them laugh, thrill them; or make them 'disgusted', 'disturbed' or 'horrified' by the killing scenes.

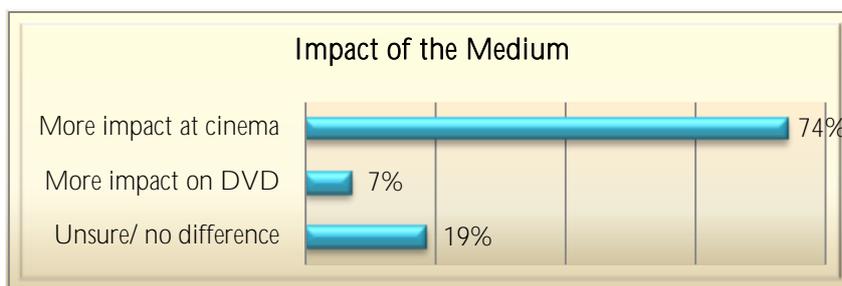
### Merit, Value or Importance

Students were asked whether they thought *Jennifer's Body* had any 'merit, value or importance in terms of literary, social, cultural, educational or scientific matters'. The majority felt the film did not have any merit or value. One student inclined to this view remarked that the film had 'absolutely none. Saying *Jennifer's Body* has social, cultural, educational or scientific merit would be like using *Hannah Montana* as an example of intelligence in American tweens'. Of those who thought that it did have merit, some indicated the film's portrayal of teen relationships had social value; some that the occult aspects had cultural or scientific value; and some that the film had literary and artistic merit. A similar proportion of male and female students felt the film had some value, with males slightly more inclined to this view.



### Impact of the Medium

Students were asked if the experience of viewing the film would be different on DVD as opposed to the cinema. The great majority felt that the film would not have the same impact on DVD due to the surround sound, darkness, large screen and atmosphere created by the audience at the cinema. Those who felt the impact would be greater on DVD believed the audience in the cinema could be distracting; that it would be scarier at home alone; or that skipping to and replaying certain scenes could increase the film's overall impact.





The first event was held in Wellington at the Spectrum Theatre on Friday 11 September.

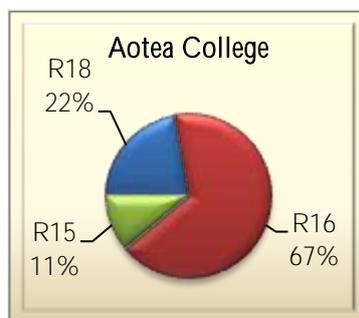
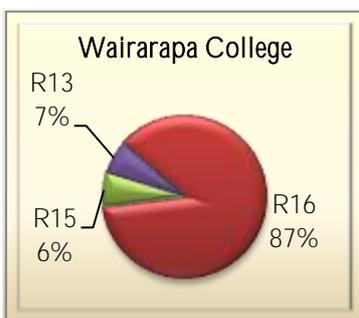
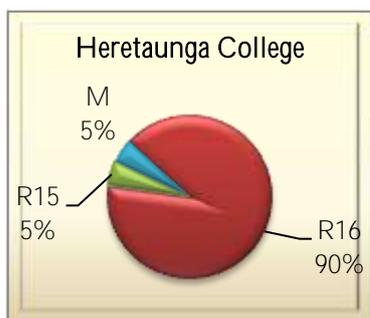
Out of a total of 63 students, 89% classified the film as R16, which was a bit higher than in the other 4 cities (83%). Wellington students were less likely to recommend a higher restriction, such as R18 (3% compared with 8% for the other cities).

There were 11 male students (17%), 51 female students (81%), and one student who did not specify a gender. Males and females differed in the classifications they chose. All males recommended the film be restricted, while 2% of females recommended the unrestricted M rating. Males were more

likely to choose a restriction other than R16, with some choosing R13, R15 or R18.

Wellington students were the only group in which a majority believed the film had some merit, value or importance. 60% of students thought the film had merit or value, including 73% of males and 53% of females.

43% of students thought that teenagers were the film's intended audience; 54% thought it was for teenagers and adults; and only 3% thought that it was aimed at adults only (which was below the average for all schools of 9%). Of those who indicated that the film was aimed more at a male or female audience, two thirds thought it was aimed at a male audience, compared with an average of 87% for all schools. One third thought it was aimed at a female audience, against an average of 13% for all schools.



## Napier

- St Joseph's Maori Girls' College
- Karamu High School
- William Colenso College

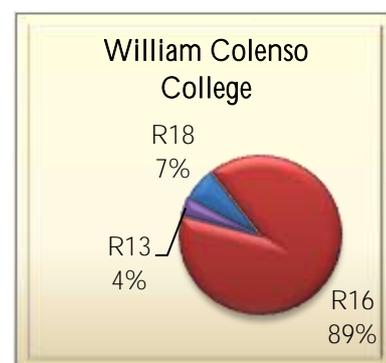
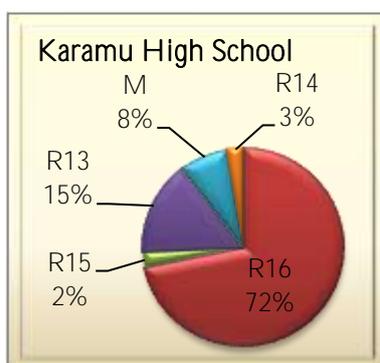
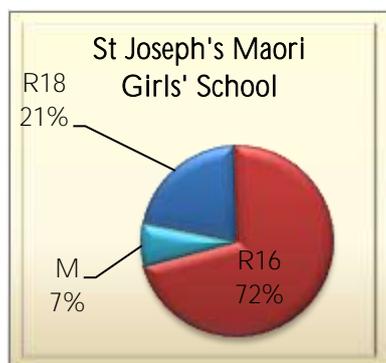
The Napier event was held at Reading Cinema on Monday 14 September.

Out of a total of 83 students, 78% classified the film as R16, which was lower than in the other 4 cities (86%). Napier students were more likely to recommend an unrestricted classification, with 5% choosing the M rating (compared with 1% for the other cities).

There were 28 male students (34%), 49 female students (60%) and five students who did not specify a gender. Females tended to recommend higher classifications than males. 11% of males chose the unrestricted M rating compared to 2% of females. 9% of females chose R18 and no males did.

When asked if the film had any merit, value or importance, Napier students were close to the overall average – 65% believed that the film did not have merit or value, with 34% believing it did.

45% of students thought that teenagers were the film's intended audience, 46% that it was teenagers and adults, and 10% thought that it was aimed at adults only. Of those who indicated that the film was aimed more at a male or female audience, two thirds thought it was aimed at a male audience, compared with an average of 87% for all schools. One third thought it was aimed at a female audience, against an average of 13% for all schools.



## New Plymouth

- Francis Douglas Memorial College
- New Plymouth Girls' High School
- Sacred Heart Girl's College
- Stratford High School

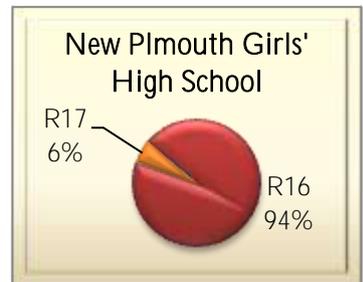
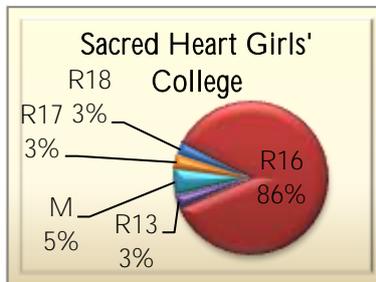
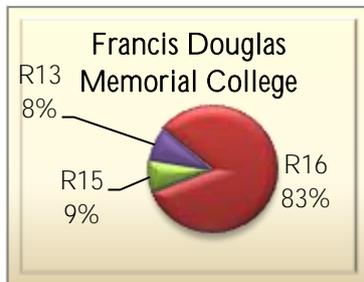
The New Plymouth event was held at Skycity Toptown Cinema 5 on Tuesday 15 September.

Out of a total of 89 students, 90% classified the film as R16, which was higher than in the other 4 cities (82%). New Plymouth students were less likely to recommend R18 (the highest classification) – 1% chose R18 compared with 9% for the other cities.

There were 14 male students (16%) and 74 female students (84%). Females tended to recommend higher restrictions than males. However, 3% of females chose the unrestricted M rating and no males did. 9% of females chose R18 and 4% chose R17 while no males did.

When asked if the film had any merit, value or importance, New Plymouth students were close to the overall average – 63% believed that the film did not have merit or value, with 38% believing it did. Males were less likely to think the film had merit or value, only 21% agreeing.

20% of students thought that teenagers were the film's intended audience, which was below the average for all schools (33%). 69% thought the film was for teenagers and adults, this was above the average of 57%. 9% thought that it was aimed at adults only. Everyone who indicated that the film was aimed more at a male or female audience believed it was more for males.



## Wanganui

- Wanganui Collegiate School
- Wanganui City College
- Ruapehu College

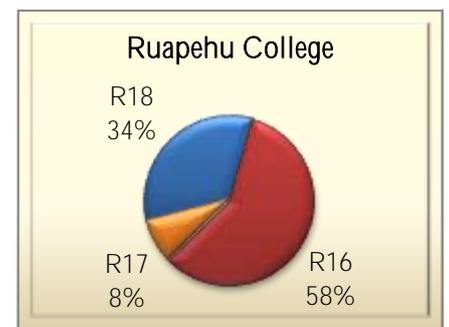
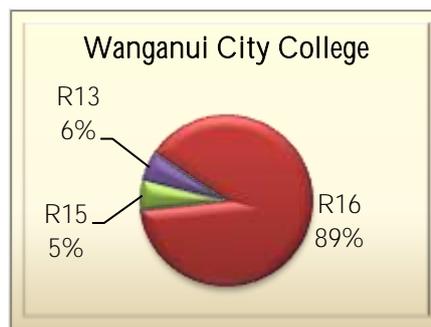
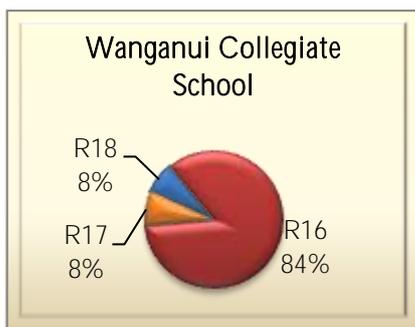
The Wanganui event was held at Embassy Cinema 3 on Wednesday 16 September.

Out of a total of 43 students, 79% chose to classify the film as R16. Wanganui students were twice as likely as students from other cities to restrict the film to 18 year olds, with 12% choosing this classification. No students chose to classify the film as unrestricted.

There were 19 male students (44%) and 24 female students (56%), making the Wanganui event the most gender balanced of the 5 cities. Females were more likely to recommend higher restrictions than males – with one in 5 choosing R18. No males chose this classification.

Wanganui students were much less likely to think the film had any merit, value or importance – only 24% believed the film had merit, compared with an average of 37% for all cities. Male students were far more likely to agree the film had merit – with 37% believing that it did compared to only 13% of female students.

28% of students thought that teenagers were the film's intended audience, against an average for all cities of 33%. 67% thought the film was for teenagers and adults, which was above the average of 57%. While 12% of students recommended the film be restricted to adults only, only 5% thought adults alone were the intended audience. Everyone who indicated that the film was aimed more at a male or female audience believed it was more for males.



## Palmerston North

- Nga Tawa Diocesan School
- Fielding High School
- Rangitikei College

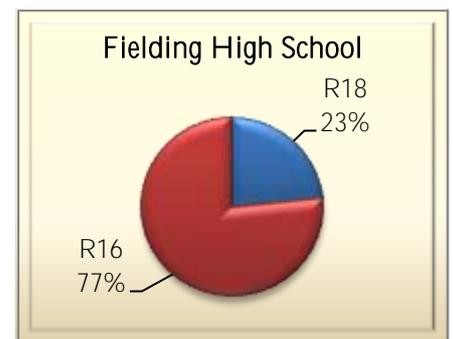
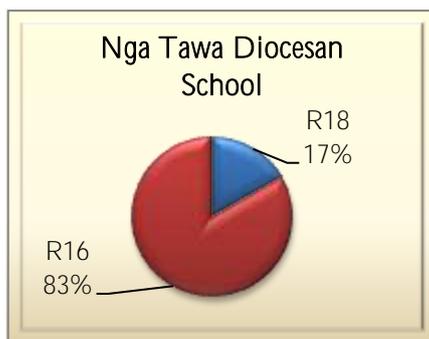
The Palmerston North event was held at Downtown Cinemas on Thursday 17 September.

Out of a total of 51 students, 82% recommended a classification of R16. Palmerston North students were the most likely group to recommend a restriction to 18 and over, with 18% choosing this compared with an average of 5% for the other 4 cities. No students chose to classify the film as unrestricted.

There were 7 male students (14%), 43 female students (84%), and one student who did not specify a gender. While a high proportion of both males and females chose the R18 classification, males were around twice as likely to recommend this – with almost a third choosing R18.

Palmerston North students were less likely overall to think the film had any merit, value or importance – 29% believed the film had merit, compared with an average of 37% for all cities. However, male students were far more likely to agree the film had merit – with 43% believing that it did compared to only 26% of female students.

30% of students thought that teenagers were the film's intended audience, against an average for all cities of 33%. 50% thought the film was for both teenagers and adults, which was below the average of 57%. Palmerston North students were more likely to think the film was intended only for adults, with 20% indicating this, against the average for all schools of 9%. Of those who indicated that the film was intended more for males or females, 91% believed it was aimed at a male audience.



## Teacher feedback results

Teachers who attended Censor for a Day were encouraged to fill in a feedback form about the event. This feedback helps us ensure that the event is meeting the needs of media studies educators and their students.

Of the teachers who filled in the feedback forms, all agreed that:

The length of the programme was suitable

The classification form provided on the day was easy to follow

Students were provided with sufficient information

The programme enhanced students' understanding of film censorship

Their school would wish to participate in a similar event in the future

Teachers had the following to say about the film:

'It is certainly aimed at the teenage audience and generated active discussion of the rating.'

'Very suitable due to the 'teenage nature' of the film.'

Most teachers said the time slot was suitable, however one said the timing of the event fell during their exams which restricted student attendance.

Most teachers agreed that improvements were not needed to the programme. However, one indicated that the discussion at the end could have been shorter, and one that the event did not last as long as had been indicated.

When asked to rate their students' experience of Censor for a Day, seven rated it as 'excellent', three as 'very good', and one as 'good'.

Some further comments:

'Mr Hastings struck just the right note between formality and friendliness. Students felt valued.'

'Censor for a Day...is most informative...It is an ideal format for educating and informing teenagers about classification.'

## Acknowledgements

The Classification Office would like to give a special thank you to Fox Distribution. Without distributors' generosity in lending us a pre-release film, Censor for a Day would not be possible.

We would also like to thank the Film and Video Labelling Body, who helped us find a suitable film, and the cinema operators, projectionists and caterers who did such a good job on the day and ensured the events ran smoothly – and that the students didn't go hungry!

Lastly we would like to thank the students and teachers from around the North Island who made the event another success – sometimes travelling considerable distances to attend – and who gave us invaluable feedback in the process.

The proposed schedule for the next Censor for a Day is term 1, 2010, in Christchurch, Dunedin and Wellington.

If you would like to attend a Censor for a Day event but are unable to, the Office is happy to send a speaker out to classes at no cost to the school. For more information please contact the Classification Office on 0508 CENSOR (0508 236 767) or at [information@copyright.govt.nz](mailto:information@copyright.govt.nz).

