

*Phase One Inquiry into the
Proposed Qualifications Reforms*

**Findings and
Recommendations
of the Tiro tiro Anō
Expert Panel**

September 2026

Foreword

Ko Te Reinga te maunga

Ko te Reinga te tangata

Ko Ngati Te Reinga me Te Pare Whero nga hapu

Ko Waimirirangi te whare

KO te Waihou o Rua te marae

Ko Te Rarawa ki te Hokianga te iwi

Ko te Kore Hokianga nui mai a Kupe te moana

Ko Paaka te ingoa whanau

Ko Moeke tenei

Mauri ora

Ko Tirotiro Anō te whakautu tuatahi a PPTA Te Wehengarua ki ngā whakahoutanga a te Kāwanatanga i te pou tarāwaho tohu mātauranga.

Nā ōku ake tohu mātauranga i āhei ai ahau ki te whai i tōku ara hei kaiako mō ngā tau e 25 ki Te Kura Tuarua o Motueka, me āku mahi, āku takoha hoki ki PPTA Te Wehengarua.

He tino pou te pou tarāwaho tohu mātauranga e angitu ai ngā ākonga. Me mārō, me tōkeke, me ū ki Te Tiriti o Waitangi, me ahu mai i ngā whakaaro o ngā kaiako, me hāngai hoki ki ngā taunakitanga tētahi pou tarāwaho e tika ana mō tōna kaupapa. E ai ki ngā rangahau i whaka-haeretia mō Tirotiro Anō, kāore ngā whakahoutanga e marohitia ana e eke ki ēnei paerewa. E whakaatu ana hoki aua rangahau kua whānui, kua hōhonu te whakahē a ngā mema ki ngā whakahoutanga e marohitia ana. Hei tauira, mō te taha ki a Māori, e kaha whakahē ana ngā mema i te kōrero ka whakapakari ngā whakahoutanga e marohitia ana i ngā ara e angitu ai ngā ākonga Māori hei Māori, ka āta tiaki hoki i te reo Māori, i te mātauranga Māori me ngā ara Māori. E kaha whakahē ana hoki ngā mema i te kōrero e whakaatu ana te hātepe whakahou i te haepapa ki Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Kua kōrero ahau ki ētahi kaiako Māori e māharahara ana, ki te rangirua te pou tarāwaho hou, ā, ki te kore hoki e taea te tohu hou te whiwhi, ka tokomaha ake pea ngā ākonga Māori pakeke ka wehe wawe i te kura. Ki te anga whakamua tonu ngā whakahoutanga e marohitia ana i tōna āhua o nāianei, e māharahara ana ahau ka ara ake anō he tauārai mō ngā ākonga Māori, mō ngā ākonga katoa hoki, kia angitu ai rātou i roto i tō tātou pūnaha mātauranga.

Hei kupu whakakapi māku ki tēnei kupu whakataki, anei tētahi whakatauki: He whakahou ora te mātauranga; ka huri te noho ora o te tangata, ā, ka waiho hei takoha mā āna mokopuna. Me whai rā i ngā kete o te mātauranga, kia puta ai ki te ao mārama.

He puna whakahou, he puna oranga te mātauranga. Mā reira e panoni ai te oranga o te tangata, ā, ka noho hei taonga tuku iho mā āna mokopuna. Nō reira, whāia ngā kete o te mātauranga, kia puta ai koe ki te ao mārama, ki te ao o te māramatanga.

Nō reira, mahia te mahi, kia puāwai ai!

Hei whakamutunga, ka tono ahau ki ngā mema kia āta wānanga i ngā kitenga me ngā tūtohutanga o Tirotiro Anō, hei whakatau i tā tātou whakautu ki ngā whakahoutanga e marohitia ana.

Mauriora!

Tirotiro anō is PPTA Te Wehengarua's initial response to the government's reforms of the qualifications framework.

My own qualifications have enabled my own career as a teacher of 25 years at Te Kura Tuarua o Motueka, and my work and contribution to PPTA Te Wehengarua.

The qualifications framework is essential to student success. A 'fit for purpose' qualifications framework should be rigorous, equitable, Te Tiriti centred, teacher informed and evidence based. Research conducted for Tirotiro Anō suggests the proposed reforms do not meet these standards. The research also indicates widely held and felt sentiments that members oppose the proposed reforms. For example, in relation to Māori, it is widely held that members strongly disagree that the proposed reforms strengthen opportunities for ākonga Māori to succeed as Māori, actively protect te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori and Māori pathways. Members strongly disagree that the reform process demonstrates accountability to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

I have spoken with many Māori kaiako who are concerned that the proposed reforms will see an increase in senior Māori students leaving school early if the new framework is vague and the new qualification unattainable. If the proposed reforms progress as they are, I am worried this will place further barriers to Māori and all students succeeding in our education system.

My final word to this foreword is a whakatauki: He whakahau ora te tamaturanga ka huri te noho ora te tangata ka waiho ia te takoha ma ona mokopuna me whāia ra ngā kete mātauranga ka puta ki te ao Mārama.

"Education is a source of renewal and wellbeing. It can transform a person's life and become a legacy for their grandchildren. Therefore, pursue the baskets of knowledge so that you may emerge into the world of light and understanding".

Nō reira, mahia te mahi. Do the work so you may flourish!

Finally, I ask members to consider the findings and recommendations in order to determine our response to the proposed reforms.

Mauri ora!

—Tirotiro anō Foreword by Kaumatua Moeke Paaka.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Panel bios	P06
Mihi / Acknowledgements	P08
He whakarāpopototanga / Executive summary	P09
Key findings	P10
Recommendations	P10
He kupu whakataki / Introduction	P11
He Tukanga / Methodology	P13

Part one: Te Tiriti, equity and aspirations

1.1	Kei Hea Tātau e Ahu Ana? Which Way in Education?	P16
1.2	Ka Mua, Ka Muri: Revisiting Te Tiro Hou Legacy	P51
1.3	Challenges and Issues in Implementing a New Qualifications System. A Narrative Review.	P63
1.4	Teachers' and school leaders' perspectives on current reform package	P84

Part two: Flexibility, Multiple Pathways, Learning, Curriculum, and Qualifications.

2.1	Flexibility doing Equity Work. Case studies	P104
2.2	Navigating Secondary Education	P117
2.3	The Rural Schooling Experience	P158
2.4	Pacific... without losing identity	P168
2.5	The Role of Assessment Flexibility in Supporting Diverse Learners within the Qualifications System	P195
2.6a	Beyond One Size Fits All: English, Equity and the Challenge of Qualification Reform	P209
2.6b	How Reforms May Influence Engagement in Mathematics	P228

Conclusion

He Āpitahanga - Appendices	P240
----------------------------	------

Panel bios

Claire Amos

Claire is the Principal at Albany Senior High School, Katoa Connect Member, William Pike Challenge Advisory Board Member, Aotearoa Education Collective Member, and co-founder of @DisruptEDNZ. She is passionate about family, thrifting, skating, tattoos and leading change in education, living by the mantra - “you can never be overdressed or overeducated”.

Andrew Basher

As a Westport resident of 26 years and Principal of Buller High School until the end of Term 1 this year, Andrew contributes a sound understanding of rural New Zealand secondary schooling as well as experience in working within the NCEA environment as a Head of Department, teacher, marker, panel leader and moderator over many years. Andrew was a member of the Equity Index Sector Reference Group (2020 – 2022) and has been a NZQA Panel Leader – Level 1 Mathematics (2005 – 2023).

Professor Gavin T L Brown (PhD, FAPS)

An expert in educational assessment, psychometrics and the psychology of assessment. Early in his career he taught for ten years in low SES Auckland high schools teaching English and ESOL. Then he spent nine years as a standardised test developer at NZCER and the University of Auckland. He has been employed as an academic at the University of Auckland since 2005, with a three-year stint at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. He is a highly cited and prolific publishing academic and is the lead editor for both editions of the Routledge Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment.

Dr Karen Dobric

Karen brings deep knowledge and experience in secondary, tertiary and vocational pathways. Karen’s governance and advisory roles include Co-Chair for the Ministry of Education Pathways Advisory Group, serving on the NZQA Scholarship Processes Advisory Group, over ten years in gifted education governance, and co-founding the Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association in 2021. She represented secondary on the NZQA Review Panel for the Level 1-4 Foundation and Bridging Qualifications in 2021 and 2026. Karen is currently engaging with VET as a member of the Pathways and Transitions Network Aotearoa. With a rich background as a senior lecturer in both university and polytechnic roles, Karen is an academic researcher, secondary educator and Deputy Principal at Papatoetoe High School.

Pip Osborne

An education consultant, a curriculum and assessment specialist predominantly in Technology Education. Pip, is a Professional Teaching Fellow at the University of Auckland and Kaiārahi for Technology Education New Zealand and Project Lead for Industry Led Subject development. Drawing on extensive teaching and national curriculum-development experience, Pip works across education and industry to strengthen curriculum, qualifications, and vocational pathways. Her work is grounded in collaboration, equity, and ensuring learning responds meaningfully to ākonga, whānau, and their communities.

Natalie Faitala

Natalie is Head of English at Wesley College and PPTA Executive member. Natalie brings a wealth of experience to the panel, having made significant contributions to NCEA, curriculum reform, including service on NZQA's Taupulega Pacific Advisory Group, the NCEA Professional Advisory Group, Review of Achievement Standards, Subject Expert Group for English, and the Te Mātaiaho English Curriculum Writing Group.

Katy Thorne

Leader of Mathematics at Aquinas College, Katy has been directly involved in the Numeracy and NCEA Level 1 pilot programmes. Katy is also President of the Bay of Plenty Maths Association.

Melissa Denzler

Kairangahau Māori | Māori researcher, NZCER. Melissa (Ngāti Maniapoto, Te Rarawa) is an experienced English-medium secondary educator committed to mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori, and honouring the diverse worldviews that shape Aotearoa. At NZCER, she contributes to kaupapa Māori and equity-focused projects that centre the voices of those most affected by systems change. Melissa also works extensively within the sector to support equitable use of assessment and data practices.

Kate Gainsford

Immediate past Principal of Aotea College and Secondary Principals' Council chairperson, Kate has represented secondary teachers and principals in democratically elected positions in NZPPTA for more than twenty years. In this time her work included contribution to education agency reference and advisory groups, including ERO, NZQA and joint work with Ministry of Education. Kate's experience as a teacher of three senior secondary subjects and her subsequent experience as a senior leader and principal and her involvement with the 2005 Scholarship Review, has seen a sustained interest and participation in curriculum and assessment matters in New Zealand.

Mihi

Acknowledgements

Whaea Gazala Maihi and Moeke Paaka are acknowledged for their knowledge, guidance, wisdom in ensuring the inquiry remained grounded in its kaupapa Māori approach.

Secondary teachers and principals who gave up their time to participate and contribute to the inquiries, in surveys, focus groups and case studies.

All Members of NZPPTA Te Wehengarua who took part in the consultation.

Ying Wang and Meiyong Hong from Auckland University who provided invaluable technical expertise in quantitative data analysis and interpretation.

Michael Johnston, Bali Haque, Judie Alison, Josh Williams, Dr Therese Ford and Bruce Jepson, Te Akatea, Hamish Davidson and Ministry of Education officials for their insights and detailed information about aspects of the reform package.

Fran Renton and Kathleen Kaveney of the PPTA National Office for providing ongoing assistance throughout phase one of the Tiro tiro Anō inquiry.

NZQA, Subject Associations and professional organisations and networks who supported the māhi of different inquiries in phase one of the Tiro tiro Anō inquiry.



He whakarāpopototanga

Executive Summary

Tirotiro Anō is a panel inquiry commissioned by PPTA Te Wehengarua in response to the Government's reforms of the secondary qualifications framework. It examines development and implementation challenges and issues of the proposed NCEA qualifications system and seeks to contribute evidence and insights to inform national discussion and decision-making while key aspects of the reforms remain under development

The nine-member panel brings together current and former teachers, school leaders, researchers, and curriculum and assessment specialists with diverse experience across secondary education. The inquiry uses a multi-method approach, drawing on research and policy evidence, quantitative data, surveys, interviews, hui, wānanga, talanoa, focus groups, case studies, and professional knowledge. Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides the overarching frame, supported by five shared mātāpono: rangatiratanga, active protection, mahi ngātahi, ōritetanga, and ka mua, ka muri.

Across the inquiry, a consistent message emerges: there is support for a rigorous and credible national qualifications system, but significant questions remain about whether the current direction and process of reform will provide the flexibility, equity, clarity and support required across diverse learners, schools and pathways. Particular concerns relate to meaningful Māori authority and Te Tiriti accountability; the potential for proposed qualification requirements to create barriers for some learners; uncertainty about key aspects of qualification design; and the capacity of schools to implement substantial curriculum and qualification changes within the proposed timeframe.

The inquiry points to the need for qualification reform to be evidence-informed, developed through meaningful engagement with those who will implement and experience it, and supported by clear principles, reliable standards and moderation, sufficient flexibility across pathways, sustained professional learning and appropriate resourcing. It also reinforces the need for the Crown to give practical effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi throughout qualification design, decision-making and implementation.

This report represents Phase One of Tirotiro Anō. As the reform programme continues to evolve, the panel intends to continue its inquiry as further policy, design and implementation decisions emerge.

Findings

1. Partnership with Māori, protection for te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi are important to teachers and school leaders. Processes to include Māori properly in the development of the reform package were not evident or supported.
2. Different criteria are used in different countries and at different times to build fair and proper qualification systems. For a qualification to be successful, the criteria and principles on which the system is built need to be widely understood, accepted and reflective of the national context. Evidently, the criteria used in the development of the reform package are currently neither clearly understood nor widely accepted and do not reflect widely held views about the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
3. There is wide agreement for the need to strengthen aspects of NCEA that support the multiple pathways young people need to reach success. A lack of clarity and certainty about proposed qualification design changes signaled for implementation in 2028 has affected practitioners' confidence in the proposed qualification reform's ability to deliver sufficient flexibility across multiple pathways to achieve equitable outcomes for all students and manageability of reform implementation.
4. Structural barriers have been identified in the reform package and design for secondary qualifications to be implemented in 2028. Requirements for 'examinations' in all subjects and the need to pass three subjects are seen as likely to cause a decline in numbers achieving secondary school qualifications, mostly affecting groups identified by the Ministry of Education as Maori, Pacific and "Disabled" students. If the planned changes proceed, it would appear to equate to a system decreeing this impact as 'acceptable losses'. Practitioners in schools do not see the losses as acceptable.
5. The volume and pace of changes in curriculum and qualification design have put the secondary schooling sector under significant and sustained pressure over recent years. Electoral cycles, policy changes, a lack of transparency and uncertain resourcing have affected schools' planning for implementation of future qualification changes.
6. Given the scope and speed of proposed changes, teachers and school leaders are clear about needing extensive resourcing and professional learning opportunities external to the school and from other agencies and professional networks to cope with the timeline.

Recommendations

1. The Crown must give practical effect to Te Tiriti and provide credible evidence about how reforms give effect to the Crown's responsibilities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, specifically by the inclusion of meaningful Māori authority and influence in decision-making; and sustained relationships with kura and Māori educators, active protection of te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori, and equitable conditions for ākonga Māori.
2. A process is devised to establish a long-cycle mechanism for changing school policy, curriculum and qualifications including representation from the main education agencies and democratically elected teacher union representatives to mitigate expensive and time-consuming policy lurches and to facilitate clear understandings and acceptance of fundamental aspects of New Zealand's public education system.
3. That clear standards, strong moderation and reliable grading systems support secondary school qualifications and that appropriate provision is made for the ongoing training of secondary teachers in robust moderation processes.
4. To ensure that the New Zealand qualifications system has sufficient flexibility across multiple pathways to achieve equitable outcomes for all students.
5. That Government provides certainty around budget and plans for the provision of effective subject specific professional learning and advisory support well ahead of the roll out of changes in secondary qualifications.

Introduction

Change is a constant in public education systems, because education serves the changing needs of societies. In democratic societies, the needs and purposes of an education system relate to all citizens, not just a select few. In a democracy, the public and the teaching profession contribute important roles in determining the purpose of an education system and whether and how education should support broad pathways for large numbers to achieve success and prosperity or narrow pathways for fewer people to 'pass'. Citizens and a nation's teaching profession therefore, must have opportunities for genuine involvement in reforms and changes.

Public commitment is critical in a public education system, because it is owned by the public. The public relies heavily on governments (politicians and public servants) to keep them well informed and engaged in order for improvements to be effective across all schools and communities. As front-line civil servants charged with the responsibility for policy implementation it is essential that the critical thinking and practical, lived experience of teachers and principals provide valuable contributions to that process. There is considerable risk to the efficacy of a policy reform if it is characterised by the educators not being heard and included in meaningful ways. The use of quick consultations, short timelines, closed door conversations, NDAs and opaqueness about the lack of consensus within advisory groups, risks the legitimacy of reforms.

This report contains the findings of inquiries conducted in 2026 by nine expert Tiroiro Anō panel members, who seek to include important voices. Tiroiro Anō was commissioned by NZPPTA Te Wehengarua, as a body independent of NZPPTA's policies. The panellists conducting inquiries for this report are all either current or previously working teachers or principals. They bring diverse perspectives of ethnicity, gender, age and experiences of school type, length of service and academic qualifications. The diversity around a common issue is a strength of this report.

The panel

Co chairs Melissa Denzler, (Ngāti Maniapoto, Te Rarawa) Kairangahau Māori, Māori researcher, NZCER and Kate Gainsford, immediate past chairperson Secondary Principals' Council, and Immediate past principal Aotea College.

Claire Amos, Principal at Albany Senior High School and Katoa Connect Member, William Pike Challenge Advisory Board Member, Aotearoa Education Collective Member, and co-founder of @DisruptEDNZ.

Andrew Basher Immediate past Principal, Buller High School.

Professor Gavin T L Brown (PhD, FAPS) an expert in educational assessment, psychometrics and the psychology of assessment, University of Auckland.

Dr Karen Dobric, Deputy Principal Papatoetoe High School. Karen's experience includes Co-Chair for Ministry of Education Pathways Advisory Group, contributor to NZQA Scholarship Processes Advisory Group, co-founder of Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association. In 2021, Karen contributed to the NZQA Review Panel for Level 1-4 Foundation and Bridging Qualifications and is currently a member of the Pathways and Transitions Network Aotearoa. Karen has lectured in both university and polytechnic settings.

Natalie Faitala, Head of English at Wesley College and contributor to NZQA's Taupulega Pacific Advisory Group, and other curriculum and assessment advisory groups.

Pip Osborne, an education consultant, curriculum and assessment specialist predominantly in Technology Education and Professional Teaching Fellow at the University of Auckland and Project Lead for Industry Led Subject development.

Katy Thorne, Leader of Mathematics at Aquinas College, Katy and involved in Numeracy and NCEA Level 1 pilot programmes. Katy is also President of the Bay of Plenty Maths Association.

PPTA Kaumatua Papa Moeke and Whaea Gazala, provided support, ensuring a strong Māori lens and cultural integrity to the panel's māhi.

Content

The panel looked into issues surrounding the development and implementation of the new qualifications for secondary schools in Aotearoa. Each chapter considers a specific aspect by reviewing or assembling evidence related to the issue, and how the proposed reforms will be received. The inquiries' findings are divided into two parts.

Part 1

The first part includes a view of the reform package through a Māori lens, the obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and system level related issues of Equity and Aspirations.

- Melissa Denzler—*Kei Hea Tātau e Ahu Ana? Which Way in Education?*
- Pip Osborne—*Ka Mua, Ka Muri: Revisiting the Te Tiro Hou Legacy.*
- Professor Gavin Brown—*A narrative review of Challenges and Issues in Implementing a New Qualifications System.*
- Kate Gainsford—*Teachers and school leaders' perspectives on qualification reform.*

Part 2

The second part covers issues of equity and flexibility in secondary curriculum, and qualifications based on multiple learning pathways.

- Claire Amos—*Flexibility is doing Equity Work.*
- Karen Dobric—*Navigating Multiple Pathways in Secondary Education.*
- Andrew Basher—*The rural school experience.*
- Natalie Faitala and Melissa Denzler—*Pacific Learners' Equity and Identity.*
- Katy Thorne and Karen Dobric—*Assessment Flexibility in Supporting Diverse Learners in Qualifications.*
- Natalie Faitala—*Beyond One Size Fits All—English*
- Katy Thorne—*How the reforms may influence engagement Maths.*

The different methods used by panellists include literature reviews, interviews, surveys and focus groups and all contribute to the overall findings and recommendations.

Next steps

Achieving equitable outcomes in our education system is a persuasive driver for change in the reform process. Negative impacts for certain groups of students, as a result of those reforms appear clear to teachers and principals. It is hoped that the report's findings will inform decision making at local and national levels for curriculum and qualification design to achieve the best of what is possible when people collaborate and act on evidence in the formation of education policy and implementation of changes.

The report is timely given policy decisions still to be made or still to be made public about the direction and details of the future secondary school qualifications. The intention is for the findings of the report to be helpful in the education conversation across the country, while further decisions are made and changes are introduced.

Te Tiroiro Anō is required to report formally from phase one of its inquiry to the NZPPTA Executive. The report's findings will be presented at the NZPPTA Annual Conference in September. At that point, the kaupapa returns to PPTA members and the democratic decision making process of the Association.

The Tiroiro Anō panel intends to continue research into the reform process in a second phase, and contribute further to the essential debate about policy and implementation decisions to come.

Methodology

Inquiry approach and methodology

This report uses a multi-method design in which multiple researchers concurrently investigated related but distinct aspects of the issues related to reforming the secondary school qualifications.

Positioning

Our positioning is both individual and collective. The panel brought together people with different cultural locations, expertise, experiences, assumptions, and responsibilities. Through whakawhanaungatanga, wānanga, collective interpretation, and iterative review, we worked together to develop independent strands of evidence while drawing on the expertise of the panelists. Interaction and dialogue among participants led to shared emerging interpretations. This relational process allowed us to recognise both common ground and difference, to reflexively consider how our positions shaped the analysis, and take collective responsibility for the report.

The panel's work has also been supported by PPTA Te Wehengarua kaumātua, whose roles included strengthening our Māori lens, upholding cultural integrity, and supporting the panel to be attentive to tikanga and relationships of accountability.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides the overarching frame for this inquiry. It establishes the relationship, obligations, and accountabilities for public education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The inquiry's guiding mātaḥono - rangatiratanga, active protection, mahi ngātahi, ōritetanga, and ka mua, ka muri- provide a shared framework through which the reforms were considered. Together, they support the analysis of the strengths, limitations, and implications of the reforms.

The panel did not treat research evidence, policy claims, sector experience, or mātauranga Māori as interchangeable forms of knowledge. Each was considered in relation to its origins, strengths, limitations, and accountabilities, including where different forms of evidence aligned, diverged, or revealed important tensions.

Evidence and analytical approach

Tirotiro Anō is a panel inquiry and evidence synthesis, rather than a single empirical study conducted through a single method. Individual chapters report methods appropriate to their specific inquiries and to the evidence available to them. The panel drew on multiple sources of insight and analysis, including research and written evidence, quantitative data, critical Te Tiriti analysis, sector voices and experience, and professional and disciplinary knowledge.

The evidence base included analysis of the reform and related policy material; relevant Aotearoa New Zealand and international research; historical and comparative evidence; sector submissions, survey findings, talanoa, interviews, hui, wānanga, case studies, and the professional knowledge of panel members and contributors. Not every chapter draws on each source in the same way. The evidence and methods used vary according to the focus of each workstream and the questions being considered.

Scope and limitations

The evidence available varied across the different workstreams. Information gathered through sector engagement provided valuable insights into participants' experiences and perspectives but should not be treated as representing the views of the wider sector. Equally, the inclusion of some voices does not mean that all relevant groups, experiences, or perspectives are represented.

The report is also based on the policy documents, evidence and decisions available at the time the inquiry was undertaken. Qualification reform continues to evolve and further design and implementation decisions may change some aspects of the reforms. However, these developments do not remove the need to examine the reform's aims, evidence base, Te Tiriti implications, likely system impacts, and the conditions needed for effective implementation.

Part 01

Te Tiriti, equity and aspirations





1.1

Kei Hea Tātau e Ahu Ana? Which Way in Education?

by Melissa Denzler

Executive Summary

Kei Hea Tātau e Ahu Ana? Which Way in Education? considers the NCEA qualification reforms through a kaupapa Māori lens, asking whether they will strengthen the conditions for ākongā Māori to thrive as Māori, or whether they will reproduce existing patterns of control and inequity. Drawing on kaupapa Māori scholarship, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Crown commitments to Māori education, research evidence, sector engagement, and survey responses from Māori educators, this chapter centres Māori aspirations for education.

Success for Māori extends beyond qualification attainment to include identity, language, culture, belonging, whānau connections and meaningful pathways. These conditions are expressed differently across English-medium and Māori-medium settings and require approaches that recognise and affirm these differences.

The analysis raises concerns about whether the reforms give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and existing Crown commitments to Māori education. Key issues include Māori authority in decision-making, protection of te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori, Māori-medium education. Further concerns relate to equitable pathways, workforce capacity, and Māori-specific monitoring and accountability.

Māori educators contributing to the inquiry questioned whether the reforms would strengthen the conditions that support ākongā Māori success. Survey findings showed low confidence in the reforms, with around seven in ten respondents strongly disagreeing that they address issues that are important to Māori, respond to challenges experienced by ākongā Māori, or reflect Māori aspirations.

The NCEA qualification reforms should not be measured only by whether they produce clearer qualifications or greater consistency. Their success for Māori will depend on where authority sits, whose knowledge is valued, whether diverse pathways are protected, and whether implementation actively addresses existing inequities. For this to occur, Te Tiriti must shape governance, implementation, resourcing, monitoring, and ongoing development of the qualification system.

Section 1: Introduction

In 1989, well before NCEA was introduced in 2002 and decades before the current qualification reforms were announced, Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Graham Hingangaroa Smith asked: *Kei hea tātau e ahu ana?* Which way in education? They argued that the education reforms of the late 1980s were “based on the necessity to create new ideological bases on which to facilitate a series of fundamental shifts in educational philosophy and in the provision of education” (Smith & Smith, 1989, p. 63). They observed that reform was often justified through claims of declining standards and rhetoric concerning excellence, accountability, and a return to the basics.

More than three decades later, many of these same narratives remain evident in discussions about qualification reform. The current NCEA reforms have similarly been framed through concerns about credibility, reliability, coherence, international compatibility, and employer confidence. Yet the way a problem is defined shapes the solutions that become possible. Narratives that position education as being in crisis can hide deeper questions about power, authority, knowledge, and whose interests educational change serves.

For Smith and Smith (1989), the critical test of reform was not whether change seemed necessary, but whether Māori and other minoritised groups were better able to negotiate “dominant and subordinate power relations” so that their needs were genuinely met (p. 66). This challenge provides the central framing for this chapter. Rather than asking simply whether qualification reform improves upon NCEA, the chapter asks what kinds of changes have been proposed, who has shaped them, whose knowledge and aspirations they reflect, and what they are likely to mean for Māori.

These questions are important because qualifications are not neutral. They shape what counts as achievement, whose knowledge is legitimised, what pathways are made available, and who is recognised as successful. For ākonga Māori, qualification reform raises a fundamental question: who defines success, and what forms of success will the reforms recognise?

A kaupapa Māori lens provides the foundation for this analysis. Rather than asking how Māori might be accommodated within a reformed system, kaupapa Māori asks whether the system itself is capable of honouring Māori aspirations, authority, language, knowledge, and ways of being. Graham Hingangaroa Smith (1997, 2003) positions kaupapa Māori as both theory and praxis, an Indigenous project of transformation rather than a request for greater inclusion within structures that remain fundamentally colonial. Henry and Pene (2001) similarly describe kaupapa Māori as grounded in Māori ontology, epistemology, and methodology, while Pihama (2010, 2016, 2019) locates kaupapa Māori theory within ongoing resistance to the suppression and marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge and education through colonial systems. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) further argues that research, policy, and reform are inseparable from questions of power, history, and self-determination. From this perspective, qualification reform is not only a technical matter of assessment design. It is also a question of power, equity, knowledge, authority, and the Crown’s responsibilities and obligations to Māori under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

This perspective is particularly important because ākonga Māori are educated across a diverse range of interconnected settings. These settings differ in their purposes, structures, languages of instruction, relationships with whānau, hapū and iwi, and understandings of educational success. They include English-medium settings, where the curriculum is delivered in the English language, and Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori educational settings, where ākonga are taught the curriculum in te reo Māori for at least 51% of the time (Māori language immersion levels 1-2). Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori settings include bilingual and rumaki units, wharekura, kura motuhake, and kura affiliated with Te Rūnanga Nui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori (i.e., kura kaupapa Māori) and Ngā Kura ā-Iwi (i.e., kura ā-iwi). At the same time, they operate within a system shaped by colonisation, ongoing inequities, Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, and enduring Māori aspirations for tino rangatiratanga (Allen & Trinick, 2026). The education system has historically contributed to the marginalisation of te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and Māori authority while privileging dominant Western knowledge and institutions (Walker, 2016). As Mikaere (2011) argues, racism and constitutional injustice are not accidental features of the system but enduring

characteristics of the colonial state. The development and growth of Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education, however, demonstrate continuing Māori resistance, innovation, reclamation, and the expression of tino rangatiratanga.

From this standpoint, a key question is not only whether the qualification reforms differ from NCEA. It is whether they interrupt enduring colonial patterns or repackage them through a new language of coherence, rigour, consistency, and credibility.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi provides the central analytical grounding for this examination of qualification reform. Te Tiriti is understood here as a living relationship whose meaning and application have continued to develop through Māori assertion, legal challenge and political debate (New Zealand Māori Council v Attorney-General, 1987; Orange, 2011). Waitangi Tribunal findings and constitutional scholarship have further shaped this understanding (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011; Durie, 2011; Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation, 2016). This framing is particularly important in the current context, where the place of Te Tiriti within legislation, education, and public policy continues to be debated and narrowed (Ministry of Justice, 2026; Waitangi Tribunal, 2026). These developments have direct implications for Māori rights, Crown obligations, and the status of Te Tiriti within education.

The chapter also draws on Critical Tiriti Analysis (Came et al., 2020, 2024), which supports critical examination of how Te Tiriti is reflected in policy, including questions of power, Māori authority, equity, and whether Te Tiriti commitments are given genuine effect. Alongside this, the panel's five mātaōpono provide a practical evaluative framework through which these questions are considered across the reforms. For the purposes of this inquiry, the mātaōpono are understood as follows:

Rangatiratanga: whether Māori exercise meaningful authority across the design, governance, curriculum, assessment, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of qualification reform (Durie, 2011; Fortune et al., 2024).

Mahi ngātahi: whether the reform process is genuinely relational, reciprocal, collaborative, and shaped with Māori from the outset (Alansari et al., 2022).

Active protection: whether te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, Māori-medium education, Māori pathways, and the wider conditions that enable Māori success as Māori are protected and strengthened (Allen & Trinick, 2026; Fortune et al., 2024).

Ōritetanga: whether the reforms actively reduce structural inequities or reproduce conditions that continue to limit the participation, belonging, pathways, and success of ākonga Māori (Alansari et al., 2022; Walker, 2016; Webber & Macfarlane, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

Ka mua, ka muri: whether reform recognises the relationship between past, present, and future, including the enduring effects of colonisation and the importance of intergenerational knowledge, continuity, and Māori aspirations (Durie, 2011; Walker, 2016).

As Smith and Smith (1989) argued, the critical test of reform is whether Māori are better able to negotiate power relations so that their needs are genuinely met. The important question is whether the qualification reforms strengthen Māori authority, aspirations, knowledge, and success as Māori, or whether they reproduce existing patterns of control and inequity. This chapter addresses this question by examining the research evidence on the conditions that support Māori educational success, evaluating the reforms against Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Crown's existing commitments to Māori education, and considering these findings alongside Māori educator and sector perspectives.

Section 2: Methods

Four approaches were used to examine how the qualification reforms align with Māori aspirations and support the success of ākonga Māori.



1: LITERATURE SCAN

A scan of the literature explored the conditions associated with ākonga Māori success and identified structural, curriculum, assessment, and system factors that can support or limit that success. It drew primarily on research from Aotearoa New Zealand, including kaupapa Māori and decolonising scholarship, research on ākonga Māori success, and literature relating to Māori-medium education. The purpose was to establish an evidence base against which the qualification reforms could be examined.

2: ANALYSIS OF CROWN EDUCATION COMMITMENTS AND REFORM DOCUMENTS

Relevant existing government strategies and frameworks, Ka Hikitia–Ka Hāpaitia, Tau Mai Te Reo, Tātaiako, and Te Kōkiritanga, were examined alongside published qualification reform documents. Shared commitments were identified across these and compared with the reform rationale and design. Alignment judgements were based on the extent to which each commitment was explicitly visible and appeared to have shaped the reform design.

3: MĀORI EDUCATOR AND SECTOR VOICE

Māori perspectives were gathered through four wānanga and one individual interview involving kaiako Māori and educational leaders across English-medium and Māori-medium settings. Two wānanga were conducted kanohi ki te kanohi and participants worked in facilitated focus groups; the third took place online with 20 participants. A further wānanga was held with the leadership team of a kura ā iwi. One individual online interview was also conducted with a tumuaki Māori from an English-medium secondary school. Together, these kōrero provided perspectives from Māori educators and leaders working across different educational contexts.

A survey distributed through PPTA Te Wehengarua provided an additional source of Māori educator voice. A total of 116 Māori educators responded, representing a range of roles and educational settings, although the sample was weighted towards experienced educators working in English-medium secondary schools.

4: ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

Evidence from the literature, existing Māori Education commitments and reform documents, wānanga, interviews, survey responses, and wider sector engagement was collected. The analysis was guided by the Tirohiko Anō mātāpono of rangatiratanga, mahi ngātahi, active protection, ōritetanga, and ka mua, ka muri. These provided a framework for examining Māori authority, partnership, protection of te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori, and equity.

Section 3: Literature Scan

Research provides a clear and consistent picture of the conditions that support ākonga Māori success and well-being and the barriers that can limit it. It also shows that there is no one-size-fits-all definition of success. What success looks like differs across English-medium, bilingual, rumaki reo rua, Māori-medium, kura kaupapa Māori, and Ngā Kura-ā-Iwi, which vary in their language of instruction, pedagogical approaches, governance, cultural foundations, and understandings of educational success (Ministry of Education, 2020b; Allen & Trinick, 2026). These settings have also been shaped by the enduring effects of colonisation and assimilationist schooling, alongside Māori resistance, self-determination, leadership, and educational innovation (Allen & Trinick, 2026). Recognising this diversity is important when considering qualification reform, because education policy does not operate in a neutral space. Decisions about curriculum, assessment, and pathways are also decisions about whose knowledge is valued, whose aspirations are prioritised, and what forms of success are recognised. This section provides a foundation for examining whether the reforms strengthen the conditions that enable ākonga Māori to succeed as Māori and give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

1. What does success look like for ākonga Māori?

There is no single definition of success for ākonga Māori. Qualifications and academic achievement are important because they can open pathways into further education, employment, and other opportunities. But success is broader than attainment alone. It can also include strong identity, confidence in te reo Māori, cultural belonging, wellbeing, whānau connection, meaningful choices, and the ability to participate confidently in both te ao Māori and te ao whānui.

What this looks like will differ across ākonga and settings. For one ākonga, success may include university study. For another it may involve an apprenticeship, growing confidence in te reo Māori, succeeding through Te Ao Haka, contributing to whānau, hapū or iwi, moving into employment, or combining several of these.

What success looks like is also shaped by educational context. English-medium, Māori-medium, kura kaupapa Māori, and Ngā Kura-ā-Iwi do not begin from the same educational foundations or locate language, knowledge, authority, and success in the same ways. Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education should not be treated simply as variations of English-medium schooling, and qualification reform cannot assume that one model will work equally across all settings (Bishop, 2003; Durie, 2001; Smith, 2017; Hunia et al., 2025).

1.1 Conditions that support ākonga Māori success

The foundational work of Te Kōtahitanga shifted attention away from deficit explanations and towards the relational and pedagogical conditions created within schools (Bishop et al., 2003, 2009). Culturally responsive pedagogy, strong teacher–student relationships, high expectations, dialogic teaching, learner voice, and affirmation of Māori identity, language, and culture are interconnected conditions for ākonga Māori success.

Māori worldviews, cultural values, and Indigenous knowledge systems need to be recognised within curriculum and assessment rather than treated as peripheral (Macfarlane et al., 2007). Assessment also needs to provide culturally meaningful ways for ākonga Māori to demonstrate what they know and can do (Kerr & Averill, 2021).

Identity, language, culture, and belonging

Webber and Macfarlane (2020) identify five optimal cultural conditions that support Māori success: Mana Whānau, Mana Motuhake, Mana Tū, Mana Ūkaipō, and Mana Tangatarua. These conditions are strengths-based and Māori-centred. They position success as connected to whānau support, cultural pride, belonging, broad opportunities, and confidence in being Māori. These conditions are relational and intercon-

nected. Whānau support, teacher relationships, belonging, cultural efficacy, aspiration, strong leadership, deliberate support systems, and meaningful whānau engagement work together to create culturally affirming environments (Alansari et al., 2022; Smaill et al., 2024).

Berryman, Lawrence, and Lamont (2018) extend this and assert that education should not simply include ākonga Māori within dominant structures but instead reshape relationships and pedagogy to enhance learner mana and enact genuine partnership.

Whānau, hapū, iwi, and local curriculum

Success is also connected to place and relationships. Learning is strengthened when ākonga can see their whānau, hapū, iwi, histories, mātauranga, and local communities reflected in what they learn (Berryman & Eley, 2017; Bishop et al., 2009; Education Review Office, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2020a). Success includes not only individual achievement, but also stronger connection and contribution to whānau and to the community.

Assessment that recognises Māori capability

Assessment is not neutral; it shapes what is taught and what counts as success (Macfarlane et al., 2008). Kerr and Averill (2024) argue that assessment in Aotearoa has historically reflected Western-centric assumptions but can be reimaged through mātauranga Māori, including principles such as manaakitanga, wānanga, and ako.

Assessment systems that privilege narrow, individualised, and largely written demonstrations of learning can marginalise oral, collaborative, performative, visual, and relational ways of knowing. Restricting how this knowledge can be expressed narrows the capabilities that can be recognised (Berryman et al., 2017; Kerr & Averill, 2024; Macfarlane et al., 2007).

Assessment and qualification structures influence what forms of achievement are recognised, what pathways are enabled, and how knowledge is valued (Bishop, 2003; Kerr & Averill, 2021; Milne, 2017). This means changes to assessment design, thresholds, comparability, and standardisation affect not only technical consistency, but also how Māori capability, aspirations, and success are recognised within the education system (Berryman et al., 2017; Kerr & Averill, 2021).

1.2 Ākonga success in Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education

Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori settings are diverse in their philosophies, governance, language use, and relationships with whānau, hapū, and iwi. These differences shape how knowledge, authority, and success are understood (Hunia et al., 2025; Allen & Trinick, 2026).

Foundations of success

Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education provide important examples of what success can look like when te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, identity, and aspirations sit at the centre (Allen & Trinick, 2026; Durie et al., 2025).

Success within these contexts is multidimensional, encompassing cultural, linguistic, social, and academic outcomes. Ākonga are supported to develop strong identities as Māori, confidence in te reo Māori, and the ability to participate in both te ao Māori and te ao whānui (Durie et al., 2025). When te reo Māori, tikanga, mātauranga Māori, and collective aspirations are sustained, ākonga Māori can achieve strongly across academic and cultural domains without compromising identity or language (Allen & Trinick, 2026).

Māori-medium education challenges deficit interpretations of Māori achievement by redirecting attention

to system design. Ākonga Māori thrive when schooling aligns with Māori identity, language, and knowledge (Milne, 2017). This suggests that improving outcomes is not simply about adding culturally responsive practices, but about reconsidering how curriculum, assessment, and authority are structured. Māori-medium education provides both a successful pathway and a critical lens for examining the wider system.

This is especially significant in the context of qualification reform, where changes developed largely through an English-medium lens show limited evidence of the distinct perspectives, purposes, pedagogies, language pathways, and aspirations that underpin Māori-medium education (Allen & Trinick, 2026; Durie et al., 2025; Smith, 2017). Therefore, reform impacts cannot be assumed to be neutral across contexts.

2. Curriculum and Assessment Barriers

Even where enabling conditions are present, systemic barriers within curriculum, assessment, and governance continue to limit ākonga Māori outcomes.

Structural inequity and systemic racism

Structural inequity and systemic racism shape Māori participation, belonging, opportunity, and achievement through curriculum, assessment, expectations, and institutional practice. Dominant knowledge systems and norms determine which forms of learner knowledge and success are recognised (Berryman et al., 2023; Rubie-Davies & O'Regan, 2011).

Whose knowledge counts

A key question is whose knowledge is recognised and valued. Where mātauranga Māori is treated as supplementary, its inclusion does not fundamentally shift learning or outcomes. Tolbert et al. (2025) argue that curriculum is inherently political, while Persaud et al. (2025) caution that reform can reproduce inequity when Indigenous knowledge is inserted into existing structures without changing the structures themselves.

Assessment barriers

Assessment practices continue to privilege narrow forms of evidence and individualised demonstrations of learning. These approaches marginalise Māori ways of knowing and limit how achievement is recognised (Berryman & Eley, 2017; Macfarlane et al., 2008). While greater standardisation may improve consistency, it does not address underlying inequities (Rubie-Davies, 2006, 2015; Turner et al., 2015).

Teacher capability, expectations, and cultural safety

Teacher capability remains a key factor in the delivery of curriculum and assessment. Low expectations limit cultural competence, and weak relationships with whānau limit ākonga Māori success (Hetaraka, 2019; Rubie-Davies, 2006, 2015).

Structural constraints in workforce supply and resources can negatively impact the delivery of curriculum and assessment for, and by, Māori (Smaill et al., 2024). In English-medium settings, Māori are underrepresented in the teaching workforce, and kaiako Māori often carry additional cultural responsibilities (Durie et al., 2023; Hunt, 2016; Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori, 2025). Culturally inclusive practices evidentially strengthen engagement and support learning relationships (Highfield & Webber, 2021).

Who defines success

Who gets to define success matters. If success is defined primarily through attaining qualifications, grades, or post-school destinations, other Māori aspirations may remain invisible. Māori authority includes having a meaningful role in deciding what successful education looks like, what forms of knowledge and achievement are valued, and how success is evaluated (Wehipeihana, 2019; Smith, 2017; Bishop, 2003).

Summary

The literature consistently identifies conditions that support ākonga Māori success. First, success for ākonga Māori is broader than qualification attainment and includes identity, language, culture, belonging, relationships, wellbeing, and meaningful future pathways. Second, success is shaped by the conditions that education systems create, including curriculum, assessment, expectations, relationships, resourcing, and whose knowledge is valued. Finally, success cannot be defined or supported in exactly the same way across English-medium, Māori-medium, and kaupapa Māori settings.

Implications and Challenges

The conditions supporting ākonga Māori success are well established. However, barriers remain in what knowledge is valued, how learners are assessed, the pathways they can access, the expectations they encounter, and who has authority over educational decisions. The question for the current reforms is whether they remove these barriers or reproduce them in a new qualification system. The reforms should not be judged only by whether they produce clearer qualifications, standardisation, stronger thresholds, or more consistent assessment. They must also be judged by whether they protect meaningful pathways, recognise different forms of Māori capability and success, and strengthen the conditions that enable ākonga Māori to thrive as Māori.



Section 4 – Evaluating the qualification reforms against the Crown’s Māori education commitments

The NCEA qualification reforms are not being developed in a policy vacuum. They sit within existing Crown commitments to Māori education, many of which are expressed through established education strategies and frameworks. These commitments also give practical expression to the Crown’s responsibilities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi and provide important reference points for evaluating the reforms.

This section examines four key strategies and frameworks: Ka Hikitia–Ka Hāpaitia, Tau Mai Te Reo, Tātaiako, and Te Kōkiritanga, to identify the commitments they establish for Māori education and consider whether these are reflected in the qualification reforms. This evaluation draws on published NCEA reform documents and associated policy materials (Ministry of Education, 2025, 2026a, 2026b).

There is limited explicit reference within the reform documents to these Māori education strategies and frameworks. This is important because collectively they represent the Crown’s current commitments regarding:

- Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- Māori language revitalisation
- Māori educational success as Māori
- Culturally sustaining education
- Māori authority and participation within education
- Equitable educational pathways

Together, they provide the policy reference points for evaluating whether the reforms uphold existing obligations to ākonga Māori, whānau, hapū, iwi, and Māori communities. The qualification reforms cannot be evaluated only through questions of assessment design, comparability, or resourcing but also in relation to these wider responsibilities.

4.1 Strategies and frameworks

To what extent do the qualification reforms align with the Crown’s existing commitments to Māori education, as articulated through Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Ka Hikitia–Ka Hāpaitia, Tau Mai Te Reo, Tātaiako, and Te Kōkiritanga?

Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia

Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia is the refreshed Ministry of Education Māori education strategy positioning Māori educational success as “Māori enjoying and achieving education success as Māori” (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020a, p. 6). The refresh strengthens the strategy’s emphasis on identity, language, culture, belonging, whānau engagement, and Māori participation in decision-making as central conditions for success. It also more explicitly positions giving practical effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi as foundational to the education system and to educational leadership, policy, and practice (MoE, 2020a, pp. 5–7).

Importantly, Ka Hikitia-Ka Hāpaitia does not frame success narrowly. Instead, it positions educational success as connected to:

- identity
- wellbeing
- equitable opportunities
- whānau engagement
- Māori participation in decision-making
- freedom from racism and bias
- meaningful pathways and aspirations.
- perceptions of success and achievement

The Ka Hikitia-Ka Hāpaitia strategy places a stronger emphasis on system transformation, culturally sustaining practice, and addressing the persistent inequities experienced by ākonga Māori within education (MoE, 2020a, pp. 8–11).

Tau Mai Te Reo

Tau Mai Te Reo is the Crown's strategy for Māori language in education. The strategy positions te reo Māori as a taonga protected under Te Tiriti o Waitangi and identifies education as central to te reo Māori revitalisation (MoE, 2020b, p. 5). Tau Mai Te Reo frames te reo Māori as a Tiriti responsibility requiring deliberate protection, investment, leadership, and system accountability.

Tau Mai Te Reo presents education as a key site for strengthening and revitalising te reo Māori across both Māori-medium and English-medium settings. The strategy emphasises the importance of strengthening and growing Māori-medium education, supporting Māori language learning pathways, and expanding the presence and use of te reo Māori across the education system (MoE, 2020b, pp. 6–9).

Tātaiako

Tātaiako (Ministry of Education and New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011) is a framework that outlines the knowledge, relationships, values, and practices educators need to support ākonga Māori to achieve educational success as Māori within the education system.

The framework identifies the competencies required for teachers and leaders to support

ākonga Māori effectively:

- ako
- manaakitanga
- tangata whenuatanga
- whanaungatanga
- wānanga

The framework emphasises:

- culturally sustaining relationships
- ākonga Māori identity
- local context
- whānau engagement
- reciprocal learning
- relational pedagogy.

Te Kōkiritanga

Te Kōkiritanga was NZQA's strategic action plan for ākonga Māori success between 2020 and 2023 and is now part of their everyday mahi (NZQA, n.d.). It focuses on how NZQA will contribute to equitable outcomes for Māori through qualification, assessment, quality assurance, organisational capability, and stronger relationships with Māori, iwi, hapū, whānau, and education providers (New Zealand Qualifications Authority [NZQA], 2020, pp. 4–7). This is especially important because NZQA sits at the centre of qualification and assessment design.

The strategy commits NZQA to:

- equity
- Māori-centred approaches
- culturally responsive systems
- partnership
- ākonga Māori pathways
- whānau engagement
- evidence-informed equity and excellence

Although these strategies and frameworks were developed independently of the NCEA qualification reforms, combined they articulate the Crown's current expectations for Māori educational success and the responsibilities of education agencies under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In this way they provide an appropriate evaluative framework for considering whether the reforms are consistent with the Crown's existing policy commitments.

4.2 Evaluating the reforms against Te Tiriti and Crown commitments to Māori

Te Tiriti o Waitangi is foundational to Aotearoa New Zealand's education system and provides a constitutional basis for evaluating the Crown's obligations, commitments, and expectations to Māori.

Te Tiriti across the strategies and frameworks

Te Tiriti underpins these strategies and frameworks in slightly different ways. All position the education system as having obligations to Māori that go beyond general inclusion or equity. Across the four, Te Tiriti-related commitments are expressed through recurring themes of rangatiratanga, active protection, equity, partnership, and accountability.

- Ka Hikitia requires the education system to give practical effect to Te Tiriti, support Māori authority and agency in education, and account to whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori for the education services provided (Ministry of Education, 2020a, pp. 5–8).
- Tau Mai Te Reo describes te reo Māori as a taonga and frames Māori language in education as a practical expression of Te Tiriti responsibilities (Ministry of Education, 2020b, pp. 1–3).
- Te Kōkiritanga explicitly reaffirms NZQA's commitment to the Crown's obligations under Te Tiriti and the principles of partnership, protection and participation (NZQA, 2020, p. 4).

The strategies and frameworks establish a strong expectation that major qualification reforms will demonstrate how Te Tiriti has shaped their rationale, design, implementation, monitoring, and accountability. They also provide key evaluative principles for considering whether the NCEA reforms reflect the Crown's responsibilities to ākonga Māori, whānau, hapū, iwi, and Māori communities under te Tiriti.

Mapping the strategies and frameworks across the reforms

The table below evaluates the extent to which commitments shared across government strategies and frameworks are evident in the published reform documentation and embedded within the reform design.

Table 1. Alignment evaluation scale

STRONG	Explicitly recognised and there is clear evidence that it has shaped the reform design.
MODERATE	Evident in some elements of the reform but not consistently developed or fully reflected in the reform design.
WEAK	Largely absent or is acknowledged without clear evidence it has shaped the reform design.

Table 2 .Alignment of reforms

COMMON COMMITMENTS	DETAILS OF COMMITMENTS	EVIDENCE	ALIGNMENT
Te Tiriti as foundational	Qualification reform should give practical effect to Te Tiriti by demonstrating partnership, active protection, rangatiratanga, equity, accountability and shared decision-making throughout the design and implementation.	Te Tiriti obligations (as expressed in Te Mataiaho, and the concept of te mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori) are less visible in reform documents. Māori-specific references, including Te Reo Rangatira, Pāngarau, Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, and kaupapa Māori settings are presented as considerations within the reform rather than as evidence that Te Tiriti has shaped the reform.	Weak
Māori succeeding as Māori – Identity, language, culture, belonging, aspirations	Qualifications should enable ākonga Māori to experience success as Māori by recognising identity, language, culture, belonging, aspirations and mātauranga Māori as central to educational success.	Reform focuses on credibility, comparability and post-school readiness. There is limited evidence that success as Māori is part of the overall reform design.	Weak
Whānau, hapū iwi and Māori communities are partners – Shared authority	Māori should participate as reciprocal partners in all stages of the reform design, implementation and monitoring.	Consultation is referenced. Reform documentation provides limited explicit evidence that Māori co-design or shared decision-making shaped the core reform structure.	Weak
Equity requires system change, not learner adaption – Removing structural inequities and barriers	Education systems should actively remove structural barriers and inequities rather than expecting ākonga to adapt to existing systems.	Risks are acknowledged, but reform documentation provides limited analysis of how the reforms will address inequities for ākonga Māori.	Weak
High-quality teaching, leadership and workforce capability are essential – Relational and culturally grounded implementation	Reform requires investing in kaiako capability, culturally sustaining pedagogy, Māori-medium education, and implementation support.	The published reform documentation gives little explicit attention to the workload and cultural responsibilities of kaiako Māori, or to how workforce pressures may affect equitable implementation. It also provides limited evidence of engagement specifically focused on the kaiako Māori workforce.	Weak
Pathways must support future aspirations – Pathways should expand meaningful options for ākonga Māori	Pathways should increase and broaden opportunities for ākonga Māori while also supporting diverse aspirations, mātauranga Māori and meaningful transitions beyond school.	The reforms emphasise clearer subject pathways and post-school readiness, but there is limited evidence that Māori aspirations, local curriculum, mātauranga Māori, or ākonga pathways have shaped the design.	Moderate
Active protection of te reo Māori and Māori-medium education – Growth and protection of those pathways	Reform should actively strengthen and protect te reo Māori, Māori-medium education and Māori language pathways through curriculum and assessment.	Te Reo Rangatira and Pāngarau, and Māori-medium education are mentioned, but provide little evidence for a strategy to protect and strengthen Māori language pathways.	Weak
Evidence, monitoring and accountability are essential – Accountability to ākonga Māori and their communities	The education system should monitor the impact of reforms on ākonga Māori and be accountable to whānau, hapū, iwi and Māori communities for equitable outcomes.	The reforms emphasise system performance and qualification outcomes. Limited evidence of Māori specific monitoring, evaluation or accountability systems.	Weak

Summary

Ka Hikitia–Ka Hāpaitia, Tau Mai Te Reo, Tātaiako, and Te Kōkiritanga are powerful reference points because they articulate the Crown’s own commitments to ākonga Māori success, Te Tiriti, language revitalisation, culturally sustaining education, and equitable pathways.

Although these strategies and frameworks were developed for different purposes, they intersect around a common set of priorities: success as Māori, identity, language and culture, whānau, hapū, iwi relationships, equity, quality teaching, meaningful pathways, and system accountability. Te Tiriti and rangatiratanga are most explicit in Ka Hikitia, Tau Mai Te Reo, and Te Kōkiritanga; in Tātaiako they are expressed more through practice, relationships, tangata whenuatanga, and ākonga Māori success.

Some commitments are visible in the published reform documents examined, while others are weakly reflected or not explicitly evident. This does not mean that related work has not happened, but it does mean that the current reform rationale and design provide limited assurance about how these commitments have shaped the reform. Greater clarity, stronger alignment, and explicit accountability are therefore needed for the detailed design phase. The challenge for policymakers is not simply whether the reforms produce clearer qualifications, but whether they strengthen the conditions required for ākonga Māori to thrive as Māori within a system that gives practical effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Section 5 – Voices from Māori educators and sector perspectives

This section draws on pūkōrero gathered through wānanga, interviews and sector engagement, alongside survey data from 116 Māori educators. Three wānanga involved more than 100 kaiako Māori, including two kanohi ki te kanohi sessions using facilitated focus groups and one online wānanga with 20 participants. A further wānanga was held with a kura-ā-iwi leadership team, alongside an online interview with a tumuaki Māori from an English-medium secondary school. These voices are presented separately to retain their distinct contexts and are positioned as authoritative, reflecting lived experiences, professional expertise, and collective aspirations for Māori success.

We acknowledge the generosity and mana of all those who contributed to this chapter. Their willingness to share their experiences, concerns, aspirations, and expertise reflects a deep commitment to the success of ākonga Māori and to the future of education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their whakaa-ro have directly shaped the analysis of this kaupapa.

5.1 Ngā Kura-ā-Iwi: Flexibility, context, and success on Māori terms

“Māori control over Māori-medium education.”

The perspectives shared by leaders from one kura within Ngā Kura-ā-Iwi provide key insights into how the NCEA qualification reforms are being understood by those working at the intersection of Māori-medium education, community aspirations, and ākonga success. Although participants acknowledged that change is an inevitable part of education and expressed confidence in their ability to adapt, they also raised significant concerns about the potential loss of flexibility, local autonomy, and culturally responsive and sustaining approaches that they regard as central to ākonga Māori success.

Success is collective and culturally grounded

“The point for us is about being malleable teachers so that the kids can truly feel that they are worthy of education.”

Participants described their kura as one built on deep relationships, strong community ties, and a commitment to ensuring that all mokopuna experience success. Rather than focusing on individual academic achievement alone, the kura prioritises collective success and pathways that respond to the diverse strengths, interests, and aspirations of learners. As one participant reflected:

“100% pass for us is more important than having a few kids that have got scholarships. It’s about a whole community rising.”

Although concerns about the reforms were prominent, participants did not reject change outright. One participant reflected that their generation had experienced both Bursary and NCEA and therefore understood the strengths and weaknesses of different systems. While expressing reservations about the proposals, they acknowledged that “we probably do need something new” and described the reforms as potentially presenting “a neat challenge”. Participants consistently voiced confidence that their kura would continue to find ways to support learners regardless of the reforms implemented.

Flexibility enables responsive pathways

Flexibility was central to their kōrero. Participants described NCEA as providing opportunities to adapt learning, assessment, and curriculum design to local contexts and ākongā needs. One participant described how integration across learning areas allows kaiako to connect learning to authentic contexts that are meaningful for ākongā. Another noted:

“NCEA really... gave us the freedom to adapt anything to our context.”

Participants contrasted this flexibility with their understanding of the reforms, which they perceived as moving towards greater prescription and standardisation. One participant expressed concern that the reforms could create a system where kaiako are expected to teach predetermined content in predetermined ways:

“I feel like we’re going to end up in an American system where you teach page 62 on the 29th of May and that’s it.”

For them, the concern was not only about kaiako autonomy, but also about the potential impact on ākongā Māori whose needs, strengths, and aspirations may not fit within more standardised structures. The kura described a highly responsive model of teaching and learning. One participant explained that timetables are regularly adjusted in response to ākongā needs, noting that

“every six weeks we have a look at who’s failing and then we flip our subjects. Our kids are thriving because of that. Because we can integrate.”

Participants viewed this flexibility as critical to ensuring that all learners can experience success, including those with diverse learning needs, those pursuing vocational pathways, and those requiring additional time and support before transitioning into employment or further study.

Protecting te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and cultural context

Strong concerns were raised about the place of te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and culturally grounded learning within the reforms. Participants questioned whether Māori knowledge systems would continue to be valued within a more standardised and subject-specific framework. One expressed concern that the inclusion of Te Reo Rangatira appeared to recognise only a small proportion of ākongā Māori, asking what this would mean for the many ākongā Māori in English-medium settings who are still developing proficiency in te reo Māori.

Similarly, another questioned whether mātauranga Māori would retain its status within future curriculum and assessment structures, expressing concern that it could become “an add-on rather than something with value”. Participants also emphasised that culturally contextualised learning is not supplementary to success. It is fundamental to it. The tumuaki contended that the success of their kura stems from learning being “all culturally contexted”, enabling ākongā to connect educational experiences with their identities, language, communities, and aspirations. They added:

“That’ll just stop all of this beautiful mahi we do at our kura.”

Assessment must be culturally valid

The discussion also surfaced concerns about assessment and cultural validity. Participants questioned whether assessors would have the cultural understanding necessary to fairly evaluate work grounded in te ao Māori and mātauranga Māori. One asked:

“Who is going to understand the cultural context of the writing?”

Uncertainty and the risk of repeating the past

Another theme to emerge was uncertainty. Participants repeatedly noted that although broad reform directions had been communicated, important details remained unclear. One participant described information about the reforms as being “drip-fed”, while another observed that professional learning development sessions were largely repeating information already available rather than providing the clarity needed to prepare for implementation. As one noted:

“We’ve got bugger all detail.”

Participants expressed frustration that significant changes appeared to be progressing despite ongoing uncertainty about curriculum content, assessment design, and implementation requirements. They also located their concerns within a broader historical context. Several drew parallels between the reforms and earlier qualification systems that they believed had disadvantaged ākonga Māori. One reflected on experiences of School Certificate and Bursary, recalling systems where learners repeatedly attempted to meet standards that were often inaccessible and where many ākonga Māori ultimately left school without qualifications.

“That was because you kept trying to meet a standard you’d never meet.”

Participants questioned whether the reforms risked recreating some of these historical patterns under new terminology.

At the same time, participants highlighted the strengths of Māori educational approaches and the success of kura Māori in supporting learners. One noted that Māori education is internationally recognised for its innovation and cultural grounding, noting that educators from around the world regularly seek to understand how Māori educational approaches achieve success for learners. Participants were concerned that the reforms appeared

to privilege international models and measures while overlooking evidence of success already present within Māori educational settings.

Adaptability, resilience, and collective strength

Despite the challenges identified, participants consistently returned to the resilience and adaptability of Māori communities. One participant noted that Māori educators have repeatedly responded to educational change through innovation and determination, while another argued that the collective strength of the kura would enable them to navigate whatever changes emerge. Participants articulated a strong sense that while the reforms may create barriers, they would continue to find ways to support their learners and uphold community aspirations.

Summary

The whakaaro shared by these leaders highlight the importance of protecting flexibility, local authority, and culturally grounded pathways within qualification reform.

5.2 Tumuaiki Perspective – Success, Equity, and Opportunity

“You’re not just representing yourself.”

The whakawhiti kōrero shared by this tumuaiki provides insights into how the qualification reforms are understood by a Māori educational leader working at a predominantly Māori, English-medium secondary school. Drawing on experience as a kaiako, tumuaiki, and advocate for ākonga Māori, they reflected on the purpose of qualifications, the opportunities they create, and the implications for kura, learners, and communities.

The tumuaiki described success as broader than qualification attainment. While qualifications were acknowledged because they open pathways and opportunities, the tumuaiki emphasised that “success is not just about holding a tohu or qualification”. “Māori achieving success as Māori” can look different for different learners and stressed the importance of taking “a holistic understanding of success”. The tumuaiki also noted that success cannot be reduced to “a black and white pass of NCEA” and that ākonga Māori need opportunities to “see themselves succeeding in different ways”.

The tumuaiki also spoke of the diversity of school communities and the different aspirations, strengths,

and experiences that ākonga Māori bring with them. They described how success can look different across communities and spoke about the strong cultural identities of many ākonga Māori, including their connections to whānau, kapa haka, hunting, fishing, and community life. They also noted that some ākonga Māori move between Māori-medium and English-medium settings because they “want a bit of everything”.

Equity was another strong theme. The tumuaki cautioned that the reforms carried “a real possibility of widening the equity gap, not closing it”. While recognising the rationale behind strengthening literacy, numeracy, and qualification requirements they stressed that this “cannot come at the expense of what makes Aotearoa unique” and emphasised that reform decisions should be evaluated not only by their intent but by their actual impact on learners and ensuring that ākonga Māori can “see themselves reflected within the qualification system”.

Discussion also focused on vocational pathways and future opportunities. The tumuaki believed vocational reforms “have potential if implemented well” and acknowledged that “university is not the only successful outcome”. At the same time, they expressed concern about ākonga Māori being directed too early into pathways that may restrict future choices and warned of “a real danger of students being streamed too early into pathways that limit future opportunities”. They questioned whose access to tertiary education might become restricted if qualifications become harder to attain.

The place of mātauranga Māori, culture, and identity within the qualification system were also central. The tumuaki emphasised the importance of protecting “subjects where Māori can achieve as Māori” and described Te Ao Haka as “absolutely revolutionary”. They reflected on its role in validating Māori art forms and creating pathways where Māori knowledge is recognised as legitimate and academically valuable. The tumuaki also challenged assumptions that Māori-centred subjects are somehow less rigorous, questioning why culturally grounded forms of achievement are often dismissed as “easy credits” despite the significant skill, discipline, and commitment these areas require.

A significant issue to emerge was workforce challenges and the realities facing kura as they respond to ongoing change. The tumuaki described recruiting and

retaining kaiako Māori as “incredibly difficult” and noted that finding kaiako Māori in specialist subject areas remains a particular challenge. They described these kaiako as “gold” and reflected on the different ways schools respond when positions remain vacant, including relying on retired teachers, redistributing staffing, or asking kaiako to work beyond their specialist areas. While acknowledging that staff “do everything they can” to support learners, they also observed that “that is not sustainable long term”.

The pace and scale of reform were also questioned. The tumuaki described the proposed timeline as “crazy” and reflected on the challenges created when multiple reforms are occurring simultaneously. They questioned whether schools and communities had sufficient opportunity to engage meaningfully with the changes and noted that the pace of change can make it difficult to have “really robust conversations”.

Reflecting on the broader education landscape, the tumuaki observed that NCEA has undergone many changes over time and noted that although the system was not perfect, “we had reached a point where the system was workable”. They also expressed concern about the politicisation of education and the ways qualification reform can become shaped by political priorities and public perceptions.

Summary

This tumuaki lens reinforces that reform must be judged by the opportunities it creates, or restricts, for ākonga Māori.

5.3 Leadership voice – wānanga

“NCEA should always be a tool; never the master.”

Te Huarahi Māori Motuhake is the Māori caucus of the Te Wehengarua Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), representing and advocating for the aspirations of kaiako Māori and learners within secondary education.

This wānanga brought together experienced Māori educational leaders and kaiako from a number of English-medium and Māori-medium settings to discuss the NCEA qualification reforms. Although participants brought diverse professional and personal experiences and local contexts, there was considerable consistency in their whakaaro. They continually returned to broader questions of purpose, identity, equity, and Te

Tiriti o Waitangi. Their kōrero centred on what enables ākonga Māori to flourish and whether the NCEA reforms would strengthen or weaken those conditions.

Success as Māori is broader than academic achievement

Participants consistently challenged narrow understandings of educational success based solely on qualifications or assessment results. Instead, success was described as holistic, grounded in identity, language, culture, belonging, and the aspirations of whānau and communities. Several referred to the long-held aspiration that education should enable Māori to achieve success as Māori rather than requiring ākonga Māori to succeed despite being Māori.

“I go back to what Mason Durie said [of] Māori achieving as Māori in the pathway they choose... it had to embrace te ao Māori in its thinking... accommodating Māori achieving as Māori. I don’t know what that looks like at the moment because it’s been tossed about a lot.”

Another described their aspiration for a qualification system that embraced multiple Māori knowledge traditions rather than positioning them at the margins.

“I’d like it to look like a holistic type of approach to kaupapa Māori... kaupapa Māori and mātauranga Māori embracing itself.”

Protecting hard-won gains

Although many acknowledged that NCEA was not without flaws, a number reflected that the qualification had gradually evolved to create more opportunities for ākonga Māori to demonstrate learning in ways that reflected who they were. Rather than describing the existing system as perfect, participants spoke about momentum, progress, and the fear that recent reforms were undoing those gains.

“There was an NCEA pathway... where there was flexibility for Māori to transmit their learnings, whether it’s orally, written, performance. We were on the way to something. It wasn’t perfect, but we were on the way to something that allowed our kids to express themselves as themselves with their learning, as a foundation of who they were. But this seems like it doesn’t matter who you are, it’s what you know.”

Another reflected on the introduction of NCEA from the perspective of someone who had initially opposed it. However, over time they came to see the ways it

recognised learners who had previously struggled within examination-based systems.

“Our kids probably could be judged on their own merits. Whereas, under the old system they were judged against a system that didn’t even meet their needs, didn’t even cater to their needs, didn’t even acknowledge that there was a need.”

Participants described NCEA as opening pathways that had previously been unavailable to many ākonga Māori. One of the strongest examples centred on Te Ao Haka and the recognition of Māori cultural knowledge within national qualifications.

“All of a sudden, it became respectable to do kapa haka. It was up there with music... It gave you exactly the same respectability because it produced the same thing in a format that belonged to our kids. Now they’ve completely removed that opportunity.”

The concern was not simply removing individual standards or subjects. Rather, participants described a broader shift in what counted as legitimate knowledge and whose strengths were recognised within the education system.

Māori aspirations at the centre

Participants repeatedly questioned whether Māori aspirations had shaped the reforms.

“There isn’t anything in the new qualification that actually takes into account that what should sit at the centre of all of the mahi is our tamariki Māori.”

Instead of viewing this as an isolated concern, participants linked it to wider questions about whose aspirations matter in education. They argued that Māori success cannot be separated from the aspirations of whānau, hapū, iwi and communities.

“I haven’t even seen anything... around what are the aspirations of our whānau and hapū because we know that it’s whānau, hapū, iwi, marae... that actually contribute to our tamariki Māori being successful. There’s nowhere in any of the kōrero... what do our whānau think? What do our hapū think?”

Narrowing what counts

Many expressed concern that the reforms represented a return to more standardised approaches to curriculum and assessment. They challenged whether

increasing emphasis on prescribed knowledge and traditional academic subjects would increase opportunities for ākonga Māori to demonstrate their strengths.

“When you’re talking about ranking of subjects... English, numeracy, maths and science... what happens to our subjects where that’s what our tamariki come to kura for? They come to kura because they love us or they love their te reo Māori or Te Ao Haka.”

Others worried that increasing standardisation would narrow opportunities for learners whose strengths lay outside conventional academic measures.

“We’ll move away to that standardised type testing, the one-size-fits-all approach. There are very few who can actually manage the expectations... but what about the rest of our tamariki? Do they get left behind?”

Participants consistently framed these concerns as extending beyond assessment. They asked what forms of knowledge, identity and culture would continue to be recognised within the qualification system if the reforms privileged standardisation over diversity.

Perhaps the strongest articulation of this concern came from one who reflected:

“The only way they’re going to enjoy academic success is by white passing, by being able to engage in a white system.”

Te Tiriti as the foundation for evaluating reform

Te Tiriti o Waitangi was central to the wānanga. Participants did not speak about Te Tiriti as an add-on policy consideration or a compliance exercise. Rather, they described it as the ethical foundation of education and the benchmark against which qualification reform should be evaluated. For them, the question was not whether Te Tiriti should be reflected in the reforms, but whether the reforms demonstrated the Crown’s obligations to uphold Māori rights, aspirations and educational success.

“The whole issue of Te Tiriti and education is an ethical issue... that absolutely trumps whatever this ministry is going to throw our way. It’s actually our responsibility to find a way to meet the needs of our rangatahi. They need an education that honours Te Tiriti.”

Instead of viewing educational reform as politically neutral, participants often situated the reforms within

the wider historical relationship between Māori and the Crown. Several challenged whether meaningful partnership had occurred during the development of the confirmed reforms, while others spoke about the limited opportunities Māori had been given to shape decisions before they were confirmed.

Further, participants contrasted the current reform process with previous curriculum development. One reflected on the development of Te Mātaiaho, describing extensive engagement with educators, communities and rangatahi before contrasting it with the current reforms.

“There were over 50,000 pieces of engagement. You compare the process... what we went through was rigorous. Then you look at what’s happening now... it will be absolutely mind-blowing just how light the resourcing has been and how minister-directed it’s been.”

Another participant was more direct:

“You can’t find Te Tiriti in this reform because it’s just not there.”

Collective responsibility and principled resistance

Participants also spoke about their own responsibilities as kaiako, tumuaki and educational leaders. Throughout the wānanga there was a strong sense that, irrespective of policy direction, educators retained an obligation to continue creating learning environments where ākonga Māori could thrive.

Several described this as principled resistance. Rather than resistance for its own sake, they spoke about continuing to uphold Te Tiriti, protecting culturally sustaining practices, and ensuring that ākonga Māori remained connected to their language, identity and communities.

“What we need to be doing as Māori kaiako... is some principled resistance... ensuring that we’re delivering what they need so that they are able to connect positively to their cultural identity, to where they’re from and who they are.”

Another added:

“We have to keep ourselves principled in our resistance.”

They also recognised that resistance would not look the same in every kura or community. Some acknowledged that individual kaiako often worked in isolation

and that maintaining culturally sustaining practice required collective support across the profession.

“You’ll have groups that will just capitulate... and then you’ll have other groups... who will push, push, push, but eventually the energy... they kind of give up... How are we going to ensure that everybody... particularly kaiako Māori... could have a space... because we’re going to end up with pockets.”

Qualifications as a tool, not the purpose of education

Throughout the wānanga, participants consistently repositioned qualifications as serving learners, not defining them. Although they recognised how important qualifications are for future pathways, they challenged the notion that assessment should become the primary driver of education.

“NCEA should always be a tool, but never the master.”

Participants repeatedly returned to the importance of seeing young people first, rather than viewing them through the lens of assessment outcomes. For many, educational success remained grounded in relationships, whakapapa, language and identity.

“We look at our students as our mokopuna... what success looks like for our mokopuna... to have a strong foundation... localised curriculum.”

This shifted the kōrero away from qualifications as the primary measure of success and located qualifications within a broader commitment to nurturing the hauora, identity and futures of tamariki and mokopuna.

Summary

Across these voices, the key concern is whether reform strengthens Māori aspirations, authority, and success as Māori.

5.4 Kaiako wānanga

“One of the things that we signed up for was to affirm and advance Tiriti o Waitangi. We need to continue with that.”

A series of wānanga brought together kaiako Māori from a range of educational settings to discuss the NCEA reform package. Although views differed on

some aspects of the reforms, participants repeatedly returned to the same concerns: on the one hand, they described Māori educational success as relational, culturally grounded and responsive to the aspirations and strengths of individual ākonga. On the other hand, they also described the reforms risking flexibility, relationships and culturally responsive and sustaining practices which are the very things that they viewed as critical to ākonga Māori educational success.

Success is built through relationships, belonging and responsiveness

Participants frequently described success as extending well beyond qualifications. Instead of defining success through assessment results alone, they spoke about relationships, whānau, whanaungatanga, belonging and creating learning environments where ākonga could reconnect with education. Many emphasised that success must be understood in relation to the learner, their whānau, their community and their aspirations and not solely through a nationally standardised measure.

“Success ... is their ability to stand in whatever space ... and feel confident that they are able to achieve the standard to the best of their ability.”

“The ākonga Māori who seem to have had a successful schooling experience are ones that feel safe ... safe to exercise their Māoritanga.”

“A lot of the students that I work with are very disengaged... Through my experience with them is relationship building and then re-teaching them how to enjoy learning again... A lot of our pathways look a little bit different. We’re looking at trades, we’re looking at work experience... their schooling experience is not quite the academic route.”

Participants in one wānanga asked whose aspirations are treated as legitimate in the qualification system. Some contrasted the emphasis that is placed on Western academic measures with the mana, discipline and achievement demonstrated in kapa haka, Te Ao haka and other expressions of Māori knowledge and achievement.

“Why isn’t that the measure of success for us as well? Why is it about how much maths you know, how much English you know, and why is it not Te Ao haka giving the same mana as English?”

Relationships, trust and professional judgement enable ākonga to succeed

Participants repeatedly described relationships as the foundation of engagement and achievement. They spoke of the importance of knowing their ākonga, working alongside whānau, maintaining high expectations and recognising forms of learning, capability and success that standardised assessment may not capture. This relational knowledge enabled kaiako to reconnect disengaged learners, build confidence and adapt pathways around learner strengths.

“Whanaungatanga... with our students, in some cases, you can’t work in isolation from the whānau. You have to have the whānau... relationships [are] the basis of success.”

“OTJ, overall teacher judgment ... if kids don’t have the opportunity to express what they know ... because we understand them. OTJ should always be considered.”

Flexibility and integration

A strong theme across the wānanga was the importance of flexibility. Kaiako described adapting contexts, integrating curriculum areas, using ākonga interests to create different opportunities for ākonga Māori to demonstrate what they know. These were not seen as add-on practices; they were described as central to equitable and culturally sustaining practice. Participants were concerned that narrow subject choice, inflexible assessment structures and increased standardisation would make this work harder.

“We’ve got to bring the walls down and allow them to succeed in what they’re strong in and bring all the other subjects to these strengths.”

“My biggest worry is what does that mean for our flexibility for our children ... their success is different.”

“I don’t think replacing NCEA is the right response ... it gives me the flexibility to change to the context that I need it to be.”

Participants did not suggest that NCEA was without problems. Instead, they queried whether replacing it with a more prescriptive system addressed those problems, especially when flexibility within NCEA had allowed kura and kaiako to respond to ākonga Māori and local priorities.

The reforms are experienced as politically driven and not informed by Māori voice

Participants across the wānanga articulated their uncertainty about the rationale, detail and implementation of the reforms. Some noted that repeated policy shifts had created a real sense of fatigue and distrust. Others saw the reform package as politically motivated rather than grounded in evidence or sustained sector engagement. The pace of change made it challenging for kaiako to invest in new systems with confidence.

“Every year I’m having to plan all my units again ... suddenly I’m going to have to do it all over again. It’s hard to build a good foundation for students when it’s always shifting.”

“It becomes a political game ... how much do they invest in the system that’s just come in, only for it to change?”

Participants also questioned whether Māori aspirations, mātauranga Māori and mana motuhake could be meaningfully reflected when Māori had not been involved from the outset or held decision-making authority.

“These drafts have come out of advice ... and [have] not even consulted us from the beginning. That rings alarm bells with me.”

“There is no mātauranga Māori truly reflected in these changes ... the real thinking isn’t behind it because the people who were doing it were not Māori.”

A further concern was the uncertainty about what implementation would mean in practice. Many felt they were being asked to prepare for reforms without sufficient information, consultation or support.

“We’re in this fear space where we don’t know what those reforms are going to look like. We have a little bit of an idea from drafts.”

“We as kaiako are stuck between a rock and a hard place watching our year nines now.”

Te Tiriti, mātauranga Māori and mana motuhake are not visible enough in the reform direction

When asked how Te Tiriti o Waitangi, mātauranga Māori and mana motuhake were reflected in the reforms, many participants responded that they either could not see them at all or saw only surface-level in-

clusion. Some described a reversal from earlier efforts to strengthen Te Tiriti-centred practice and mātauranga Māori across the curriculum. They drew a clear distinction between the surface level inclusion of Māori words or content and the deeper authority, values and thinking that is required for meaningful expression of rangatiratanga.

“While occasionally the words are there, the real thinking isn’t behind it.”

“What is their understanding of mana motuhake? ... With the sterilised vision of mātauranga Māori, and like lip service that might seem like it is there, how does that exercise mana motuhake?”

Participants also described kura-based and community-led practice as an expression of mana motuhake. Kapa haka, iwi and hapū relationships, local strategic planning and Māori frameworks were identified as places where ākonga Māori already experience identity, authority and success.

Kaiako Māori will carry the cultural and implementation burden

Across all wānanga, kaiako Māori anticipated that they would absorb much of the work required to support ākonga Māori from the effects of reform. This included learning new systems, rewriting programmes, developing culturally responsive resources, supporting kaimahi, maintaining mātauranga Māori, and providing additional help outside school hours. Participants linked this work to current shortages, cultural taxation, burnout and the loss of kaiako Māori from the profession.

“Kaiako Māori should only be worried about teaching, not trying to figure out how to manipulate the system so that our teaching is justified.”

“We’ll continue to see an increased workload ... which will continue to contribute to burnout.”

“You hold your whole culture on your back ... you carry all of their culture and responsibility on your back to be able to ensure that you are passing it down correctly.”

“My mātauranga Māori has actually been drained and been taken as a given... This needs to be given back.”

Kaiako will continue to adapt

Despite real concerns, participants also expressed strong commitment and collective responsibility. Kaiako expected that they would continue to adapt programmes, weave mātauranga Māori through learning, draw on whānau and community relationships, and create locally meaningful pathways. They were confident they could wrap around ākonga, but they did not see this adaptation as evidence that the reform itself was sound.

“We know what works, we know what works, but we have to mask it.”

“Sooner or later, we’re going to adapt ... because we have to, for our kids’ sake.”

“We have already been weaving mātauranga Māori throughout ... we’ll just keep it.”

Some participants also saw the introduction of the reforms as a reason for Māori to reaffirm collective values and strengthen local responses. This was framed more as an act of resilience and resistance rather than as confidence in the policy direction.

“If we could get our voices heard ... please listen to us, we see it day in, day out. We know what works.”

5.5 Māori Educator Survey data

The findings below are drawn from a survey distributed through PPTA Te Wehengarua that invited Māori members to share their experiences and perspectives on NCEA reforms.

Responses from Māori educators indicate consistently low levels of confidence that the NCEA reforms will achieve positive outcomes for ākonga Māori. Across nearly all survey items, disagreement substantially outweighed agreement, suggesting widespread concern about both the intent and implementation of the reforms.

Survey participants

A total of 116 Māori educators participated in the survey. Respondents were able to select more than one role; therefore percentages do not total 100%. Most respondents were kaiako (70%, n = 80), with additional representation from middle leaders (32%, n = 36), pastoral, cultural and specialist support staff (18%, n = 20), and senior leaders (12%, n = 14). The sample was very experienced, with almost three-quarters of respondents having worked in education for more than 10 years, including 42% (n = 47) with over 21 years of experience.

Respondents represented a range of educational settings. Most worked in English-medium secondary schools (79%, n = 90), while 8% (n = 9) worked in wharekura, 5% (n = 6) in Ngā Kura-ā-Iwi, and 2% (n = 2) in Kura Hourua.

Overall, 32% of respondents (n = 36) worked in Māori-medium or bilingual settings, including 10% (n = 11) in Māori-medium rumaki settings and 22% (n = 25) in Māori-medium bilingual settings. In comparison, 75% (n = 85) worked in English-medium settings. As respondents could select more than one language-medium option, these percentages total more than 100%.

The survey reflects the perspectives of Māori educators working across both English-medium and Māori-medium education, while being weighted towards experienced educators in English-medium secondary schools.

Perceived purpose of the reforms

Participants expressed limited confidence that the reforms were designed with Māori interests in mind. Around seven in ten respondents strongly disagreed that the reforms address issues important to Māori (70%), respond to challenges experienced by ākonga Māori (71%), or reflect Māori aspirations for educational success (70%). Similarly, 64% strongly disagreed that the intended benefits of the reforms for Māori were clear. Even the statement that “the purpose of the reforms is clear” attracted more disagreement than agreement, with 66% either strongly or mostly disagreeing. Respondents therefore saw a clear disconnect between the stated intentions of the reforms and Māori educational priorities.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi in practice

Survey responses showed particularly strong disagreement regarding the reforms’ alignment with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Approximately three-quarters of respondents strongly disagreed that the reforms give effect to Te Tiriti in practice (73%), uphold the Crown’s active protection obligations (75%), enable Māori decision-making (75%), support genuine Crown-Māori engagement (76%), or promote equitable outcomes for ākonga Māori (77%). Similar numbers of respondents also disagreed that the reforms strengthen mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori (71%). Respondents viewed the reforms as falling well short of Te Tiriti expectations.

Anticipated impacts on ākonga Māori

Participants were similarly pessimistic about the likely effects of the reforms on ākonga Māori. Between

65% and 75% strongly disagreed that the reforms would improve educational outcomes, strengthen learner engagement, increase equity, improve wellbeing and belonging, strengthen school-whānau relationships, or provide more meaningful learning pathways for ākonga Māori. Overall, respondents did not anticipate that the reforms would produce meaningful improvements for ākonga Māori.

Implementation, workload, and resourcing

Respondents also expressed concern about the practical implementation of the reforms. Around 71% strongly disagreed that implementation timeframes were realistic. 69% strongly disagreed that kaiako would have sufficient time to adapt teaching and assessment practices, and 72 % that the pace of change would be manageable. Although opinions were more mixed regarding whether schools were prepared for implementation, fewer than one-third strongly disagreed with this statement (31%), suggesting that preparedness varied across contexts. Only about one-quarter expressed confidence that schools would have adequate resources to implement the reforms effectively.

Cultural workload for Māori educators

The survey also highlighted concerns about the distribution of cultural responsibilities. Over half of respondents agreed that the reforms would increase demands on kaiako Māori, with 56% either mostly or strongly agreeing that culturally responsive responsibilities would increase. Similarly, 46% strongly disagreed that responsibility for Māori-focused aspects of the reforms would be shared across all staff, while 62% strongly disagreed that Māori educators would receive adequate support for these additional responsibilities. More than one-third strongly agreed that the reforms would increase the cultural and relational responsibilities already carried by Māori educators. Respondents anticipated the reforms would reinforce rather than reduce existing inequities in cultural workload.

Summary

Across the survey, Māori educators expressed consistently negative perceptions of the reforms. The strongest concerns related to the reforms' alignment with Māori aspirations, Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations, and their potential to improve outcomes for ākonga Māori. Respondents also anticipated considerable implementation challenges, including unrealistic timeframes, insufficient resourcing, and an increased cultural workload for Māori. Overall, respondents expressed low confidence in both the reforms' alignment with Māori aspirations and Te Tiriti expectations, and their practical feasibility.

5.6 Māori voice through a Te Tiriti lens

The Tiroiro Anō inquiry panel identified five mātāpono through which the reform proposals were examined: rangatiratanga, mahi ngātahi, active protection, ōritetanga, and ka mua, ka muri. This section draws on the collective voices shared through wānanga, interviews, survey responses, and wider sector engagement and analyses them through these principles to identify the conditions participants considered necessary for qualification reform to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

These kōrero shift the evaluation beyond questions of design and implementation. They ask whether the reforms enable Māori authority, are shaped through genuine partnership, protect te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori, and create equitable conditions for ākonga Māori to flourish.

Rangatiratanga

Participants clearly distinguished between being consulted and having genuine decision-making opportunities. Their concern was not whether Māori had been invited to respond, but whether Māori knowledge, priorities, and aspirations had shaped the reform from the outset and would continue to shape its implementation.

Participants valued the authority of kura, kaiako, whānau, iwi, and communities to define success and to make decisions that respond to their own ākonga and local contexts. They expressed concern that increased standardisation could reduce flexibility, narrow local decision-making and potentially constrain the ability of ākonga Māori to see themselves reflected within the qualification system.

Mahi ngātahi

Participants consistently situated trust, reciprocity, and sustained engagement as essential conditions for successful change. They reflected on earlier reform experiences and questioned whether current engagement had moved beyond simply information sharing and consultation to genuine partnership and shared influence.

Mahi ngātahi is not a one-off stage in a reform process. It requires enduring relationships with Māori communities, iwi, educational leaders, kura, and kaiako through design, decision-making, implementation, and review. Participants expressed a real willingness to engage constructively with change, but that willingness depended on Māori voices being heard, acted upon, and visible in the decisions that followed.

Active protection

Participants' concerns centred on the future status of te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and culturally grounded educational practice within a more standardised qualification framework. Questions about assessment validity, curriculum content, comparability, and cultural context were therefore also questions about whose ways of knowing were upheld, and whose mātauranga would be recognised and protected.

Participants emphasised that Māori-centred subjects and forms of achievement are legitimate, rigorous, and academically valuable. Protecting them requires more than recognition in policy or the inclusion of Māori words and content. It requires Māori values and thinking to shape the system, as well as adequate resourcing, workforce capability, and long-term investment. Without these conditions, the responsibility for sustaining te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori and culturally grounded practice will continue to fall unevenly on Māori educators and communities. Active protection requires deliberate system responsibility.

Ōritetanga

Participants were clear that equal treatment does not necessarily produce equitable outcomes. They challenged assumptions that the same pathway, the same assessment conditions, or the same definition of achievement will produce fair outcomes for all learners. More standardised approaches were viewed with caution where they might privilege a certain type of academic success and narrow opportunities for ākonga whose strengths and aspirations might sit outside that scope.

Success was also described as encompassing identity, belonging, language, culture, wellbeing, connection to whānau and community, and diverse pathways. From this lens, an equitable qualification system needs to recognise different forms of achievement and respond to ākonga diversity rather than treating difference as a problem to be fixed.

Ka mua, ka muri

Participants interpreted the current reforms through their personal, professional and collective experiences. Earlier qualification systems, including School Certificate and Bursary, curriculum reforms, and experiences of educational change have shaped their judgements about trust, likely impact and whether commitments would be sustained.

The kōrero was also future-focused. Participants expressed hope that reform could support ākonga Māori success if it genuinely upheld Māori aspirations, knowledge, authority, and relationships. Their concern was intergenerational: what kind of system would be left for future ākonga Māori, and will the choices made now expand or limit their ability to flourish as Māori. Ka mua, ka muri requires reform to learn from the past while acting responsibly for future generations.

Section 6 – Evaluating the reforms

The Government's March and May 2026 decisions moved the policy context beyond consultation. NCEA is to be replaced by the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZCE) at Year 12 and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE) at Year 13. A Year 11 Foundational Award focused on literacy and numeracy will sit alongside them, with implementation phased from 2028 to 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2026a, 2026b).

This section examines the implications of the new qualification structure for Māori, distinguishing between decisions that have been finalised and aspects that remain uncertain. The analysis considers whether the reforms address conditions known to shape inequitable outcomes for ākonga Māori and whether they strengthen Māori authority over knowledge, assessment, pathways, and educational success.

Two questions guide the analysis:

1. To what extent do the reforms address structural conditions contributing to inequitable outcomes for Māori?
2. To what extent do the reforms redistribute authority so Māori can shape what knowledge is valued, how subjects and assessments are designed, how success is recognised, and how the system is monitored?

6.1 Industry-led subjects and vocational pathways

Industry-led subjects will sit alongside Ministry-led subjects, allowing academic and industry-based learning to contribute to one qualification. Proposed fields include construction, engineering, health, and community services (Ministry of Education, 2026b).

Implications for Māori

Industry-led learning may broaden recognised pathways into employment, training, further study, whānau wellbeing, iwi and hapū development, and community leadership. The central risk is inequitable pathwaying. Without safeguards, ākonga Māori may be steered towards vocational subjects while academic pathways retain greater status and tertiary access. This concern is not new. Tokona te Raki's Kōkirihiā initiative argues that existing streaming practices already channel learners into prescribed educational and vocational pathways, with Māori learners disproportionately affected by placement in lower streams (Tokona te Raki, 2023). In this way, pathway decisions can constrain educational opportunities and shape future trajectories from an early age. Mātauranga Māori must also be more than an addition to subjects organised around industry priorities.

Māori educators described success as broader than receiving a qualification or meeting labour-market demands. Their kōrero included whānau wellbeing, iwi and hapū development, cultural continuity, community leadership, and Māori aspirations. Industry-led pathways should therefore expand what is valued without narrowing success to employability.

Qualifications also shape the status attached to different pathways. If vocational subjects are treated as less valued, increased choice may coexist with restricted access to university or professional study. Guidance, prerequisites, subject allocation, and destination data will need careful examination to ensure that choice is real rather than a new form of streaming.

The place of te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and Māori economic and development priorities also remains central. An integrated pathway cannot be culturally legitimate if Māori knowledge is supplementary while industry knowledge determines the structure and purpose of learning.

What we don't yet know

The published reform detail available at the time of this analysis does not yet establish how Māori will share authority over priority sectors, subject content, valid evidence of learning, or pathway monitoring. Rangatiratanga requires decision-making power; mahi ngātahi requires Māori to co-design alongside the Crown and industry; active protection requires te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, tikanga, and Māori development aspirations to shape relevant subjects; and ōritetanga requires monitoring so expanded choices do not reproduce hierarchies between academic and vocational pathways.

6.2 Subject-based qualifications, achievement, and enrolment requirements

NZCE and NZACE will be subject based. Learners must pass at least three subjects and achieve the Foundational Award, and schools must normally enrol Year 12 and 13 learners in at least five subjects. No particular Year 12 or 13 subjects will be compulsory (Ministry of Education, 2026b).

Implications for Māori

Given some concerns about the complexity of NCEA, a subject-based certificate may be easier for ākonga, whānau, employers, and tertiary providers to interpret than accumulated credits and standards. However, its fairness depends on which subjects ākonga are able to access and enter, the guidance they receive, whether those subjects keep open a broad range of future choices, and what each school or kura can provide. Streaming, prerequisites, timetables, staffing shortages, and guidance practices can result in unequal opportunities, even when enrolment rules are identical. A visible three, four, or five-subject result may also rank ākonga Māori without revealing differences in school size, language medium, staffing, or subject supply.

Equitable access matters as much as the number of subjects passed. Ākonga enrolled in five subjects do not have equal opportunity if they are excluded from prerequisite subjects, or if staffing and timetabling prevents their school or kura from offering them. The certificate must be interpreted alongside the conditions that shaped what was available. A subject-based qualification has to be judged not only by how clearly it records achievement, but also by whether it leaves ākonga Māori with meaningful choices that recognise success across academic, vocational, cultural, and community pathways.

Māori educators identified flexibility and contextual responsiveness as strengths of NCEA. Flexibility has sometimes enabled fragmented programmes, but it has also allowed schools and kura to respond to local context, learner need, kaupapa, and pathway. Reform should address poor programme design without removing the flexibility that sustains culturally responsive learning.

What we don't know yet

It remains unclear how programme design, subject combinations, exceptions, and local pathways will protect Māori authority and Māori-medium provision. Rangatiratanga requires meaningful influence for Māori communities; active protection requires Te Reo Rangatira, Pāngarau, Pūtaiao, mātauranga Māori, and locally grounded subjects to be available and recognised on equal terms; and ōritetanga requires action on streaming, prerequisites, guidance, expectations, and unequal subject supply.

6.3 Whole-subject assessment and national consistency

Each subject will include coursework and at least one examination, with most learners completing three to four assessments per subject. Assessment will address the whole subject and be nationally consistent. Reassessment and grade aggregation were still under development in May 2026 (Ministry of Education, 2026b).

Implications for Māori

Whole-subject assessment may improve curriculum coherence and make results easier to interpret. However, as the literature scan highlights, assessment validity also depends on whether ākongā Māori can demonstrate knowledge through culturally and linguistically meaningful forms of evidence. A nationally consistent assessment system can therefore be technically reliable while still being culturally or educationally incomplete. National consistency requires decisions about what knowledge counts, what constitutes valid evidence, and how subject boundaries are defined. Māori educators involved in this inquiry valued NCEA's capacity to adapt learning to local contexts. A nationally consistent model raises important questions: consistency of what, determined by whom, and with what scope for iwi, hapū, kura, and communities to locate learning? The type of assessment is important because it helps determine which capabilities can count as success. If valid achievement is defined too narrowly, then greater consistency may come at the cost of recognising the different ways ākongā Māori know, learn, and demonstrate capability.

Mātauranga Māori may be relegated to optional content if subjects continue to be organised in dominant disciplinary traditions. Standardised assessment may improve comparability, but its validity may be limited when knowledge is expressed through different linguistic, relational, practical, or collective contexts. Common assessments can measure outcomes produced by unequal access to culturally responsive pedagogy, high expectations, specialist teachers, stable staffing, resources, and sufficient learning time (Bishop et al., 2007; Rubie-Davies, 2006).

The concern is especially significant for mātauranga Māori. If whole-subject design begins from dominant disciplinary traditions, Māori knowledge may be included as content without shaping the subject itself.

At least one examination in every subject also requires an equity analysis. Common examinations may improve comparability, but identical assessment conditions do not create identical learning opportunities. A national examination may record the outcomes of unequal conditions while presenting them as differences between learners.

National consistency assumes access to qualified teachers, stable staffing, appropriate resources, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and enough time to learn the whole subject. Those conditions remain uneven across Māori-medium, rural, small, and hard-to-staff settings.

What we don't yet know

The reforms do not yet clarify how Māori will exercise authority over subject knowledge, assessment constructs, evidence, moderation, and validity, particularly in Māori-medium pathways. Rangatiratanga requires that authority; mahi ngātahi requires continuing co-design; active protection requires te reo Māori and mātauranga Māori to be foundational rather than assimilated into English-medium assumptions; and ōritetanga requires equitable staffing, design capacity, professional learning, resources, accessible assessment, and monitoring. National consistency is only credible when learners also have equitable conditions in which to learn.

6.4 The A+ to E six-point grading scale

An A+ to E scale will replace Achieved, Merit, and Excellence, with C or above being a subject pass. Grade aggregation and endorsement details were still being developed in May 2026 (Ministry of Education, 2026b).

Implications for Māori

This grading scale may be more familiar to some employers, tertiary providers, and whānau. Cultural validity is particularly important for Te Reo Rangatira, Pāngarau, Pūtaiao, mātauranga Māori, and Māori-medium subjects. Grades are only as valid as the subject frameworks, tasks, and moderation processes that

support them. A clearer grading scale does not broaden what counts as success. Its value for ākonga Māori depends on whether the knowledge and capabilities being assessed are culturally valid and reflect a broad understanding of achievement.

Grades are shaped by the opportunities available before assessment. Teacher expectations, subject access and support, learning opportunities, continuity of teaching, cultural safety, familiarity with assessments, and resourcing all influence outcomes. Māori expertise must shape subject frameworks, tasks, moderation, and grade aggregation from the outset.

What we don't yet know

The reforms do not yet establish Māori decision-making power over performance standards, valid evidence, grade production, or evaluation of differences of outcomes and opportunities. Rangatiratanga and mahi ngātahi require Māori authority and continuing involvement; active protection requires culturally legitimate grading; and ōritetanga requires monitoring the pathways, teaching conditions, subject access, and assessment opportunities that produce grades.

6.5 The Foundational Award and compulsory Year 11 subjects

From 2028, the Foundational Award will recognise literacy and numeracy benchmarked at Year 11. It will not be required for progression into Years 12 and 13 but will be required for NZCE or NZACE. Year 11 learners will study English or Te Reo Rangatira, Mathematics or Pāngarau, and Science or Pūtaiao, while NCEA Level 1 will be removed (Ministry of Education, 2026a, 2026b).

Implications for Māori

A record of foundational learning may support ākonga Māori who leave before completing Year 12 or 13. Naming Te Reo Rangatira and Pāngarau recognises Māori-medium pathways, but literacy and numeracy are culturally and linguistically situated and cannot be treated as translations of English-medium constructs. Compulsory Science or Pūtaiao may help protect access to future educational pathways while also exposing existing inequities in workforce capacity and subject provision in small, rural, and Māori-medium settings.

Because the Foundational Award is required for the later certificates, it has the potential to become a gatekeeper for Māori if support is uneven or opportunities to demonstrate learning are narrow. Its legitimacy will depend on whether it functions as a supported platform that strengthens progress and success for ākonga Māori, rather than reinforcing inequities.

What we don't yet know

The reforms do not yet show how Māori authority will shape Te Reo Rangatira, te reo matatini, Pāngarau, and Pūtaiao, or how equivalent status, quality, resourcing, and timing will be secured for Māori-medium design. Ōritetanga also requires evidence that ākonga Māori who need further opportunities are supported without deficit labelling and that the award reduces rather than reinforces inequity.

What emerges through a Te Tiriti lens?

Although the reforms may provide greater clarity about qualification structure, they offer considerably less clarity about the distribution of authority, the protection of Māori-medium pathways, or the mechanisms through which existing inequities will be addressed. Naming Te Reo Rangatira, Pāngarau, and Pūtaiao is important, but active protection requires more than visibility. It requires Māori authority over design, sustainable workforce and resourcing, culturally valid assessment, and monitoring capable of identifying inequitable effects. Equally, nationally consistent subjects, assessment, and grading may strengthen comparability, but they do not in

themselves address unequal access to teaching, subjects, pathways, or culturally sustaining learning conditions. The central issue is not whether the qualification framework and design are clearer, but whether the conditions surrounding that architecture enable Māori to exercise authority and ākonga Māori to access equitable opportunities.

The reforms cannot be evaluated solely by whether they produce clearer qualifications, more consistent assessment, or stronger pathways. Their legitimacy also depends on where authority sits, whose knowledge shapes curriculum and assessment, how implementation risks are distributed, whether inequities are actively identified, monitored and addressed, and whether the system enables ākonga Māori to succeed in ways that reflect their identities, aspirations, strengths and communities.

Section 7 – Implications

The success of the reforms for ākonga Māori will depend not only on the design of the qualification system, but on how it is implemented, governed, resourced, and evaluated over time. As the evidence throughout this chapter highlights, that success includes qualification achievement and future pathways, but also identity, language, culture, belonging, collective aspirations, and the ability to flourish as Māori. Drawing together the literature, Crown commitments, Māori educator and sector perspectives, survey findings, and analysis of the reform design, the following implications table identifies the conditions that will shape whether the reforms, viewed through a Te Tiriti lens, give practical effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and support Māori educational success.

Table 3: Conditions Shaping Whether the Reforms Give Effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Support Māori Educational Success

TE TIRITI DIMENSION	IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALIFICATION REFORM
Rangatiratanga	Genuine Māori authority and influence throughout the design, implementation, governance, and ongoing evaluation of the qualification system will be essential if the reforms are to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Māori aspirations, knowledge, and decision-making need to be integral to reform rather than considered after key decisions have been made.
Mahi ngātahi	Authentic partnership with Māori requires sustained collaboration, reciprocal relationships, shared responsibility, and adequate resourcing throughout implementation and ongoing refinement of the reforms.
Active protection	Protecting and strengthening te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, tikanga Māori, and culturally sustaining educational practice will require sufficient capability, resources, and system support to ensure these commitments are realised in practice.
Ōritetanga	Equitable outcomes depend on recognising diverse pathways to success, addressing systemic barriers, and ensuring qualification structures enable ākonga Māori to succeed as Māori without compromising identity, language, or culture.
Ka mua, ka muri	Learning from the historical experiences of Māori within education will be important in ensuring that current reforms contribute to the long-term aspirations of mokopuna rather than repeating past patterns of inequity.

Te Tiriti is not an optional consideration applied after the reform has been designed. It is a foundational framework that is the basis against which the legitimacy, fairness, and educational value of the reform must be judged.

Reform cannot be considered successful or complete simply because Māori have been consulted or because Māori content remains visible somewhere within the system. Success requires Māori influence to be evident in decisions, Māori aspirations to be protected in design and practice, and the diverse strengths of ākonga Māori to be recognised within the purposes, pathways, and measures of success.

Section 8: Limitations

A main limitation of this chapter is the absence of direct ākongā, whānau, hapū, and iwi voice. The voices gathered were primarily those of Māori educators and leaders, alongside survey data and existing research. These insights provide important professional and lived expertise but cannot be taken as representing the aspirations and experiences of ākongā Māori, whānau, hapū, and iwi themselves.

A further limitation relates to contributions made in te reo Māori. Some kōrero could not be included in the current analysis because appropriate transcription required specialist expertise, alongside further checking of the ethical processes for their use. As a result, contributions that were in te reo Māori are not represented in the current findings. This will be addressed in Phase 2 so that this important voice can be included appropriately, in te reo Māori and without translation.

The evidence also varies across educational settings. Māori-medium provision, kaupapa Māori settings such as kura kaupapa Māori and Ngā Kura-ā-Iwi, and English-medium contexts are not represented equally, and findings should not be interpreted as suggesting a single Māori experience of qualification reform. The Māori educator survey provides a key indication of sector perspectives but, with 116 respondents and a sample that is weighted towards experienced educators in English-medium secondary settings, it is not representative of all Māori educators.

Finally, this analysis is based on the reform decisions, documentation, and detail available at the time of writing. Important aspects of assessment design, implementation, resourcing, monitoring, and Māori-medium provision are still in development. This chapter can identify likely implications, risks, and conditions required for equitable implementation, but it cannot determine the full effects of the reforms before these details are finalised and implemented.

Section 9: Recommendations

The recommendations below respond to the key issues emerging from this analysis and identify actions that would strengthen the capacity of the reforms to support Māori educational success and give practical effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Each recommendation is accompanied by Ngā whakaaro, a question intended to support ongoing consideration, implementation, and evaluation.

Give ongoing effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Recommendation

Ensure that Te Tiriti o Waitangi is foundational to the governance, implementation, evaluation, and ongoing refinement of the qualification system, with Māori exercising meaningful authority and influence in decision-making at every stage.

Ngā whakaaro

How will Māori exercise meaningful authority in the governance, implementation, evaluation, and ongoing refinement of the qualification system, and how will Te Tiriti o Waitangi be made visible in the decisions that are made?

Define and recognise success for ākongā Māori more broadly

Recommendation

Ensure that the purpose, design, implementation, and evaluation of the qualification system recognise success for ākongā Māori as extending beyond gaining qualifications to include identity, language, culture, belonging, wellbeing, collective aspirations, and meaningful educational, employment, and community pathways.

Ngā whakaaro

Whose definitions of success will shape the qualification system, and how will ākongā Māori, whānau, hapū, iwi, and Māori communities know that their aspirations are genuinely reflected in it?

Monitor equity and unintended consequences

Recommendation

Establish systematic and transparent monitoring of the intended and unintended impacts of qualification reform on ākonga Māori, kura, and communities, with mechanisms to identify emerging inequities and respond to them.

Ngā whakaaro

How will implementation be monitored to identify intended and unintended impacts on ākonga Māori, schools, and communities?

Protect curriculum breadth and ākonga Māori pathways

Recommendation

Protect equitable access to a broad range of meaningful curriculum, qualification, vocational, and academic pathways for ākonga Māori across diverse school and community contexts and monitor implementation for any narrowing of choice or opportunity.

Ngā whakaaro

Where could implementation unintentionally narrow subject choice, pathway access, or future options for ākonga Māori, and how will this be identified and addressed?

Support and affirm Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education

Recommendation

Ensure that the distinct foundations, purposes, philosophies, aspirations, pedagogies, language, and assessment approaches of Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education actively inform reform.

Ngā whakaaro

What decision-making authority will Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education have in shaping qualification design, assessment, and implementation?

Invest in workforce capability and sustainable implementation

Recommendation

Provide appropriate time, resourcing, professional learning, and capability development to enable kaiako, leaders, and kura to implement the reforms effectively and equitably.

Ngā whakaaro

What evidence will show that kaiako, leaders, and kura have the time, capability, staffing, and support needed to implement the reforms sustainably?

Build learning and refinement into implementation

Recommendation

Establish mechanisms to ensure that evidence gathered during implementation informs ongoing evaluation, refinement and continuous improvement of the qualification system, drawing on the experience and perspectives from ākonga, whānau, iwi, kura, educators, employers, and tertiary providers.

Ngā whakaaro

How will evidence gathered during implementation lead to timely changes when unintended impacts, inequities, or implementation problems are identified?

Section 10: Conclusion – Kei hea tātau e ahu ana?

Qualification reform is not a neutral process of system redesign. It is shaped by social, cultural, political, and educational priorities and involves decisions about whose knowledge is recognised, how educational success is defined, and whose authority shapes the system. From a Māori perspective, these are fundamental questions of educational justice and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Across the literature, Ministry of Education and NZQA strategies, and voices gathered for this chapter, a consistent set of conditions emerges for supporting Māori educational success: meaningful Māori authority in educational decision-making; active protection of te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, and Māori-medium education; culturally sustaining curriculum and assessment; equitable access to diverse pathways, and sustained investment in implementation. These conditions give practical expression to Te Tiriti o Waitangi within the senior secondary qualification system.

Although the reforms' stated aims are to improve coherence, credibility, and learner outcomes, the Government's own advice acknowledges that achievement is likely to decline in the short term, particularly for Māori, Pacific, disabled learners, and those facing socioeconomic barriers (Office of the Minister of Education, 2025, para. 59). The Minister also acknowledges a corresponding responsibility, stating that "the onus is on us to make sure we support these students" (Office of the Minister of Education, 2025, para. 36). This is significant: the risk is known in advance and responsibility for responding to that risk is explicitly located with the Government. However, the published reform documentation examined provides limited detail about how these risks will be mitigated in practice, how Māori authority will shape implementation, or how Māori educational aspirations will be protected throughout the reform process.

The current reform direction provides insufficient assurance that Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations will be realised in practice. Consultation alone is not evidence of partnership. The visibility of Māori content is not evidence of active protection. Equity cannot be assumed just because it is a stated intended outcome. A reform of this importance must demonstrate how rangatiratanga, mahi ngātahi, active protection, and ōritetanga are embedded throughout its design, implementation, governance, and evaluation.

The burden of proof rests with the Crown. Where reforms are anticipated to have disproportionate impacts on ākonga Māori, those advancing the reforms must demonstrate that the changes will strengthen, rather than diminish, Māori educational success. This requires clear evidence that the distinct foundations, purposes and contexts within Māori-medium and kaupapa Māori education are supported, that ākonga Māori in English-medium settings are able to experience educational success as Māori, that implementation will not deepen existing inequities, and that clear mechanisms exist to identify and respond to any unintended consequences.

Kei hea tātau e ahu ana? The question posed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Graham Hingangaroa Smith remains a critical one for the current reforms. The measure of qualification reform is not whether the resulting system is clearer, or more consistent, or more comparable. It is whether power and opportunity shift so that Māori authority, mātauranga, te reo Māori, and aspirations genuinely shape the system, Te Tiriti is upheld in practice, and ākonga Māori are able to succeed as Māori. That is the test of whether this reform represents transformation for Māori, rather than simply another restructuring of the qualification system.

Acknowledgements

Meiyang Hong and Professor Gavin Brown, for their invaluable technical expertise in quantitative data analysis and interpretation. Kate Gainsford for her knowledge and contribution to the survey writing process.

References

- Alansari, M., Webber, M., Overbye, S., Tuifagalele, R., & Edge, K. (2022). *Conceptualising Māori and Pasifika aspirations and striving for success (COMPASS)*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0019>
- Allen, P., & Trinick, T. (2026). Navigating contested terrain: The impact of comprehensive reforms on the quality and equity of Indigenous education in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 34(3). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.34.9005>
- Berryman, M., Egan, M., & Haydon-Howard, J. (2023). A pedagogical continuum: Driving culturally responsive school reform for Māori secondary students. *Journal of Education and Development*, 7(2), 30–42. <https://doi.org/10.20849/jed.v7i2.1339>
- Berryman, M., & Eley, E. (2017). Succeeding as Māori: Māori students' views on stepping up to the Ka Hikitia challenge. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 52(1), 93–107. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-017-0076-1>
- Berryman, M., Eley, E., & Copeland, D. (2017). Listening and learning from rangatahi Māori: The voices of Māori youth. *Critical Questions in Education*, 8(4), 476–494.
- Berryman, M., Lawrence, D., & Lamont, R. (2018). Cultural relationships for responsive pedagogy: A bicultural mana ōrite perspective. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 1, 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.0096>
- Bishop, R. (2003). Changing power relations in education: Kaupapa Māori messages for “mainstream” education in Aotearoa/ New Zealand. *Comparative Education*, 39(2), 221–238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050060302555>
- Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Cavanagh, T., & Teddy, L. (2007). *Te Kotahitanga Phase 3 whānaungatanga: Establishing a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations in mainstream secondary school classrooms*. Ministry of Education.
- Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Tiakiwai, S., & Richardson, C. (2003). *Te Kōtahitanga: The experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori students in mainstream classrooms*. Ministry of Education.
- Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Wearmouth, J., Peter, M., & Clapham, S. (2009). Te Kotahitanga: Addressing educational disparities facing Māori students in New Zealand. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25(5), 734–742. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.01.009>
- Came, H., O'Sullivan, D., Kidd, J., & McCreanor, T. (2024). Critical Tiriti Analysis: A prospective policy making tool from Aotearoa New Zealand. *Ethnicities*, 24(6), 985–1004. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231171651>
- Came, H., O'Sullivan, D., & McCreanor, T. (2020). Introducing critical Tiriti policy analysis through a retrospective review of the New Zealand Primary Health Care Strategy. *Ethnicities*, 20(3), 434–456. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819896466>
- Durie, K., Denzler, M., & Turner-Adams, H. (2023). *Me aro ki te hā o Hine-ahu-one: Wāhine Māori in leadership*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0036>
- Durie, K., Kupenga-Keefe, H., Denzler, M., & Palmer, G. (2025). Te Kura Tūtahi: Mana motuhake and Māori leadership in education. *New Zealand Council for Educational Research*. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0080>
- Durie, M. (2001). A framework for considering Māori educational advancement. Ministry of Education.
- Durie, M. (2011). *Ngā tini whetū: Navigating Māori futures*. Huia.
- Education Review Office. (2017). *Culture, language and identity*. <https://ero.govt.nz>
- Fortune, K., Durie, K., & Palmer, G. (2024). *Mā mua ka kite a muri, mā muri ka ora a mua: “Equity” in kura mana Māori motuhake: An overview of the literature*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0053>
- Henry, E., & Pene, H. (2001). Kaupapa Māori: Locating Indigenous ontology, epistemology and methodology in the academy. *Organization*, 8(2), 234–242. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508401082009>
- Hetaraka, M. (2019). A kaupapa Māori analysis of Tātaiako: Considering Māori education policy. *MAI Journal*, 8(2), 159–171. <https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2019.8.2.5>

- Highfield, C., & Webber, M. (2021). Mana Ūkaipō: Māori student connection, belonging, and engagement at school. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 56(2), 145–164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-021-00226-z>
- Hunia, M., Smaill, E., Durie, K., Gibbs, B., Hipkins, R., & Lawes, E. (2025). *He tōtōpū nō te pakiaka, he hiwa nō te pā: Research on indigenous national monitoring frameworks*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0087>
- Hunt, A.-M. (2016). Teachers' cultural capital: Supporting changing practice. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 2, 28–34.
- Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation. (2016). *He whakaaro here whakaumu mō Aotearoa: The report of Matike Mai Aotearoa*.
- Kerr, B. G., & Averill, R. M. (2021). Contextualising assessment within Aotearoa New Zealand: Drawing from mātauranga Māori. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 17(2), 236–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801211016450>
- Kerr, B. G., & Averill, R. M. (2024). Culturally sustaining assessment for Indigenous learners in Aotearoa New Zealand: Drawing from policy, research, and educator voices. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 143, 104567. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104567>
- Macfarlane, A., Glynn, T., Cavanagh, T., & Bateman, S. (2007). Creating culturally-safe schools for Māori students. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36(1), 65–76. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1326011100004439>
- Macfarlane, A. H., Glynn, T., Grace, W., Penetito, W., & Bateman, S. (2008). Indigenous epistemology in a national curriculum framework? *Ethnicities*, 8(1), 102–126. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796807087021>
- Mikaere, A. (2011). Racism in contemporary Aotearoa: A Pākehā problem. In *Colonising myths, Māori realities: He rukuruku whakaaro* (pp. 67–96). Huia.
- Milne, A. (2017). *Coloring in the white spaces: Reclaiming cultural identity in whitestream schools*. Peter Lang.
- Ministry of Education. (2020a). Ka Hikitia–Ka Hāpaitia: The Māori education strategy. <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/strategies-policies-and-programmes/maori-education-and-language/ka-hikitia-ka-hapaitia>
- Ministry of Education. (2020b). Tau Mai Te Reo: The Māori language in education strategy. <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/strategies-policies-and-programmes/maori-education-and-language/tau-mai-te-reo-overview>
- Ministry of Education. (2025). *Proposal to replace NCEA with new national qualifications: Discussion document*. Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga.
- Ministry of Education. (2026a, March 26). NCEA update: Structure of new qualification system agreed. Tāhūrangi. https://tahurangi.education.govt.nz/ncea_tranche1
- Ministry of Education. (2026b, May 16). Further details confirmed for new senior secondary qualifications replacing NCEA. Tāhūrangi. <https://tahurangi.education.govt.nz/senior-secondary-quals-finalised>
- Ministry of Education, & New Zealand Teachers Council. (2011). *Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners*. Tātaiako: for teachers of Māori learners
- Ministry of Justice. (2026). *A Treaty Principles Bill*. <https://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector-policy/key-initiatives/a-treaty-principles-bill/>
- New Zealand Māori Council v Attorney-General [1987] 1 NZLR 641 (CA).
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2020). *Te Kōkiritanga: NZQA's action plan for ākonga Māori success 2020–2023*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/maori/focus-maori/te-kokiritanga/>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.). *Our focus on Māori*. Retrieved August 14, 2026, from <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/maori/focus-maori/>
- Office of the Minister of Education. (2025, June 30). *Public consultation on proposal to replace NCEA* [Cabinet paper]. New Zealand Government.
- Orange, C. (2011). *The Treaty of Waitangi* (2nd ed.). Bridget Williams Books.

- Persaud, J. N., Wannamaker, K., Stark, K., Lambert, C., Harrison, C., & Keller, N. (2025). Decolonizing education: Advancing Indigenous student success through culturally responsive practices in Ontario. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 21(2), 264–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801251340657>
- Pihama, L. (2010). Kaupapa Māori Theory: transforming theory in Aotearoa. In *He pūkenga kōrero: a journal of Māori studies: Sum 2010; v.9 n.2* (pp. 5–14).
- Pihama, L. (2016). Positioning ourselves within kaupapa Māori research. In J. Hutchings & J. Lee-Morgan (Eds.), *Decolonisation in Aotearoa: Education, research and practice* (pp. 233–257). NZCER Press.
- Pihama, L. (2019). Colonisation, neoliberalism and Māori education. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 54, 5–19.
- Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2006). Teacher expectations and student self-perceptions: Exploring relationships. *Psychology in the Schools*, 43(5), 537–552. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20169>
- Rubie-Davies, C. M. (2015). *Becoming a high expectation teacher: Raising the bar*. Routledge.
- Rubie-Davies, C. M., & O'Regan, M. (2011). Teacher expectations and student outcomes in New Zealand classrooms. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 46(1), 17–34.
- Smaill, E., Boyd, S., Palmer, G., Tuifagalele, R., Denzler, M., & Spiller, L. (2024). *Poipoia kia puāwai: How schools support ākonga Māori and Pacific students to attain University Entrance*. NZCER. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0048>
- Smith, G. H. (1997). *The development of kaupapa Māori: Theory and praxis* [Doctoral thesis, University of Auckland].
- Smith, G. H. (2003). Kaupapa Māori theory: Theorizing Indigenous transformation of education and schooling. Paper presented at the Kaupapa Māori Symposium, NZARE/AARE Joint Conference, Auckland.
- Smith, G. H. (2017). Kaupapa Māori theory: Indigenous transforming of education. In T. K. Hoskins & A. Jones (Eds.), *Critical conversations in kaupapa Māori* (pp. 70–81). Huia Publishers.
- Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Zed Books.
- Smith, L. T., & Smith, G. H. (1989). Kei hea tataua e ahu ana? Which way in education? *ACCESS: Contemporary Issues in Education*, 8(2), 63–71.
- Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori. (2025). State of te reo Māori report 2025. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/ttw/pages/5951/attachments/original/1767816282/State_of_Te_Reo_Ma%CC%84ori_%28English%29.pdf
- Tolbert, S., Hipkins, R., Cowie, B., & Waiti, P. (2025). Epistemic agency, Indigenous knowledge, and the school science curriculum: Reflections from Aotearoa New Zealand. *International Journal of Science Education*, 47(15–16), 1986–2002. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500693.2024.2356229>
- Tokona te Raki. (2023). *Kōkirihiā: The plan for removing streaming from our schools*. Tokona te Raki Māori Futures Collective. <https://www.kokirihiā.com>
- Turner, H., Rubie-Davies, C. M., & Webber, M. (2015). Teacher expectations, ethnicity and the achievement gap. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 50, 55–69. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-015-0004-1>
- Waitangi Tribunal. (2011). *Ko Aotearoa tēnei: A report into claims concerning New Zealand law and policy affecting Māori culture and identity* (Wai 262). Legislation Direct.
- Waitangi Tribunal. (2026). *Hūtia te Rito o te Harakeke, kei Hea te Kōmako e Kō? The interim stage one report of the Education and Training Amendment Act and Te Mātaiaho urgent inquiry* (Wai 3553) [Pre-publication version].
- Walker, R. (2016). *Ka whawhai tonu mātou: Struggle without end* (Rev. ed.). Penguin.
- Webber, M., & Macfarlane, A. (2020). Mana tangata: The five optimal cultural conditions for Māori student success. *Journal of American Indian Education*, 59(1), 26–49. <https://doi.org/10.5749/jamerindieduc.59.1.0026>
- Wehipeihana, N. (2019). Increasing cultural competence in support of Indigenous-led evaluation: A necessary step toward Indigenous-led evaluation. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 34(2), 368–384. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.68444>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/136133205200034100>



1.2

Ka Mua, Ka Muri: Revisiting Te Tiro Hou Legacy

by Pip Osborne

Executive Summary

This inquiry returns to the kaupapa of Te Tiro Hou (Allen et al., 1997), chapter five; A Kura Māori evaluation of secondary qualifications reform (pp. 79–94). The inquiry recognises that understanding the future requires us to look carefully to the past. Nearly thirty years after the original inquiry into the National Qualifications Framework, **Ka mua, ka muri** revisits many of the same pātai with the same commitment to listening to those whose lived experiences continue to shape secondary education in Kura Māori.

This case study seeks to understand how the proposed replacement of NCEA with the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZCE) and New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE) is experienced, interpreted and evaluated by those working within Kura Māori (Ministry of Education, 2026). It asks whether reform is desirable and if it can genuinely uphold the aspirations of ākonga Māori, whānau, hapū and iwi, while remaining educationally robust and capable of successful implementation.

The inquiry was undertaken through a wānanga involving representatives from Kura Māori who participated in the original Te Tiro Hou inquiry. Guided by the original evaluative framework and informed by kaupapa Māori approaches to knowledge generation, participants explored educational implications of the proposed reforms, alongside questions and discussions of rangatiratanga, mana motuhake, mātauranga Māori, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Across every area of discussion, participants demonstrated a willingness to engage constructively with change. The kōrero did not reject reform in principle. Aspects of the proposed qualifications framework were recognised as offering potential opportunities, these aspirations were repeatedly weighed against the practical realities facing Kura Māori.

A significant finding throughout the wānanga was that implementation cannot be separated from context. Considerable variation between kura remains in staffing, specialist expertise, access to professional learning, resourcing, language capability and relationships with iwi and communities. A consistent message emerged that equity is achieved through recognising the diverse realities in which kura exercise rangatiratanga and give effect to locally determined aspirations.

Questions of assessment also featured prominently throughout the wānanga. Concerns expressed increased reliance on externally assessed examinations. These privilege particular ways of demonstrating learning while disadvantaging many ākonga whose strengths are more authentically demonstrated through localised contexts and ongoing teacher judgement. Concerns relating to learner wellbeing, engagement and assessment burden sat alongside wider discussions about curriculum breadth and educational purpose.

The inquiry further identified enduring questions regarding Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Participants consistently emphasised that honouring Te Tiriti requires more than the inclusion of te reo Māori or Māori content within qualifications. It requires genuine partnership, recognition of mātauranga Māori, meaningful opportunities for iwi and hapū to exercise rangatiratanga, and sufficient flexibility for kura to enact curriculum that reflects the aspirations of their own communities. These concerns closely mirror those expressed by participants in Te Tiro Hou almost three decades earlier.

The enduring challenge of reform in qualifications goes beyond grades and assessment structure. Reform in education should be implemented in ways that uphold professional trust, respect local knowledge, recognise the authority of Māori communities, and provide the conditions necessary for success. The themes emerging from this inquiry suggest that many of the questions raised in 1997 continue to resonate today, reinforcing the importance of listening carefully to the voices of those responsible for bringing education to life within their kura.

Introduction

The reform of senior secondary qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand has once again prompted national debate about the purpose of assessment, educational equity, curriculum coherence, and the pathways available to young people. The proposed replacement of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) with the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZCE) and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE) represents one of the most significant changes to the qualifications system since the development of the National Qualifications Framework during the 1990s.

While qualifications reform is often presented as a new policy direction, many of the issues being debated today are not new. In 1997, *Te Tiro Hou: The Qualifications Framework Inquiry* examined the educational validity, manageability and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework, identifying both opportunities and significant concerns for ākonga Māori, kaiako and kura. The inquiry concluded that successful reform depended not only on the design of qualifications, but equally on implementation, professional trust, adequate resourcing and meaningful engagement with those responsible for enacting change.

Recognising these historical continuities, *Tirotiro Anō* revisited Kura Māori that participated in the original inquiry to explore whether similar themes remain evident within the current reform context. Returning to these kura acknowledges the value of historical perspectives and the enduring mātauranga held within communities that have experienced multiple cycles of qualifications reform. Rather than viewing the past as separate from the present, this inquiry is grounded in the understanding that previous experiences provide an important lens through which current policy can be examined.

This chapter presents the findings from that wānanga. Drawing on pūkōrero as legitimate expressions of mātauranga, the analysis identifies the key themes emerging from participants' kōrero while privileging their voices as the primary source of knowledge throughout the inquiry.

Background and Context

The Ka mua, ka muri inquiry was undertaken with representatives from two Kura Māori that participated in the original *Te Tiro Hou* inquiry in 1997: *Te Kura o Te Whānau-a-Apanui*, and *Te Waha o Rerekohu Area School*. *Te Kura Mana Māori o Whangaparāoa* were invited as a linking kura between these two kura. They provided a unique opportunity to revisit many of the same communities who contributed to the original qualifications inquiry almost three decades earlier. The inquiry sought continuity of perspective, allowing historical and contemporary experiences of qualifications reform to be considered alongside one another.

The participating kura represent a commitment to providing education that reflects the aspirations of their whānau, hapū and iwi. Throughout the wānanga, participants consistently located discussions about qualifications reform within the wider context of their communities, recognising that decisions about curriculum, assessment and pathways extend beyond individual learners to broader aspirations for cultural identity, language revitalisation and community wellbeing.

The original *Te Tiro Hou* inquiry documented concerns raised by Māori participants regarding educational equity, recognition of community knowledge, trust in assessment, moderation, workload, and the ability of iwi to exercise authority over qualifications affecting their learners. Questions of rangatiratanga and educational opportunity featured strongly within the original findings and provided an important point of reference for this inquiry.

Nearly thirty years later, *Tirotiro Anō* returned to these same communities to explore whether those earlier aspirations and concerns continue to resonate within the current programme of qualifications reform. Participants



were able to reflect across multiple generations of reform, drawing on lived experience rather than responding solely to current policy proposals. They were invited to consider the reform proposal within the realities of their own kura, their communities and their aspirations for future generations of ākonga. In doing so, the Ka mua, ka muri inquiry recognises that qualifications reform is experienced differently across contexts, and that understanding kura Māori context in isolated and rural communities is essential to interpreting the whakaaro shared throughout the wānanga.

Methodology and Inquiry Process

The Ka mua, ka muri inquiry was undertaken through a two-day wānanga held at Te Kaha in June 2026 with six kaiako representing the three kura. The purpose of the wānanga was to create a space where participants could critically examine the proposed qualifications reforms through the lens of their own lived experiences, professional practice and historical involvement in qualifications reform. The structure of the wānanga was intentionally collaborative, allowing kaiako to question, challenge and build on one another's whakaaro while drawing connections between the original Te Tiro Hou inquiry and the current reform programme.

Discussion was guided by a series of semi-structured framework questions developed by the Tiroiro Anō panel specifically for the inquiry. These questions provided a consistent structure for exploring participants' experiences and perspectives across each stage of the wānanga.

The inquiry combined several sources of evidence. These included facilitated group dialogue during the wānanga, reflective discussion prompted by the evaluative framework, and consideration of the original Te Tiro Hou report and its findings. Revisiting the historical report alongside current policy proposals enabled kaiako to compare current reforms with earlier aspirations, concerns and recommendations, identifying areas of continuity as well as change over the past three decades.

Consistent with the kaupapa of the inquiry, participants' pūkōrero were treated as legitimate expressions of mātauranga rather than simply data to support researcher interpretation. This approach recognised kaiako as the knowledge holders, with thematic analysis used to identify recurring patterns across the kōrero while preserving the integrity and authority of participants' voices. The themes presented in this chapter therefore emerged inductively from the wānanga discussions, supported by repeated review of the discussion transcripts and considered alongside the original inquiry findings.

The inquiry findings were subsequently synthesised to identify recurring themes, areas of convergence and divergence, and implications for the qualifications reform. These findings provide the basis for the discussion and recommendations presented in the following sections of this report.

Analysis and Findings

Five findings were retained because each was supported across multiple framework questions. The findings do not seek to replace the pūkōrero. They bring together recurring whakaaro while preserving participants' authority as the knowledge holders.

Finding 1: Rangatiratanga requires authority in decision-making, not consultation after decisions have been made.

“We are not involved in any of the decision-making. We are involved after and we are ‘consulted’.”

Participants consistently distinguished consultation from genuine involvement in decision-making. Consultation was described as a process that occurs after the direction has already been set, allowing Māori perspectives to be recorded without necessarily influencing the outcome, highlighting that “consultation” often feels like a “tick the box” exercise where decisions are pre-made.

This exclusion was described in practical terms with one kaiako reflecting that, across three decades, they could not remember being invited to a hui simply to be asked what they thought about the current NCEA. Instead, the process was experienced as one in which “they have decided already what it looks like” and then arrive with a plan. Participants also questioned who was authorised to represent them within reform processes. As one explained, the advisers selected to speak on their behalf “are not us. They are not the people who work with the kids at home.” For rural and isolated communities, this distance was compounded by the experience that “no one comes to see us.”

“Consultation is a colonisation word. Negotiation is a Māori word. Please do not consult with us. Negotiate with us”.

The question of authority extended beyond participation in meetings to the starting point from which curriculum and qualifications are designed. Kaiako questioned curriculum development that begins within a Western framework and is subsequently translated, rather than being developed from mātauranga Māori.

“Everything is done from a Western framework and we are having to fit in under that Western framework, which means Māori epistemology, you do not hear about it.”

The draft Pāngarau curriculum was discussed as a tangible example. Kaiako compared it with the English-medium mathematics curriculum

and concluded that it appeared to be “just a translation,” rather than curriculum generated from mātauranga Māori. Their concern was not whether Māori language or content appeared within the framework, but whether Māori communities held authority over its underlying knowledge, purposes and design. Unease remains between crown-controlled reform and meaningful negotiation with whānau, hapū and iwi. Importantly, participants expressed that iwi and kura have the capability to exercise this authority. They are confident in knowledge, tikanga, experience and collective structures already held within their communities:

*“We have the mana to do that. We have all the schools,
the tikanga, and the knowledge of the people. [...] We can write curriculum.”*

This shifts the issue from one of being invited to contribute to Crown-led development towards recognition of existing Māori capability and authority to determine what uri should learn, why it matters, and how that learning should be recognised. The evidence suggests that the current process does not yet give sufficient effect to rangatiratanga. This closely reflects Te Tiro Hou, where participants asked: “What power do iwi have to choose or not choose the Qualifications Framework?” (Allen et al., 1997, p. 83) Nearly thirty years later, the underlying question of where authority sits remains unresolved.

Finding 2: Standardised assessment continues to privilege particular ways of demonstrating learning.

*“The system is still the same, measuring the same way.
It is still assessing the same and not yet taking into account
the different modes of assessment. The different ways that
our uri show that they have been successful.”*

Participants described learning demonstrated through lived experience, cultural practice, contribution to whānau and community, practical capability and sustained engagement. These forms of learning were not always considered visible within standardised external assessment. Dialect differences and generic national assessment resources were also identified as barriers for ākonga and kaiako delivering curriculum and assessment.

Participants provided concrete examples of how standardised assessment can disadvantage ākonga. One kaiako described a year in which all learners at their kura failed an examination because it had been written in another tribal dialect. Concerns also extended to moderation. In one History programme, work developed from a te ao Māori perspective was repeatedly marked down because the moderator did not recognise that

worldview: “We just got slice, slice, slice.” These examples suggest that assessment validity depends not only on its format, but also on the linguistic and cultural knowledge of those designing, marking and moderating it. Participants further noted that external examination results provided little explanation or feedback, limiting the ability of kaiako and learners to understand why achievement had or had not been recognised.

Concern about examinations appeared across several discussions. Kaiako discussed potential impacts on wellbeing, attendance, engagement and confidence, particularly for ākonga who do not demonstrate their capability well within a fixed, high-pressure examination setting. The central frustration was between standardised national assessment and the professional judgement of kaiako and whānau who know their ākonga.

They proposed more flexible timing and formats for external assessments, rather than disappear. Clearer assessment specifications, reduced reliance on a single end-of-year event, consideration of Maramataka, and meaningful feedback for learners and kaiako were repeated themes throughout discussions.

This reinforces concerns raised in Te Tiro Hou about fairness, educational validity, assessment burden and the limitations of one assessment approach across different subjects and learners. The original inquiry supported a mix of assessment methods and emphasised credible moderation, teacher capability and opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement in more than one way.

Finding 3: Uniform implementation would not produce equitable outcomes for small rural kura.

“As long as the government keeps on funding schools by the ‘number of bums on seats’, our schools up the Coast are forever going to be behind the eight ball.”

Participants repeatedly located the proposed reforms within the realities of small, isolated kura. Staffing shortages, declining rolls, limited access to specialist kaiako, infrastructure, connectivity and the number of subjects expected to be delivered were identified as significant barriers to implementation. One kura is operating with a minimum number of teachers, LATs, and “a principal who is supposed to be in the office” but is required to teach because there are insufficient staff. Another explained that small kura may already have a physical education teacher delivering junior science and cannot readily access either specialist or relieving teachers to teach a newly imposed compulsory subject.

The pressure was between national expectations of compulsory subjects Te Reo Rangatira (or NZC English), alongside Pāngarau (or NZC Mathematics), Pūtaiao (or NZC Science) and the actual capacity of kura to deliver them. Providing every school and kura with the same curriculum documents or implementation instructions was not viewed as equitable when kura begin from very different positions. Kaiako were concerned that reforms requiring greater subject specialisation and broader curriculum coverage could further marginalise kura already operating with small numbers of staff.

“Where is the professional development for kaiako?”

Across the framework questions, participants returned to uncertainty about what the proposed system would require in practice. Concerns included incomplete curriculum and assessment information, repeated policy change, unrealistic expectations of teacher knowledge, insufficient professional learning and the workload of implementing another system while maintaining current provision.

Kaiako identified early planning, clear guidance, time, staffing, exemplars, adaptable resources, local support and collaboration as necessary conditions for success. They also described team teaching, inter-kura collaboration and flexible curriculum organisation as approaches within their contexts. The opportunity is therefore not to replace local practice with a uniform implementation model, but to resource kura to build on what is already effective.

This finding strongly echoes Te Tiro Hou, which identified teacher involvement, realistic timeframes, adequate resourcing, professional development, moderation support and sustained implementation funding as essential to credibility and success. The present pūkōrero indicates that these conditions remain central nearly three decades later. The earlier inquiry also warned that a qualification may be educationally sound in principle but remain unmanageable without the conditions needed to implement it.



Photographs supplied by and reproduced with permission of Te Kura Mana Māori o Whangaparāoa.

Finding 4: Localisation is not an optional addition; it is central to te reo, tuakiri and whanaungatanga.

“It is the flexibility to customise. Customisation means our context of learning. Take that away from us, you are taking away language, you are taking away our identity, you are taking away connection.”

Participants described iwi aspirations and localised curriculum as the foundation of their educational approaches. Existing flexibility within NCEA has enabled kura to organise learning around kaupapa, integrate curriculum areas and draw on local environments, histories, dialects and iwi knowledge.

Kaiako described their curriculum as integrative rather than organised primarily through separate subjects. Kaupapa provides the organising structure, with learning drawn together across curriculum areas and connected to the lives, responsibilities and environments of uri. One example involved students responding to the effects of a recent flood by monitoring the health of their local river, gathering data and writing up their findings in the classroom. This brought together learning, environmental responsibility and an immediate issue affecting their community.

Localisation also shaped how learning was organised. One kura described operating without a conventional subject timetable and is instead guided by Tāwhai’s (2013) *Living by the Moon* which documents the maramataka according to Te Whānau-ā-Apanui knowledge, including relationships between lunar phases, environmental conditions, harvesting, planting and community activity.

“We do not have a timetable and it works for our kids... Our way allows us to finish bodies of work rather than spread it out to the end of the term. It allows integration, collaboration, and cross-crediting.”

These examples demonstrate that flexibility currently enables kura to organise learning through sustained kaupapa rather than requiring local contexts to be fitted retrospectively into separate subject structures.

Language, authorship and place were also central. Participants wanted resources grounded in their own dialect, histories and experiences, including “our own stories and our own books.” As another kaiako explained:

“And our own authors. That just stays in our iwi and doesn’t go out. It’s tailored for ours. Custom.”

For participants, learners connect with these resources because “they see it. We visit it. It is them.” Localisation therefore protects more than curriculum choice. It maintains relationships between learning, whenua, dialect, iwi knowledge and the collective identity of the learner.

The proposed requirement to cover prescribed knowledge across subject structures created a conflict between national coherence, providing greater clarity about what should be taught, and the ability of kura to maintain integrated, iwi-led learning. Prescription could narrow the space available to determine how learning is organised and whose knowledge sits at its centre.

Te Tiro Hou similarly emphasised the role and mana of iwi, the recognition of community knowledge, and the need for qualifications to provide flexible opportunities that reflect diverse needs and aspirations. The value placed on local authority and mātauranga has therefore remained consistent.

Finding 5: Success is broader than academic achievement and must retain meaningful pathways.

“It depends on what a person’s view of success looks like.”

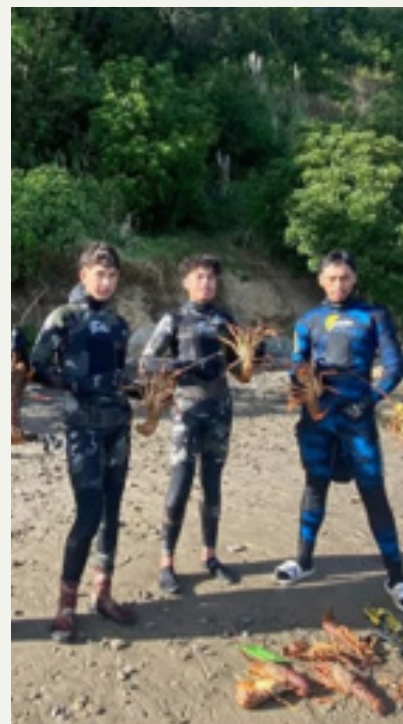
Participants defined success through employment, contribution to whānau and hapū, cultural capability, identity, wellbeing, and the ability of uri to pursue futures that are meaningful to them. University was recognised as one valuable pathway, but not as the single measure of educational success.

These broader definitions of success were grounded in observable capabilities such as responsibility and contribution. Success included knowing how to provide for others, care for local environments, participate within whānau and hapū, and move confidently into adult life. One kaiako explained:

“Success is our kids that know: you go out, you fish, you get enough to feed your whānau back home. You take some extra and feed the whānau, drop some off to Nanny. That is huge success.”

Other examples included knowing the ocean and operating a boat safely, gathering and preparing kai, contributing on the marae, becoming a good parent, gaining employment and remaining connected to home. These were not presented as alternatives for learners unable to succeed academically. They were described as valuable capabilities and outcomes in their own right.

“I would rather go out on the sea with a 12-year-old who knows the ocean, knows how to run a boat, can fish ...than I would trust a university graduate..... I will go with that 12-year-old and trust them with my life. That is success.”



Photographs supplied by and reproduced with permission of Te Kura Mana Māori o Whangaparāoa.

Participants also provided concrete examples of vocational learning leading to sustained employment and progression. One described a learner who completed chainsaw management and ATV machinery courses through a polytechnic while at school. Those experiences helped him secure work in forestry, gain machinery and loading qualifications, and eventually establish his own trucking business. This example challenges assumptions that vocational credits represent easier or less valuable learning, noting that it is not always possible to predict how particular skills will later contribute to “a career and a business.”

Another kaiako described supporting two dyslexic learners whose previous schooling had been marked by frustration. Within a whānau-based environment, one developed his strengths in the service industry and the other drew on meat-processing skills learned from his uncle at the marae. Both moved into employment, one later becoming a supervisor. Their classroom programme concentrated on practical foundations, including gaining their driver licences. These examples illustrate why participants were concerned about qualification structures that define progress primarily through academic subject achievement.

Work-readiness was also understood more broadly than preparation for a single occupation. Managing money, obtaining identification and driver licences, communicating with employers, negotiating contracting arrangements, turning up reliably and understanding one’s own skills are important preparation for adult life. Some argued that a record of learning showing what a learner can actually do may be more meaningful to employers than a certificate stating only that the learner has passed a qualification. Te reo Māori was also identified as an existing capability that learners themselves may undervalue:

*“Some kids have it and they do not even realise what they have.
It is gold sitting on gold.”*

Meaningful pathways must therefore enable uri to recognise the value of what they already know, connect that learning with employment and further education, and contribute to the future aspirations of their whānau, hapū and iwi.

Participants valued vocational learning, practical experience and relationships with iwi organisations and local employers. They were concerned that a more rigid or academically weighted framework could reduce engagement and weaken pathways already working for the diverse aspirations of ākonga and communities.

This continues the original Te Tiro Hou emphasis on whānau development, community knowledge, recognition of actual achievement and flexible provision for diverse aspirations. The historical evidence also cautioned against qualification structures that separate academic and vocational learning into pathways of unequal status.

Reflections and Future Recommendations

Participants engaged critically with the proposed direction while returning to a more practical question: under what conditions could curriculum and assessment changes genuinely work for their uri, kaiako, kura and communities? Across the discussions, those conditions remained consistent; meaningful involvement before decisions are made, sufficient time and staffing, sustained professional learning, flexible assessment, and protection of iwi-led and localised curriculum.

Several tensions remain unresolved. National consistency continues to sit in tension with rangatiratanga and the ability of kura to customise learning around iwi aspirations, language and local mātauranga. External assurance remains in tension with professional judgement and the diverse ways ākonga demonstrate success. Reform timelines and expectations remain difficult to reconcile with the workforce, infrastructure and resourcing realities of small rural kura. Consultation also remains distinct from the negotiation and shared decision-making participants sought. The wānanga did not resolve these tensions but it does indicate that they must be addressed as central design questions rather than left for kura to manage during implementation.

The future recommendations raised by participants were practical. They sought earlier face-to-face engagement with communities and more balanced representation in decision-making. Opportunities identified included involving Māori educators and communities before decisions are made, replacing consultation with negotiation, and increasing iwi authority over curriculum, assessment, qualifications and funding.

They called for assessment approaches that are flexible in timing and form, transparent about what will be assessed, and responsive to learner wellbeing. They identified opportunities for kura-specific implementation planning, funding models that recognise small-kura realities, and investment in staffing, digital tools, connectivity and infrastructure rather than relying primarily on printed resources.

Kaiako wanted the strengths of existing practice protected, particularly the ability to integrate learning around kaupapa, and draw on community knowledge. Opportunities identified included curriculum guidance showing connections across learning areas, flexible and integrated delivery, locally authored resources, and iwi involvement in determining the knowledge and capabilities valued within their communities. Kaiako wanted resources grounded in their own stories, histories and dialects, rather than generic materials requiring kura to continually translate and adapt them.

Participants wanted to maintain meaningful vocational, cultural and employment pathways. Opportunities identified included stronger connections with the Māori economy, greater exposure to local role models and workplaces, records of learning that make capabilities visible, and partnerships that connect curriculum with iwi and local employment.

*“Kei ia kura, ia kura. Kei a tātou ngā rongoā, ngā huarahi pai
kia eke panuku ia tamaiti ia tamaiti”*

Implementation cannot be treated as a later operational phase. It is part of the educational validity of the reform itself. A framework that cannot be enacted within the staffing, time and resource realities of kura cannot deliver equitable outcomes, regardless of its stated purpose.

Important questions remain. How might rangatiratanga be enacted within a national qualifications framework rather than acknowledged only in principle? How can national credibility and comparability be maintained without narrowing the forms of knowledge and evidence recognised? What funding and implementation approaches would enable small rural kura to provide equitable curriculum and pathway opportunities? How can integrated, localised learning be sustained within more prescribed subject and assessment structures? These questions require engagement with kura, whānau, hapū and iwi as policy, curriculum, assessment and implementation decisions continue to be shaped.

The historical comparison shows both change and continuity. Kaiako now speak from over two decades of experience working with NCEA and adapting it to fit their own kaupapa. The policy architecture, assessment technologies and language of reform have changed. Yet the underlying concerns identified in Te Tiro Hou remain strikingly familiar: limited involvement in decision-making, pressure on teacher workload and capability, inadequate implementation support, and the need for flexibility to serve diverse learners and aspirations.

A reflection arising from Ka mua, ka muri is that its contribution lies not in claiming these concerns are newly discovered, but in demonstrating their endurance. Returning to these communities has shown the value of kura and kaiako memory in reform. Their pūkōrero is not simply a record of past or present dissatisfaction; it is mātauranga generated through living with, adapting to and implementing successive qualification systems. Historical perspectives matter because they allow future decisions to be informed by what communities have already experienced, already understood and already asked the system to address.

Participants didn't oppose change; they do challenge the assumption that improvement comes from redesigning qualifications alone. Across every conversation, kaiako kept returning to relationships, local aspirations, capacity, and genuine partnership.

It's about who gets to define success, and how we build a system that reflects that together.

References

Allen, P., Crooks, T., Hearn, S., & Irwin, K. (1997). *Te Tiro Hou: Report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry*. New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association. <https://www.ppta.org.nz/about-ppta/publication-library/document/134>

Ministry of Education. (2026, May 16). *Further details confirmed for new senior secondary qualifications replacing NCEA*. Tāhūrangi. <https://tahurangi.education.govt.nz/senior-secondary-quals-finalised>

Tāwhai, W. (2013). *Living by the moon: Te maramataka a Te Whānau-ā-Apanui*. Huia Publishers.

1.3

Challenges and Issues in Implementing a New Secondary Qualifications System: A Narrative Review

by Gavin T L Brown

Faculty of Arts & Education, The University of Auckland
Correspondence by email to gt.brown@auckland.ac.nz

Executive Summary

This chapter is a narrative review of two major issues, Purpose and Assessment, related to the implementation of any new qualifications system. It is based on the extensive cross-cultural experience the author has in the field of developing, administering, analysing, and communicating assessment results.

Under Purpose, the chapter addresses the question of why educational systems have qualification systems, given that the life destination of all students does not include university degree work. The overview suggests that we do not inherently need to subject youngsters to high-stakes qualifications assessments to prepare for life as citizens and workers of Aotearoa. Nonetheless, it points to the importance of using professional teachers to make judgments about the quality of student attainment and learning, regardless of its content. The chapter also raises the fundamental purpose of having schools in modern society. Drawing on the OECD schooling futures project it outlines pros and cons of six different schooling types. It advocates for schools as a platform for ensuring holistic development (i.e., education, vocation, psychological and physical health) so that students are prepared, not just for higher education, but rather for life as an adult in society.

In terms of Assessment, the chapter tackles the arbitrary nature of determining quality and the tight relationship between standards and norms. Despite the power of statistical processes to calculate test scores, it points to the fundamental political process of determining how well a student has done and the benefit of using criteria-informed standards as the basis for awarding qualifications. Nonetheless, this requires extensive moderation of grading processes within and between schools to ensure that common standards are applied across the nation and among subjects. The chapter also tackles the challenges of having humans do marking, and the special concern of when teachers mark their own students. The problem of automating scoring across so many subjects is identified as a currently incomplete solution. It is concluded that only with robust funded inter-school moderation can public confidence in the qualification system be obtained. In having teachers award credits and grades toward qualifications raises some important challenges when targets are imposed by government policy.

The first known effect of holding someone accountable for an outcome is compliance. While this may be desirable, it does mean that qualification grades can be contaminated by external expectations rather than being awarded validly. There is no known evidence of mass fraud in New Zealand qualifications by teachers and implication that the system is invalid are anecdotal and politically motivated.

The chapter then introduces multiple criterial methods for evaluating a change or reform, including systems from the previous NZPPTA Te Tiro Hou report, the New Zealand Assessment Institute, the New Zealand Skills Group, and the American Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE). The JCSEE framework points to the importance of determining if a change is useful (Utility), whether it can be done within the context and its resources (Feasibility), whether the reforms are ethical, legal, and socially viable (Propriety), and whether the mechanisms produce reliable and truthful data (Accuracy). These criteria and standards allow us to think about all aspects that need to be considered when introducing a new system. This framework leads us to questions and recommendations grouped by these four categories, that as yet do not seem to be clearly resolved.

Introduction

Any change of direction to an assessment and qualification system needs serious consideration of the challenges the change has to overcome. Fortunately, the challenges of change in educational assessment, whether for formative improvement or summative evaluation, are well understood and long-established. In this essay, several important factors are discussed. Because this essay is a narrative review (Paré et al., 2015), it does not implement a systematic search. Instead, this review opportunistically exploits the knowledge the author already has to hand. Thus, it is important to understand the author's credentials for in drafting this perspective.

The author is competent to do this work for multiple reasons. The author is a professor of educational assessment at the University of Auckland, where he has been an academic for 21 years. Before that, he was a high-school teacher and PPTA member for 10 years (1986-1996) and was a standardized diagnostic test developer at NZCER and Auckland UniServices contributing to the development of the Essential Skills Assessments: Information Literacy, Assessment Resource Bank: English, and the Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle). He has published three textbooks on educational assessment including:

- *Contemporary Educational Assessment: Practices, Principles, and Policies* (Pearson Education South Asia, 2010);
- *An Introduction to Educational Assessment, Measurement and Evaluation: Improving the Quality of Teacher- Based Assessment* (3rd ed.; Dunmore Publishing; 2014); and
- *Assessment of Student Achievement* (Routledge, 2018).

He is the lead editor of the *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (Routledge, 2016) and is currently leading the editing of the 2nd edition, due in 2026. He has taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses on assessment, curriculum and assessment, and statistical methods at the University of Auckland, the Education University of Hong Kong, Umea University, Sweden, and Hong Kong University.

He is a highly cited scholar (Google Scholar h-index = 80; Scopus h = 45; Web of Science h = 36), with a high volume of research publications (>260 outputs). He is a current member of the *Technical Overview Group Assessment* (NZQA) and served on it previously from 2012-14. He has been

a member of technical advisory panels for the *Child and Youth Wellbeing Survey* (Social Wellbeing Agency), the Ministry of Education *Equity Index Model*, and the Ministry of Education *Early Childhood Education - Equity Index*. Hence, he has a credible basis for commenting on the issues surrounding reforming the New Zealand school qualifications system.

Context of Current Reforms

This potted history of New Zealand secondary school qualifications since the 1970s is taken from Brown, Irving, and Keegan (2014). In the 1970s, students had to pass three subject examinations at the School Certificate (SC) level to be awarded the Certificate. This was norm-ranked scoring with 50% pass rates. That meant there was no recognition for students who may have passed one or two subjects or learned much, but not enough to be ranked in the top half. Just because a student failed to gain recognition especially in the School Certificate in Year 11, did not mean that they could not learn or were incapable of learning or had not learned a great deal during the school year. In many cases, students not acquiring School Certificate had experienced success in learning outside school or in employment. Because secondary schools had awarded University Entrance internally based on internal assessments in the sixth form - Year 12, experimentation with the Sixth Form Certificate led to the development of inter-subject and inter-year statistical moderation of results. A student in 'hard' subjects (e.g., Physics or French) could be scaled up, while students in 'easy' subjects (e.g., Woodwork or Home Economics) would be scaled down. What that meant was that in 'difficult' subjects more students would be granted a passing grade, regardless of their actual raw marks. Likewise, fewer students in the 'easier' subjects were allowed to pass despite their actual raw marks. What made this system so particularly galling was that subjects taken predominantly by Māori students (e.g., te reo Māori) had very low pass rates despite students doing very well on the examination papers, while subjects like French or Latin, which were taken primarily by highly successful Pākehā students, tended to have very high pass rates, despite many students doing quite poorly on the actual examination.

Under the auspices of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) in the early 1990s, a qualifications framework was developed. This came about in part due to educators' criticism of the fairness and accuracy of certification grades and in part from employers' criticism of the lack of clarity around giving recognition to a much wider range of skills than those recognised in the traditional academic examination system. A goal was to change the basis of recognition from normative rank order to attainment of standards. It was considered a national scandal when the public became aware that marks indicated rank rather than actual performance.

Consequently, NZQA began developing standards-based qualifications to more accurately identify and reward the quality and quantity of students' actual achievement against quality standards. The standards express a recognisable degree of progress or quality within a domain of skill, knowledge, or understanding. Each standard has explicit criteria or scoring rules for determining whether the learner has done enough or knows enough to meet the standard described. Each standard also has a recognised number of credits which can be applied towards a qualification at a certain level. Credits are determined by the number of hours of instruction and independent study expected for the completion of the standard.

Efforts were made to incorporate vocational education and training into the ten NQF levels and secondary qualifications. It is worth noting that the use of standards as the basis for determining a worker's mastery and degree of competency and complexity has long been part of how industry assessed worker capabilities (Skills Group, 2026). Thus, the integration of work-related learning and academic-based learning on a standards-basis was not alien or impossible.

Unit Standards (US) are primarily measures of skill and knowledge related to industry training subjects; for example, in business there are US for tourism, accounts clerks, baristas, US exist for manual trades such as electricians and mechanics, in the health sector Unit Standards have been created for laboratory technicians and enrolled nurses, and in the communication industry, there are US for journalism, languages, and writing. Unit

Standards are scored on a dichotomous basis—that is, the student either did or did not meet all the criteria related to the standard. Over 16 000 Unit Standards have been registered showing faster and more extensive development of the qualification system than seen in the senior school NCEA qualification. Students can transfer the credits associated with each Unit Standard towards their national school qualification—the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) - as well as use the credits to indicate prior learning for a vocational qualification. Assessment for Unit Standards is through internal, school-based assessment and is expected to align with external employer expectations about competency (Skills Group, 2026).

Assessment within NCEA Achievement Standards (AS) is similar to university accreditation—the gaining of credits through internal and external evaluations with aggregation of credits toward a qualification. The proportion of students who are awarded each grade is not pre-determined; rather all students whose work is judged to meet a certain level of performance (i.e., met the standard) are awarded the associated grade. While it may be possible to earn accreditation through selection of internally assessed credits, it needs to be born in mind that schools offer courses of study that contain standards related to the subject.

In this context, the Ministry of Education is proposing major changes to the secondary school qualifications system. Nevertheless, the current system functions well in giving incremental recognition of student learning in a focused, standards-based method with integration of vocational learning. The system has evolved since the 1970s when three passes at School Certificate level were needed to be awarded School Certificate. Now, there is widespread acceptance that the actual capabilities, skills, and knowledge students have ought to be recognised and valued.

A key factor in implementing a change to NCEA relates to large changes in New Zealand's political scene. Since the Waitangi Tribunal's formation in 1975, case law has consistently found in favour of the Māori language version of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In terms of education that has meant supporting, not just the academic achievement of Māori learners, but more importantly the sovereignty aspirations of Māori communities for determining what it means to learn as Māori, for Māori, and in some cases, in Māori. This has led to early independent development, and subsequent Crown support, of kohanga reo and kura kaupapa Māori as expressions of the first nation of Aotearoa, tangata whenua. This means that changing secondary school qualifications has to fulfil obligations in how the treaty gives ownership to Māori of their own educational futures. Hence, consideration of Māori aspirations and ambitions cannot be sidelined by state authority, since the governing principle of New Zealand is shaped by the agreement made by the Crown in 1840.

The replacement of the NCEA system is being implemented in 2026 by Erica Stanford, Minister of Education. The system will be replaced incrementally from Year 11 with the Foundation Certificate in 2027, the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZCE) in 2028, and by 2029 the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE). Additionally, students will be required to take courses in Mathematics, English, and Science subjects. Instead of optional external end-of-year examinations, each subject will have a summative examination. Internal school-based assessments will be carried out for some coursework units that are part of the overall subject specification. The Standards based grading system (i.e., Not Achieved, Achieved, Merit, and Excellence; NAME) will be replaced with six letter grades (A+, A, B, C, D, and E) and with scores between zero and 100. Details of scoring and grading quality assurance are not yet available, much to the consternation of teachers and school leaders who are experiencing high levels of uncertainty about the volume and pace of details yet to be announced. Content for each subject is being redeveloped with a knowledge-rich, sequenced curriculum with details released for some subjects in mid-2026.

Purposes

Addressing these reforms begins with the big questions of what is the purpose of a secondary school qualification and underlying that, what is the purpose of schooling itself.

The Purpose of Qualifications

New Zealand has relied on an English model of school qualifications more or less since the inception of School Certificate (O Level) and University Entrance (A Level); like Harry Potter's OWLs and Advanced OWLS. This approach to schooling presumes that the role of secondary schooling is first to select the best candidates for university education and secondly to allow learners access to various levels of further education and or employment. It has become normative that, without examinations, students would not be motivated to show their best. Performance on end-of-year or end-of-program examinations (e.g., Year 13 Scholarship) can then be used to award financial rewards to those performing at the highest levels. The NZQA Scholarship examination gives Outstanding to candidates in the top 1/3 of 1% and Scholarship to those in the top 3% of their cohort. Indeed, the current crop of Premier Awards were given to candidates who not only performed outstandingly (i.e., 3 Outstanding and 4 Scholarship) but every one of them had sat the Scholarship examination in Year 12 or even Year 11 before sitting again in their Year 13. This competitive examination system recognises students financially and with public recognition for amazing performance. These students are the winner of the university entrance lottery.

However, New Zealand allows students with no examination results to enter university education at age 20. Such students are required to take foundation course to enter degree programs, but no child need be shamed or belittled for not gaining University Entrance (UE) at age 18—just wait two years and you can go anyway. Conceiving secondary schooling as the correct conduit for selecting university education harkens back to both the Chinese and British public examination systems in which opportunities and recognition were given through examination processes.

Just as commonly, qualifications are seen as a gateway to technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The challenge of TVET is that it is generally seen as less prestigious than UE preparation by employers, the public, and even teachers. Basic competency in literacy and numeracy, the ability to per-

severe with schoolwork, the discipline of attendance and handing in work on time are all considered desirable traits and abilities among school-leavers. Indeed, schools are now expected to prepare students for employment by ensuring that they know how to operate GenAI/LLM and possibly not even be concerned by ethical or environmental challenges embedded in their use. The claim here is that students need to develop generic or key competencies that will make them employable and potentially lifelong learners. The tragedy of this belief is that, notwithstanding the well-meaning ambitions of the NZ Curriculum, competencies are discipline specific and do not generalise or transfer easily to other domains (Alexander & Murphy, 1999). For example, knowing how to write a history essay does not transfer to knowing how to write a business memo, despite both requiring critical and analytical thinking. While employers and their advocates might want schools to prepare students for work, this removes the responsibility of employers to train their own workers and puts it on schools and teachers.

Another alternative to qualifications examinations is to propose a Leavers' Certificate consisting of a Record of Learning for all school leavers. The Certificate may include a 'major' in an area that could be either TVET or UE approved subjects. The Certificate could specify the minimum that all students are expected to complete in order to graduate from secondary school independent of UE or taking up a TVET further training opportunity. The Leaving Certification for graduation requires students successfully completing teacher-assessed courses of study in school, alongside completing sufficient extra-curricular, artistic, or physical education programs. The public ceremony of graduation represents an important transition in social status and standing; quite unlike being a school leaver or 'old boy or girl' of a school. Additionally, getting a graduation diploma results in greater opportunities for employment, remuneration, and further training. High School graduates may go on to university, technical school, or employment, but they have met minimum expectations of a young adult.

A threat to modern examination-based qualifications is that they narrow the curriculum to material that is easily examined in a first draft writing session. Combined with the increasing capacities of GenAI/LLM students are faced with the challenge of being moral and having integrity. When examinations matter, the pressure to present oneself best may lead to dishonesty and reliance on whatever the AI machine produces. This creates a problem for individual integrity and the integrity of institutional qualifications. Without care, we may become a society that relies on people doing their work with GenAI, passing it off as their own, and then responding to such work with their own GenAI. Not only *reductio ad absurdum* but also one in which the machine no longer needs humans.

This brief overview suggests that we do not inherently need to subject youngsters to high-stakes qualifications assessments to prepare for life as citizens and workers of Aotearoa. Nonetheless, unless we switch to purely objectively scoreable assessment (i.e., MCQs) we need to make use of professional teachers to make judgments about the quality of student attainment and learning.

The Purpose of Schooling

The Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns challenged how we carried out schooling and allowed us a real reason to think about what schooling is about. The subsequent entry of GenAI/LLM software systems also forces us to think about what schooling is for and whether there is a valid place for how we currently conduct formal examinations and assessments.

I draw on here my own work which was a perspective piece about the future of schooling (Brown, 2020). The OECD (2001) imagined six alternative schooling futures that were possible some 20 years hence. Those futures revolved around three major trajectories; more of the same (i.e., the status quo); a de-schooled society in which schools disappeared; and a re-schooled society in which schools became more than mechanisms for transmitting learning or caring for children. Within each of these options, two variants were proposed, meaning six possible futures were imagined (Table 1).

Table 1. OECD Schooling Future Scenarios

ASPECT	STATUS QUO	RE-SCHOOLING	DE-SCHOOLING
More desirable	1. Robust Bureaucratic System	3. Core Social Centre	5. Network Learning
Less desirable	2. Extended Market Model	4. Focused Learning Organisation	6. Teacher Exodus Meltdown

Under status quo, Scenario 1 predicted robust versions of bureaucratically-controlled school systems, while Scenario 2 envisioned extensions of existing market models. Under re-schooling, Scenario 3 visualised schools as core social centres in which multiple public services were co-ordinated around the school, while Scenario 4 pictured schools as focused learning organisations that sped up and intensified academic education. Under de-schooling, Scenario 5 depicted learners as members of a networked society in which schooling happened remotely and individually, while Scenario 6 foresaw a mass exodus of teachers from the schooling system in which government supported services experienced a ‘meltdown’.

The probability and validity of these scenarios is not difficult to imagine. Systematic schooling contributes to efficient development of core literacy and numeracy skills required by complex societies; indeed, dating back to the Babylonian era (Cole, 2010). Thus, whether schools are funded by public resources (Scenario 1) or the market (Scenario 2; Ravitch, 2013), an argument can be made that economic development depends on their existence. Interestingly, the call for de-schooling is not new. Much earlier Illich (1971) called for personalized education as an alterna-

tive to the dehumanizing effect of mass schooling seen in Scenarios 1 and 2. It is only with the advent of ubiquitous and inexpensive information and communication technologies (ICT) that Scenario 5 has become possible. The current reform with its insertion of compulsory testing in Years three to ten, that we may see the use of SMART testing data used to create an American-style school accountability regime in which teachers are held accountable for poor learning outcomes (Hershberg, 2002; Nichols & Harris, 2016). That may lead teachers to abandon public schooling for fear of being blamed for student achievements (Scenario 6). Globally, the more equity driven options of Scenarios 3 and 4 are less frequently observed. An exception may be Finland's school system post-1980 that has fulfilled aims of quality and equality across all social classes (Sahlberg, 2014). It can be argued that New Zealand has a tradition of aiming for an egalitarian society and equitable outcomes through education policy. It requires political and economic will to use schooling for such an end.

During the pandemic, with schools closed in New Zealand, official Learning at Home materials included those created by government agencies, non-government agencies, and by private sources. This blend of ICT mediated resources is evidence for both Scenario 2 (market driven schooling) and Scenario 5 (network learning). The success of ICT networked learning was evident to some parents who saw that their own children had profitably engaged in extensive and rapid learning without the distraction of classmates, the intervention of teachers, or the disruption of bells. For such parents, quite possibly those with substantial socio-economic resources, they are likely to question return to school or even the NCEA qualification system that depends on internally assessed coursework.

Assuming that a Scenario 5 de-schooled ICT system of schooling is preferred as a future of schooling there are unacceptable consequences for open and democratic societies. ICT technologies (both hardware and software) change continually and rapidly, so meeting the needs of 50,000 students per year cohort over the long-term will be expensive, even though ICTs are becoming cheaper per unit as they become more ubiquitous (Pinker, 2018). Theoretically, if all residents are entitled to state provided technologies, democratic governments will have to raise taxes and redistribute spending to meet those needs, reinforcing Scenario 1. In contrast, financial responsibility for ICTs could be devolved to the individual, as it currently is for BYOD machines in our schools, we would see a future of the market-driven Scenario 2. In such a future, individuals who can't pay for technology or educational resources will be left behind.

A second reason to resist Scenario 5 is our social nature that grows as we interact with each other in the material, corporeal world. The Covid-19 lockdown showed how much we need to interact and be with each other, and this is especially true for our children and grandchildren. Real-world interaction is enjoyable and pleasurable, as well as being developmental. Human children learn to be intelligent, empathic, and considerate through interaction with adults and peers (Rogoff, 1991). Thus, interaction beyond the family is essential for humanity as we know it. Reducing schooling to interaction with a computer, along the lines of Scenario 5, limits opportunity to learn important human skills and attributes such as kindness, humility, sharing, support. We are flesh beings, whose identity, culture, and our greatness, depend on how we interact with each other in the real world. This is an easy priority for Aotearoa New Zealand in light of the Māori proverb that repeats three times that people are the most important:

He aha te mea nui o te ao
He tangata, he tangata, he tangata
What is the most important thing in the world?
It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

Placing humans at the centre of schooling might mean revising schools into core social centres (Scenario 3) so that there is integration of learning, employment, welfare, and health services for the benefit of all. Consider that during the pandemic some schools issued sewing machines, art supplies, musical instruments, books, as well as school owned digital devices, to students to help them continue learning. Many schools provided food parcels and connections to health and mental health services during the lockdown, some-

times against the advice of the Ministry of Education who wanted social and health agencies to take care of those things. Nevertheless, families accepted advice and help from the social ‘hub’ they trusted and already had a relationship with, that is their local school. It might be expected that post-Covid lockdowns, schools that supported their local community would have done better with rates of return to school and attendance, than those which remained distant to their communities. Even post-Covid some schools kept providing repurposed or donated devices to young people so that they could effectively participate in education.

In Scenario 3, the wellbeing of children and young people can be met by providing diverse services (e.g., breakfast and lunch, health and counselling services, and life skills education) on campus. Schools become more than learning hubs, they become social centres. The physical plant of schools, which are spread throughout our communities, could become social resources outside conventional school hours. School meeting places, technologies, artistic and creative spaces and materials, and equipment and facilities for sport, cooking, and making with hard and soft materials became a community resource that tend to be under-utilised in the evening and on weekends. If opened to families and community, schools become a new centre for social good just as community libraries are already popular places; they are warm, quiet, have desks, free internet and power, offer opportunities to meet and greet friends and neighbours, as well as a place to pick up a good read. How much more could our schools do with all that we have already invested in them? Anecdotally, there are case examples of schools which saw significant improvement in achievement, attendance, engagement, wellbeing and community satisfaction because of deliberate, informed and strategic decision-making around this scenario.

One of the ignored purposes of schooling, which gives insights into the need for qualifications, is the development of robust citizens able to participate in social, economic, and political life informed with the breadth and depth of school teaching. Democracies rely on citizens to be able to coordinate their lives in social spaces in which people with different views exist; a democracy requires citizens who can see a society lived with different others (Dewey, 1916). Democracies also require humans to value things beyond employment, qualifications, and finances. If life is to be enjoyed, democracies need people who can contribute poetry,

music, fine arts, literature, language, dance, and so on. As Noddings (2008) makes clear most opportunities for active participation in life beyond schooling do not occur through getting a university degree; they happen through employment that requires technical and interpersonal skills. Thus, schooling that prepares young people for life needs to expose youngsters to their own talents, wherever they may lie, and to the best of our civilisations, without need to be tested or examined on enjoying poetry, music, reading, painting, and so on. Clearly, to be a citizen in a democracy also requires extensive knowledge about the history and governance of the state and sufficient knowledge to make informed, not prejudiced, votes. Hence, schools also need to make knowledge accessible to all. Ahmadow and Holstege’s (2023) meta-analysis shows very clearly that primary schooling promotes democracy. In that time period, children have freedom to explore racism, recycling, reproduction, slavery, genocide, and any number of other social issues that will no doubt fire them to seek the common good.

Naturally, there are obstacles in converting schools into social centres, including how to protect educational and curricular materials that schools house while allowing schools to be used for new additional services. The negative aspects of isolation during pandemic could perhaps be mitigated if we take up the challenge of meeting and being with each other. Instead of embracing the isolation of the machine (the Matrix anyone?), we could use schools to more profoundly engage with each other. The societal goal is to ensure that through schools and schooling we make the future accessible to all, not just the privileged. Given that some secondary schools have already gone down the Scenario 3 path, how are their strengths maintained and built upon? Scenario 3 is not an unrealistic utopia, it is achievable for the benefit of all of society so that students going down diverse pathways to success can be supported by our secondary school qualifications.

The question of what the purpose of schooling is connects to the question of the purpose of qualifications assessments. The current proposed changes can be situated into these six scenarios. However, for the most part, they appear to align best with bureaucratic control of schooling (Scenario 1) and an extension of current private sector market mechanisms (Scenario 2). Nonetheless, this reform should be questioned at the level of strategic priorities for New Zealand secondary school education and qualifications.

Assessing Student Work

In this section, I turn to the more technical issues of how grades and scores can be obtained and validated. I consider what grades, scores, and standards mean, how standards and norms are related, and the challenges in conducting professional judgement of coursework and examination performances. I introduce the simple fact that employing teachers within a system to implement policy creates an opportunity to use the system to evaluate whether the teachers are doing their jobs well, an approach taken extensively in the United States (Nichols & Harris, 2016). I describe criterial systems by which a new system could be evaluated and raise some questions that need to be addressed.

Grades, Scores, and Standards

The question of how student work should be evaluated boils down to two fundamentally different approaches. The most traditional approach is to quantify how many questions or test items the student can get right and convert the percentage correct to a qualitatively meaningful letter grade. This approach is normal in highly technical subjects (e.g., science, technology, engineering, medicine; STEM). For example, the University of Auckland uses 50% as the threshold for passing. In contrast, the Education University of Hong Kong decrees that 40% earns a D which is deemed a passing mark. In the USA, 60% is often expected as the minimum for passing. Thus, there is no universally agreed upon percentage correct mark that represents a pass, let alone an A. This makes explicit the arbitrary nature of setting a pass mark and of converting % scores to letter grades.

The second approach is to judge how well the work has been done on a more holistic basis. This requires mapping the work submitted, usually in the Arts and Humanities subjects, to quality standards captured by letter grades A to C. At the University of Auckland, Excellence is A, Good is B, and Satisfactory is C. The current NCEA uses Not Achieved, Achieved, Merit, and Excellence to describe ascending qualities of performance. The same categorical labels are used in NZQA's Scholarship examination, but the grades are supplemented with a numeric scoring system that allows augmentation (Penny, Johnson, & Gordon, 2000). That is, scores 0, 1, 2, are Not Achieved, 3 and 4 are Achieved, 5 and 6 are Merit, and 7 and 8 are Excellence. This augmented scale allows markers to indicate work is high or low within each grade range and gives potential for more consensus among markers. In such a system the grade awarded reflects not how many questions a person can answer, rather how well the learner has engaged with and learned in the domain of interest.

Interestingly, the grade awarded can be given purely on the basis of the work observed or it can be adjust-

ed to reflect certain political or statistical properties. If test scores are considered to follow a normal distribution (i.e., a bell curve) then that distribution can be used to determine what proportion of the distribution is awarded a grade, independent of how many questions were answered correctly or how well the student has done. This process assumes that in each cohort of students the same proportion of learners will function to the same level. For some observers, this gives confidence that 'standards' are not being watered down.

For other observers, the system punishes learners who could do what was expected but happened to fall beneath the cut-score on the curve. This tension has been played out in New Zealand qualifications assessments at least since the Secretary for Education Cyril Beeby removed the Standard VI examination in the 1930s in order to allow all children to progress to further schooling without let or hindrance. Of course, increasing the number of students at any level of schooling reduces the average attainment. But socially, allowing all children the opportunity for more schooling had the desired effect of helping to raise not only the IQ of the nation but the capacity of youngsters to become useful members of society.

Statistical manipulation can rapidly obtain a rank order distribution and convert obtained grades to rank order grades such as percentile, stanine, T scores, z-scores, and so on. Both classical test theory (CTT) and item response theory (IRT) statistical item analysis allow the identification and elimination of items that have zero or negative discrimination; an expectation that all items contribute positively to the total score. While CTT awards marks based on the number of items answered correctly, IRT takes a different approach. IRT analysis is used extensively in school diagnostic tests (e.g., PAT, e-asTTle, CIPS) and generates total scores that are higher for candidates who answer more difficult questions correctly. Thus, under IRT errors and skips among easy items does not impact total score if challenging items are answered correctly.

The conversion of CTT and IRT scores still needs to be qualitatively converted from a number to a letter grade representing a quality of performance. The setting of grade boundaries is a political process, rather than a statistical one. Consider the NZQA Scholarship examinations which are marked against standards and then rank-order information is used to award Outstanding to the top ⅓ of 1% and Scholarship to the top 3% of the Year 13 cohort eligible to take the Scholarship exam. Hence, standards-based scoring identifies a category of score and rank-ordering determines who gets the financial rewards.

The challenge of norms, standards, and criteria

Prior to the introduction of the National Qualifications Framework (NZQA, 1993), New Zealand school qualifications had slowly morphed from a purely norms-referenced awarding of examination-based qualifications (e.g., School Certificate, University Entrance) through the Sixth Form Certificate (although this was adjusted by inter-subject moderation of grades) to the current standards-based system (Peddie, 1992). In norms-referenced approaches, a set proportion of the population (e.g., 50%) were awarded the qualification, independent of the quality of work exhibited. The norms-referenced system was critiqued for awarding grades purely on a rank-ordered basis, without consideration of how well students just below the rank-order cut-off score had performed.

Under a standards-based system, all students could be awarded the relevant grade or certificate based on the quality of their demonstrated learning. The requirements for meeting the standard were described in a set of criteria which showed the degree of competence needed to be awarded a grade or certificate independent of how well others did (Glaser, 1963). Theoretically, if students had all submitted work that met the criteria, they could all be awarded the top grade or qualification. Standards-based approaches to grading have long existed in technical and vocational learning. In the 1970s, typists had to get to 35 words per minute with fewer than five errors to meet minimal competency. Competency in welding suggests that 1-2% errors in visually inspected welds may be acceptable, though, under high pressure (e.g., a pipeline) tolerance may be zero errors and require more extensive testing beyond visual inspection. Clearly, judging learner competencies in directly observable skills is best done by evaluating actual practice.

Reliance on criteria creates challenges for school subjects on the UE-approved list where learning and competence are much harder to access and where learning involves the coordination of many discrete skills. Academic ability hides in the mind of the learner and is visible only in the products created. This hidden nature of intellectual cognition creates challenges for standards-based approaches to evaluating learning. However, the challenge in describing clear, concise, and sufficient criteria for all school learning has proved to be impossible (Popham, 1994). Consider the complexity of skills needing criterial descriptions in a history essay about the Land Wars of the 1860s or a lab report for an experiment in motion. Nevertheless, some of the component skills of school learning (e.g., giving a speech, running a chemistry experiment, etc.) can be seen in practice (i.e., the classroom or the laboratory). Indeed, one of the advantages of the current NCEA standard system is that standards existed for work that could be demonstrated in school, rather than just talked about in a terminal examination. Indeed, it was an invalid task, prior to the NCEA, when students were assessed in the Year 11 (Fifth Form) School Certificate English about speech-giving by being asked to write a paragraph about giving a speech, which they may not have done.

Accurate and valid assessment of academic work is complicated in part because of instructional practices such as giving students tasks to complete that require extensive labour across contexts (e.g., laboratory, library, internet, home, etc.) over prolonged periods of time (e.g., by the end of term or in two weeks, and so on). This means that the learning processes themselves cannot be directly assessed; just the products of learning processes (e.g., essays, assignments). More global or generic descriptions of what students needed to demonstrate in academic work were needed.

Another challenge in deciding between criteria and norms is that humans are variable. Machine scoring of multiple-choice questions tends to be highly consistent, but machine scoring of essays is not perfect (Shin, Guo, & Gierl, 2021). The introduction of AI as an item-writer or test marker is also problematic because the algorithms are probabilistically designed to provide fluent text rather than truth, hence, the many hallucinations of GenAI (Guest et al., 2025). Even with robust instruction and school resources variation in prior knowledge, motivation and effort, and socio-economic resources, in general, only small proportions of candidates demonstrate the highest expected qualities of learning. Angoff's (1974) insight was that underneath

criteria that describe increasing degrees of competence there are likely to be normative performance levels. In other words, standards for excellence, notwithstanding the theoretical promise of all learners meeting criteria, probably describe that which only relatively few students ever do. Thus, there is an inherent tension between standards and norms. The difference in standards-based assessment is that the proportion of students earning 'excellence' or 'A+' is not pre-determined; it appears, perhaps with some variation between years, as an empirical fact (e.g., in 2024, 15% earned Excellence, while in 2025 just 12% earned the same grade).

Consequently, how to judge the competence of students in ways that reflect the diversity of the work involved in learning school subjects needs to be clarified. Standards-based judgements against robust criteria can work for patently observable skills within subjects. However, judging the quality of attainment in complex cognitive processing is more challenging. The choice to rely on Bloom et al.'s (1964) famous taxonomy does not lead to a robust basis for determining how well student work meets incremental standards (Hattie & Brown, 2004; Hattie & Purdie, 1998). The Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (Biggs & Collis, 1982) was explicitly derived from mapping characteristics of student written work to grades awarded. Simply, failing grades were seen when work showed one idea, low passing grades were associated with work that had non-organised lists of ideas, good passing grades were associated with relational patterns among ideas, while the highest grades were seen in work that extended relational patterns to material from beyond the given materials. Another empirical approach to deriving academic standards is to determine the characteristics of work that all the 'passing' products have that none of the 'failing' products have and then extending this empirical boundary process from low pass to good pass to excellent work (Upshur & Turner, 1995).

Hence, decisions have to be made as to the criteria by which student performance will be judged—criteria versus norms. Further, do those criteria arise from the data or are they defined in advance? Curriculum documents identify what students are meant to be taught; however, until recently New Zealand curriculum documents have tended not to describe what increasing levels of attainment look like. That is usually a task for assessment. Criteria-based judgements seem to have greater validity in terms of curriculum requirements (e.g., student can make valid inferences about novels studied in class), but normative-judgements are simply easier to

make (e.g., student performed in the top 10% of candidates). Hence, resolving this is not a statistical decision; rather it is a political one. Generally, any system that serves the children of the socio-economic elites and preserves the social status quo will be preferred by elites. This leaves us with the challenge of how to decide what system we should have without it simply becoming a 'bun fight' based on wealth and power.

Professional Judgement Challenges in Internal Assessment

One of the most challenging human judgement tasks is evaluating the quality of written work. Humans are notoriously inconsistent within themselves with empirical evidence showing that markers give divergent scores for the same work when marked at a later time (Brown, 2009). Similar inconsistency exists between markers who tend to value or notice different aspects of the work (Brown, 2009). Some solutions have been identified that lead to more consistent scoring (Brown, 2010), including the presence and use of scoring rubrics or guides, inter-marker moderation, and structured task design. Humans are reasonably accurate at determining if Essay X is better or worse than Essay Y (i.e., comparative judgment; Pollitt, 2012), but they are notoriously unreliable in ranking a whole set of essays, especially without extensive moderation between markers and retraining of markers (Brown, 2009).

An identified source of consistent marking has to do with material that machine software can be readily programmed to identify. Page's (1968) work showed that when machines were programmed to reward longer texts, polysyllabic words, longer sentences, and passive voice, the machines generated scores more highly correlated with humans than humans were with each other. Thus, attributes of academic text can be quantified in algorithms that mimic how humans make their judgements about student work. While automatic writing evaluation software has developed considerably (Huawei & Aryadoust, 2023), it may be that learners simply use the software as a tool to identify and fix errors as if it were an advanced and customised MS Word tool to identify grammar, punctuation, and spelling problems, while ignoring the potential of important rhetorical information that would improve composition (Yang, Gao, & Shen, 2024).

A small-scale study suggested that GenAI/LLM tools can generate useful feedback (Parker, Becker, & Carroca, 2023). A large study of automated feedback that

pointed students to what they had to do next to improve from the Turn-it-in system (Hattie et al., 2021) found greatest gains among students who had failing marks to start with. Thus, quicker feedback from machines may reduce teacher workload especially for those learners having the greatest difficulty in composing their thoughts. However, the use of GenAI/LLM raises questions about data security given that no systems are resident in New Zealand, the huge negative environmental impact of data centres, and possible costs to ensure an AI Agent is trained for New Zealand school writing. In addition to these technical challenges, there are unknown long-term risks of deprofessionalising teachers' work by removing them from the marking process. How do teachers internalise the standards that they need to teach if they are not part of the key process by which standards are operationalised?

This suggests that improving the quality of human marking in New Zealand's 400+ secondary schools in all curricular areas cannot be easily fixed by introducing either automated essay scoring or GenAI/LLM. Since written communication is an important human skill, it behoves the nation to have teachers trained and enabled to make reliable and valid judgments about the quality of student writing. Explicit teacher attention to those aspects of writing led to rapid gains in writing ability in line with the asTTle v4 writing rubrics (Brown, Glasswell, & Harland, 2004). Furthermore, explicit instruction in how to write an introduction to an essay is eminently learnable and associated with greater university grades (Brown & Marshall, 2012).

Since the teachers are first instructors of writing, they need deep understanding of the rhetorical moves of composition in each subject area to teach, let alone judge their students. To ensure integrity in teacher judgments used for qualifications purposes, the system needs to assure the quality of marking with robust rubrics and inter-marker moderation. The current light sampling cannot produce confidence in teacher marking across the nation.

The Effect of Accountability

Once a purpose is determined, a basis for evaluating the quality of the system can be implemented. A system has power to compel compliance from among the actors who are charged with ensuring the policy is implemented. With responsibility comes accountability.

The current reform seeks to minimise a problem that may only affect certain students aiming for university entrance. It is possible that students have not been taught and learned all the core information needed to begin study in the first year of university. This may have happened because the school could not provide or allow students access to a set of standards expected by universities. Indeed, which courses students get to take is ultimately determined not by their personal preference or family priorities but rather by school structures.

Schools exercise structural, directive, and guiding influence over students' NCEA course choices. Whether these choices are made by students acting independently, under pressure or guidance from parents, or under the influence of peers, schools determine the number and range of options available to students and set and administer the rules by which subject choices are realised. Schools themselves are limited by their size, overall resources, the qualifications of teachers they employ, and the need to meet the learning needs of a diverse student body. While these factors might be taken as givens, it is important to acknowledge the role they play in the overall process of NCEA course selection. Even though schools try to meet the needs of individual students, the sheer complexity of the NCEA system, and the logistics of organising learning activities for a large number of students, make this difficult to achieve. Madjar et al., 2009, p. 68

Specifically, schools have control over how many and which standards are actually offered, how many credits are available in any subject in any year, and what prerequisites students need to enter higher levels of study (Madjar et al., 2009). Thus, it is normally schools that determine if students have adequate preparation for standards aligned to further NCEA levels and eventually University Entrance. Thus, students may arrive at first year university without having been exposed to all the teaching that the university expects, through no personal fault but rather as a consequence of the school in which they learned.

It is commonly presumed that students choose a selection of standards that appeal to them, but this is clearly much less the case than might be hoped because of school control of prerequisites. It is well established that access to NCEA qualification pathways is dependent on overall academic ability upon entry to high school; a study of students in the 39 Starpath schools showed that e-asTTle and PAT scores at year 9 were moderate predictors of NCEA L1 performance

(i.e., $B = .20$ to $.25$) (Asil & Brown, 2014). Those doing well at Year nine will likely be those given access later on to programs of standards and subjects that support academic success for UE.

An interesting possibility, especially in larger schools, is to take a smorgasbord of standards across a wide range of subjects and thus assemble sufficient credits from diverse sources to earn qualifications such as NCEA Level 1 or Level 2. This type of credit assembly may be seen as a threat to the integrity of academic subjects. On the other hand, assembling standards across subjects to create a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach to knowledge and practice is a laudable practice. Making a choice to reduce standards in a year may reflect a method of controlling excessive demands as students engage in a wide range of co- and extra-curricular activities. While some students may credit-collect in order to meet minimum requirements, this does not inherently mean that a credit-collection protocol is wrong. Credit collection is the very mechanism that universities use to assemble programs of study resulting in degrees. Passing sufficient credits is the essence of university education. Hence, blaming either school limitations or student selection as a failure is a misplaced attack on a mechanism that in general serves society well: that is, let people choose.

Nonetheless, teachers and schools are held accountable for student achievement and performance, either through state regulation or through public perceptions of school quality. Buckendahl (2016) makes clear that public perceptions of assessment are relatively simplistic, leading to the obvious mantra: good schools get good results. When the state sets targets (e.g., 80% of students will earn NCEA Level 2), teachers are held accountable by their managers and employers to reach that target. Indeed, school leaders whose schools met such targets often received recognition from ERO and at times directly from the Minister of Education of the time. Unfortunately, sometimes there are implications for their employment that depend on achieving the target (Yates, 2018).

This is the first known effect of accountability—delivering what you will be judged upon (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Teachers will do how they understand their employer will evaluate their work. Simply, if higher pass rates are required, choices will be made. This principle applies equally to students and teachers. If students are required to gain a specific number of credits with little in the way of guardrails for content, their be-

haviour in collecting credits is logical, not underhanded. Similarly, if teachers and schools are to be judged by pass rates, it is only logical that such pass rates are achieved within the regulations.

Because schools have control over prerequisites, schools can protect themselves from criticism by designing selection systems so that only students deemed to be capable of achieving at higher levels in certain subjects are admitted to Level 2 or 3 courses in university entrance subjects. This is a type of streaming or tracking that results in schools providing courses labelled as ‘alternative’ versions of Mathematics, English, and Science courses, but which do not teach to the NCEA L1 or higher standards. Such a streaming system protects the school’s pass rates in higher level courses by putting academically less successful students into alternative pathways. Alternatively, teachers or school administrators are presumed to help academically weaker students to get qualifications by assembling collections of standards that sum up to the required target.

To shield themselves from severe negative consequences due to student performance on state accountability tests, teachers have been accused of misconduct in the high-stakes American state accountability testing system (Ravitch, 2015). However, it is possible that teachers conceive of such actions (e.g., changing multiple-choice question answers on behalf of their students) as balancing the unfairness of the test consequences against the unfairness of societal deprivation to children under their care. The current NCEA system itself is open to a similar threat; teachers grade their own students, so it may be possible that they are marking more generously than independent graders would.

However, there is no robust empirical evidence that such is the case in New Zealand. There may be anecdotal claims leading to the perception that the NCEA allows ‘underhanded’ actions that undermine the system. Such attacks may have political purposes, to manufacture doubt about the integrity of the school qualification system and the teachers marking the work. This doubt may be addressed by calls for external examinations marked by people who don’t know the student. However, if teachers are going to be judged on qualification rates, it seems entirely rational for teachers to exploit loopholes in the system to achieve the targets against which they will be judged. It also suggests that whatever system is created there will be unintended loopholes that will be exploited because of the pressure of consequences.

Criteria for Judging Systems

The Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (JCSEE) provides a range of methods for judging whether the criteria being used to evaluate a new program or system. The JCSEE began in the 1970s in response to test standards developed by the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the American Educational Research Association (AERA). The test standards told test users what test developers should have done to develop robust, dependable tests that could be used to support decision making about schools and learners. The JCSEE saw and responded to the need to ensure evaluation systems similarly had standards and criteria to follow so that users of evaluations could have confidence in the conclusions of the evaluation. Currently, JCSEE is hosted at Western Michigan University and has published standards in 1981, 1988, 1994, 2008, 2010, 2015 covering personnel evaluation, program evaluation, and classroom student evaluation.

I draw on the program evaluation standards as a way of thinking about how the proposed changes to the NCEA should be evaluated. The JCSEE recommends consideration of four major sets of criteria: Utility, Feasibility, Propriety, and Accuracy. Utility draws our attention to whether the proposed change is informative, timely, and able to do something valuable and useful to solve a known problem. Feasibility asks whether the new system is easy to implement, efficient in its use of school and teacher time and resources, is adequately funded, and is viable from a political standpoint. If the scale of the work exceeds funding from the Crown, then it unfairly falls upon subject associations and wealthy schools to purchase or create the resources needed. Propriety asks if the proposed program is valid legally, ethically, and has due regard for the welfare of all stakeholders, parents, communities, teachers, schools, and Māori as tangata whenua. An important aspect of propriety as it applies to Aotearoa New Zealand is the challenge to ensure that the new system is responsive to all communities and respects the legally instantiated rights of all communities served by school qualifications. Accuracy points to the need that sound information is generated by whatever new qualifications are proposed. Accuracy expects the system to generate technically adequate and complete information as the basis for sound judgments and decisions. Detailed standards for each of these four domains are provided in Appendix A.

It is worth noting that there is considerable overlap between the JCSEE standards and those disseminated within New Zealand by the PPTA itself (Allen, Crooks, Hearn, & Irwin, 1997) and the New Zealand Assessment Institute (NZAI, 2021). Principles for a New Zealand educational system that incorporates multiple pathways to life success are also pertinent (Skills Group, 2026), especially in light of Minister Stanford's emphasis on integrating industry skills into the new qualification. It is possible to integrate these various principles onto the JCSEE criteria (Table 2). The take home message is that all parties have concerns about the utility, propriety, feasibility, and accuracy of any major reform to the school qualifications system.

Table 2. JCSEE, NZPPTA, and NZAI Criteria for evaluating qualification systems

JCSEE	NZPPTA, 1997	NZAI, 2021	SKILLS GROUP, 2026
Utility	Assessment arrangements promote coherence and integration of learning and teaching. Learners and teachers receive clear and helpful feedback on progress, and have more than one opportunity to attain the required standards Learners and teachers find the qualifications and assessment system empowering and motivating Learning achieved and demonstrated in one context is accepted and credited in other contexts where it is relevant	Curriculum is interconnected with learning, teaching and assessment Assessment guides improvement in learning and teaching Assessment builds student agency Assessment information is essential at all tiers of the education system	Multiple Pathways, not 'academic' versus 'vocational'

JCSEE	NZPPTA, 1997	NZAI, 2021	SKILLS GROUP, 2026
Propriety	The range of credits and qualifications available meets the needs and aspirations of learners and of all sections of the community.	Assessment is fair and serves the learning of all students	Equity by design
Feasibility	Assessment arrangements involve acceptable levels of workload and stress for learners and teachers, and justifiable expenditure for the community.	Necessary and sufficient evidence of progress and achievement is gathered using a range of assessment approaches	Early exploration, flexible commitment A collaborative ecosystem System integration and simplification
Accuracy	Credits and qualifications accurately describe learner achievement, and are trusted. Learners and teachers can readily obtain clear and helpful information and guidance about the content, criteria and expected standards for particular credits or qualifications.	Assessment information is dependable	Industry Skills Board must develop curriculum, not just assessment

Important utility concerns have to do with integration with curriculum, teaching, and learning, increased motivation and agency among learners, and greater acceptability and credibility among external stakeholders. It is worth noting that utility concerns are for both teachers and students. Propriety concerns focus on meeting the needs and aspirations of learners and their communities. Feasibility focuses on appropriate methods of assessment that require reasonable workloads to implement both by teachers and learners, while also being cost-effective. Accuracy requires clear, accurate information about what the system requires, and that the outcome information (credits, grades, scores, etc.) can be relied upon and trusted.

In drawing on formal standards for evaluating the sufficiency of a new system, it is important to remember that these criteria are intended to support our own thinking about what we want from our own school qualification system. They are not an imposition from external authorities. Rather these criteria and standards allow us to think about all aspects of introducing a new system, including questions such as what do we really want a qualifications system to do and what is the purpose of secondary schooling.

Recommendations and Questions to Consider

After this consideration of the many facets that need to be considered when re-designing a school qualifications system, recommendations and questions to consider are organized according to the JCEE standards.

Utility or Purpose

1. The question remains from what is known of the new qualifications as to whom it serves and to whom will it be useful? Clearly, the examination and grading systems will be comfortable and appreciated by older generations who were schooled in a system that had summative examinations as the key determinant of the final grade. Such communities, now paying for their children to take the Cambridge International Examinations, may find the new system useful, but this does not mean it will be useful for all. Consideration of how TVET students will be impacted by the removal of the NCEA needs to be undertaken.
2. The validity of qualifications that rely on externally marked, summative examinations may be cautioned given the importance of practical and inter-personal skills, even in UE subjects. Opportunities to be recognized for ability to put skills to work is one of the founding principles of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. An

examination-dominated system is likely to call into question the claim that the qualifications recognize and prepare students for life beyond schooling.

3. The examination system is intended to prepare students for entry to higher education. While in itself a laudable goal, this is far from a population-wide purpose of mass secondary schooling. The new system has to face the challenge of educating all young people for preparation for life as adult citizens who need to make our country work and meaningfully participate in civil life. This includes, as we found during Covid, the ability to create and perform arts of various kinds which helped us cope with restricted life and contributed positively to wellness and resilience of communities.
4. The details of how industry skills will be integrated into the curriculum are still unknown. Nonetheless, the question remains as to whether teachers in school should be judging industry-relevant work? Ought that not be done by the employers themselves who have well-developed standards based evaluation systems?
5. Given that access to university education, regardless of academic qualifications, can be attempted from the age of 20, the scale of changes seems inordinate for a minority of students who are on the University Entrance pathway.

Propriety

1. A considerable threat to changing the qualifications system is the possibility of negative unintended consequences for students who are not successful in meeting the new expectation of passes in three out of five subjects. How should the actual capacities of students be recognized who fail to pass three subjects at any level?
2. Relatedly, how does an educational system justify labelling students as 'failures' when it is meant to educate, teach, and train young people the knowledge and skills they need for success in life?
3. Further, how is it legitimate to ration access to university for young people when they can apply to enter from age 20 onward? Giving a signal of possible success may play a legitimate role, but there are many other societies that allow UE based on teacher-evaluation rather than solely on examination (e.g., Austria, Sweden).
4. Those interested in vocational or career directions that do not require university entrance do not seem well served by this system. How do we ensure that New Zealand schooling serves all students well? This may be especially problematic for communities of learners and whanau who were well served by the design of the NCEA that allowed recognition for work done throughout the year or for work in non-traditional university entrance subjects.
5. The general antipathy in the educational communities of principals and teachers toward the proposed reforms may or is likely to cause ethical and or political challenges to the acceptability of the new system.
6. The general secrecy behind the development of the new curricular and qualifications systems raises doubts as to the legitimacy of the new system. Democracy demands open and transparent governance and decision-making around such a major change.
7. The legal rights of the indigenous first nations of New Zealand, the Māori tribes of Aotearoa, in education and schooling need to be incorporated into systems and regulations that impact Māori. Their ambitions and preferences cannot be legally overlooked.

Feasibility

1. To fulfill the moderation principles needed to obtain accuracy multiple markers are needed for each task or assignment that counts towards the qualification. This is a considerable challenge, especially in smaller schools where there might be just one teacher of each subject. While parents may be satisfied with lighter sampling, accuracy will be impacted and require the need for an appeals and remark mechanism to be deployed by NZQA. It is likely that significant budget increases over the long term will be needed by NZQA to ensure quality grading against standards.
2. The pool of markers NZQA will draw upon are the same trained teacher workforce to mark and moderate coursework and examinations. That workforce, is currently in short supply and will need time to train. The cost of this will depend on agreements reached with the NZPPTA about new workloads.
3. Any change in a system requires substantial training or professional development that cannot be treated as once-and-done. Teachers move between schools and countries, retire, and are newly recruited from teacher education programs. That means the transition between the old system and new system will need to be designed to run for at least three years beyond the gradual deployment of Foundation, NZCE, and NZACE by 2030.
4. While general assessment principles are relatively constant across subjects, the over 50 subjects in secondary schooling that qualify for university entrance will require discipline specific professional development providers. This can be achieved with well-trained developers within each discipline and well-developed training materials for self-access as well as in conjunction with providers. Because there are 400 secondary schools across the motu, and because deployment of NZCE is planned for 2029, many professional development providers will need to recruit and train in order to meet the scale of need. This may have implications for Immigration policy and practice if recruitment has to happen outside New Zealand.
5. It is unlikely that the cost of upskilling teachers to cope with the new system could be met cheaply. In 2007-8, the professional development budget of the Ministry of Education was about \$66M and included the Assess to Learn project (Poskitt & Taylor, 2008) that supported the deployment of the new asTTle system among other curriculum and achievement related training. Is adequate funding been set aside to train the trainers and then train the teachers?

Accuracy

1. The sine qua non of any score and grade system is that the grade or mark is an accurate indicator of the student's performance and attainment. Without objectively scored items, the biggest threat to accuracy lies in the consistency and reliability of human scoring, regardless if the work is done as coursework or a summative examination. Because this is high-stakes for students, their families, and the school, each piece of work that counts toward the final grade should be marked at least twice. Quality assurance standards that should be used to ensure accurate scoring are:
 - With a 6-point grade system (A+, A, B, C, D, E), any pair of graders, markers, or raters needs to attain 70% agreement between them (Stemler, 2004).
 - Given there are but 6 grade points, agreement may arise by chance (i.e., matching grades could occur 1/6 or 17% of the time). To counter that Cohen's (1960) kappa chance-adjusted correlation coefficient should be used to assure users that agreement between markers occurs $k \geq .60$.
2. Funding in the system to allow for intensive moderation has to be deployed.

References

- Alexander, P. A., & Murphy, P. K. (1999). Nurturing the seeds of transfer: a domain-specific perspective. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 31(7), 561–576. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355\(99\)00024-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(99)00024-5)
- Allen, P., Crooks, T., Hearn, S., & Irwin, K. (1997). *TE TIRO HOU: Report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry*. New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association.
- Angoff, W. H. (1974). Criterion-referencing, norm-referencing and the SAT. *The College Board Review*, 92, 3–5, 21.
- Asil, M., & Brown, G. T. L. (2014, August). *Predicting NCEA achievement from Year 9 and 10 standardised test data (StarPath Data Analysis—Quant-DARE Tech. Rep. #2)*. The University of Auckland, Faculty of Education.
- Biggs, J. B., & Collis, K. F. (1982). *Evaluating the quality of learning: The SOLO taxonomy (Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome)*. Academic Press.
- Bloom, B. S., Engelhart, M. D., Furst, E. J., Hill, W. H., & Krathwohl, D. R. (Eds.). (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals--Handbook 1 Cognitive Domain*. David McKay.
- Brown, G. T. L. (2009). The reliability of essay scores: The necessity of rubrics and moderation. In L. H. Meyer, S. Davidson, H. Anderson, R. Fletcher, P. M. Johnston, & M. Rees (Eds.), *Tertiary Assessment and Higher Education Student Outcomes: Policy, Practice and Research* (pp. 40–48). Ako Aotearoa.
- Brown, G. T. L. (2010). The validity of examination essays in higher education: Issues and responses. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64(3), 276–291. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00460.x>
- Brown, G. T. L. (2020). Schooling beyond COVID-19: An unevenly distributed future. *Frontiers in Education*, 5(82). <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00082>
- Brown, G. T. L., & Marshall, J. C. (2012). The impact of training students how to write introductions for academic essays: an exploratory, longitudinal study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(6), 653–670. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2011.563277>
- Brown, G. T., Glasswell, K., & Harland, D. (2004). Accuracy in the scoring of writing: Studies of reliability and validity using a New Zealand writing assessment system. *Assessing Writing*, 9(2), 105–121. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.asw.2004.07.001>
- Brown, G. T. L., Irving, S. E., & Keegan, P. J. (2014). *An introduction to educational assessment, measurement, and evaluation: Improving the quality of teacher-based assessment* (3rd ed.). Auckland, NZ: Dunmore Publishing. ISBN: 9781927212097
- Buckendahl, C. W. (2016). Public perceptions about assessment in education. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 454–471). Routledge.
- Cohen, J. (1960). A coefficient of agreement for nominal scales. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 20, 37–46.
- Cole, M. (2010). What's culture got to do with it? Educational research as a necessarily interdisciplinary enterprise. *Educational Researcher*, 39(6), 461–470. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X10380247>
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. The Macmillan Company.
- Glaser, R. (1963). Instructional technology and the measurement of learning outcomes: Some questions. *American Psychologist*, 18(8), 519–521. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0049294>
- Guest, O., Suarez, M., Müller, B., van Meerkerk, E., Oude Groote Beverborg, A., de Haan, R., Reyes Elizondo, A., Blokpoel, M., Scharfenberg, N., Kleinherenbrink, A., Camerino, I., Woensdregt, M., Monett, D., Brown, J., Avraamidou, L., Alenda-Demoutiez, J., Hermans, F., & van Rooij, I. (2025). Against the Uncritical Adoption of 'AI' Technologies in Academia. *Zenodo Preprint*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17065099>
- Hattie, J. A. C., & Brown, G. T. L. (2004). *Cognitive Processes in asTTle: The SOLO Taxonomy* (asTTle Tech. Rep. #43). <https://doi.org/10.17608/k6.auckland.23796336.v1>
- Hattie, J. A., & Purdie, N. (1998). The SOLO model: Addressing fundamental measurement issues. In B. Dart & G. Boulton-Lewis (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 145–176). ACER.
- Hattie, J., Crivelli, J., Van Gompel, K., West-Smith, P., & Wike, K. (2021). Feedback that leads to improvement in student essays: Testing the hypothesis that “Where to Next” feedback is most powerful. *Frontiers in Education*, 6(182). <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2021.645758>
- Hershberg, T. (2002). Comment. In D. Ravitch (Ed.), *Brookings Papers on Education Policy: 2002*. (pp. 324–333). Brookings Institution Press.
- Huawei, S., & Aryadoust, V. (2023). A systematic review of automated writing evaluation systems. *Education & Information Technologies*, 28(1), 771–795. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11200-7>
- Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. Harper.
- Lerner, J. S., & Tetlock, P. E. (1999). Accounting for the effects of accountability. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(2), 255–275. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.255ra>
- Madjar, I., McKinley, E., Jensen, S., & Merwe, A. V. D. (2009). *Towards University: Navigating NCEA Course Choices in Low-Mid Decile Schools* (The Starpath Project for Tertiary Participation and Success). <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/content/dam/uaa/auckland/education/research/docs/Towards%20university%20FINAL%20report.pdf>
- Ministry of Education. (1994). *English in the New Zealand curriculum*. Learning Media.

- New Zealand Assessment Institute. (2021). *Assessment to Improve Learning: Principles, Practices and Proof*. NZAI. https://www.nzai.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NZAI_Assessment-Principles-Practices-and-Proof-Final.pdf
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1993). *The National Qualifications Framework*. NZQA.
- Nichols, S. L., & Harris, L. R. (2016). Accountability assessment's effects on teachers and schools. In G. T. L. Brown & L. R. Harris (Eds.), *Handbook of Human and Social Conditions in Assessment* (pp. 40–56). Routledge.
- Noddings, N. (2008). Schooling for Democracy. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(1), 34–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170809000109>
- OECD. (2001). *What schools for the future?: Schooling for tomorrow education and skills*. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/what-schools-for-the-future_9789264195004-en
- Page, E. B. (1968). The use of the computer in analyzing student essays. *International Review of Education*, 14(2), 210–225. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01419938>
- Paré, G., Trudel, M.-C., Jaana, M., & Kitsiou, S. (2015). Synthesizing information systems knowledge: A typology of literature reviews. *Information & Management*, 52, 193–199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.im.2014.08.008>
- Parker, J. L., Becker, K., & Carroca, C. (2023). ChatGPT for automated writing evaluation in scholarly writing instruction. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 62(12), 721–727. <https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20231006-02>
- Peddie, R. (1992). *Beyond the norm? An introduction to standards-based assessment*. New Zealand Qualifications Authority.
- Penny, J., Johnson, R. L., & Gordon, B. (2000). The effect of rating augmentation on inter-rater reliability: An empirical study of a holistic rubric. *Assessing Writing*, 7, 143–164. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1075-2935\(00\)00012-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1075-2935(00)00012-X)
- Pinker, S. (2018). *Enlightenment now: The case for reason, science, humanism, and progress*. Viking.
- Pollitt, A. (2012). Comparative judgement for assessment. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 22(2), 157–170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-011-9189-x>
- Poskitt, J., & Taylor, K. (2008). *National Education Findings of Assess to Learn (AtoL) Report*. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/National-Education-Findings-of-Assess-to-Learn-AtoL-Report>
- Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of Error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. A. E. Knopf.
- Ravitch, D. (2015, April 6). Did Atlanta educators get justice before the law? *Diane Ravitch's blog*. <http://dianeravitch.net/2015/04/06/atlanta-cheating-scandal/>
- Rogoff, B. (1991). The joint socialization of development by young children and adults. In P. Light, S. Sheldon, & M. Woodhead (Eds.), *Learning to Think: Child Development in Social Context 2* (pp. 67–96). Routledge.
- Sahlberg, P. (2014). *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* Teachers College Press.
- Shin, J., Guo, Q., & Gierl, M. J. (2021). Automated essay scoring using deep learning algorithms. In M. Khosrow-Pour (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Modern Educational Technologies, Applications, and Management* (pp. 37–47). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-3476-2.ch003>
- Skills Group. (2026). *Multiple Pathways to Success--A White Paper*. <https://skills-group.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Multiple-Pathways-to-Success-April-2026.pdf>
- Stemler, S. E. (2004). A comparison of consensus, consistency, and measurement approaches to estimating interrater reliability. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 9(4). <https://doi.org/10.7275/z6fm-2e34>
- Upshur, J. A., & Turner, C. E. (1995). Constructing rating scales for second language tests. *ELT Journal*, 49(1), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/49.1.3>
- Yang, H., Gao, C., & Shen, H.-z. (2024). Learner interaction with, and response to, AI-programmed automated writing evaluation feedback in EFL writing: An exploratory study. *Education and Information Technologies*, 29(4), 3837–3858. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-023-11991-3>
- Yates, A. (2018). *Economics and accounting teachers' beliefs about school-based assessment, the summative and formative tension: A mixed method study*, [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Victoria University of Wellington]. https://openaccess.wgtn.ac.nz/articles/thesis/Economics_and_accounting_teachers_beliefs_about_school-based_assessment_the_summative_and_formative_tension_A_mixed_method_study/17067818/2/files/31559186.pdf

Appendix A. JCSEE Program Evaluation Standards

Utility.

U1 Evaluator Credibility

Evaluations should be conducted by qualified people who establish and maintain credibility in the evaluation context.

U2 Attention to Stakeholders

Evaluations should devote attention to the full range of individuals and groups invested in the program and affected by its evaluation.

U3 Negotiated Purposes

Evaluation purposes should be identified and continually negotiated based on the needs of stakeholders.

U4 Explicit Values

Evaluations should clarify and specify the individual and cultural values underpinning purposes, processes, and judgments.

U5 Relevant Information

Evaluation information should serve the identified and emergent needs of stakeholders.

U6 Meaningful Processes and Products

Evaluations should construct activities, descriptions, and judgments in ways that encourage participants to rediscover, reinterpret, or revise their understandings and behaviors.

U7 Timely and Appropriate Communicating and Reporting

Evaluations should attend to the continuing information needs of their multiple audiences.

U8 Concern for Consequences and Influence

Evaluations should promote responsible and adaptive use while guarding against unintended negative consequences and misuse.

Feasibility

F1 Project Management

Evaluations should use effective project management strategies.

F2 Practical Procedures

Evaluation procedures should be practical and responsive to the way the program operates.

F3 Contextual Viability

Evaluations should recognize, monitor, and balance the cultural and political interests and needs of individuals and groups.

F4 Resource

Use Evaluations should use resources effectively and efficiently.

Propriety.

P1 Responsive and Inclusive Orientation

Evaluations should be responsive to stakeholders and their communities.

P2 Formal Agreements

Evaluation agreements should be negotiated to make obligations explicit and take into account the needs, expectations, and cultural contexts of clients and other stakeholders.

P3 Human Rights and Respect

Evaluations should be designed and conducted to protect human and legal rights and maintain the dignity of participants and other stakeholders.

P4 Clarity and Fairness

Evaluations should be understandable and fair in addressing stakeholder needs and purposes.

P5 Transparency and Disclosure

Evaluations should provide complete descriptions of findings, limitations, and conclusions to all stakeholders, unless doing so would violate legal and propriety obligations.

P6 Conflicts of Interests

Evaluations should openly and honestly identify and address real or perceived conflicts of interests that may compromise the evaluation.

P7 Fiscal Responsibility

Evaluations should account for all expended resources and comply with sound fiscal procedures and processes.

Accuracy

A1 Justified Conclusions and Decisions

Evaluation conclusions and decisions should be explicitly justified in the cultures and contexts where they have consequences.

A2 Valid Information

Evaluation information should serve the intended purposes and support valid interpretations.

A3 Reliable Information

Evaluation procedures should yield sufficiently dependable and consistent information for the intended uses.

A4 Explicit Program and Context Descriptions

Evaluations should document programs and their contexts with appropriate detail and scope for the evaluation purposes.

A5 Information Management

Evaluations should employ systematic information collection, review, verification, and storage methods.

A6 Sound Designs and Analyses

Evaluations should employ technically adequate designs and analyses that are appropriate for the evaluation purposes.

A7 Explicit Evaluation Reasoning

Evaluation reasoning leading from information and analyses to findings, interpretations, conclusions, and judgments should be clearly and completely documented.

A8 Communication and Reporting

Evaluation communications should have adequate scope and guard against misconceptions, biases, distortions, and errors.

1.4

Teachers' and school leaders' perspectives on Qualification Reform

by Kate Gainsford

Executive Summary – NZPPTA membership survey

The Tiroitiro Anō panel commissioned a national survey to gather secondary teachers' and principals' views on the changes to national qualifications, confirmed by Government in March 2026. The two month survey examined the educational, equity, implementation and system level implications of the proposed reforms associated with a new curriculum from 2027 and the replacement of the school qualification system from 2028. The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions and six sections.

Introduction

Tiroitiro Anō is an independent research inquiry project, commissioned by Te Wehengarua (NZPPTA) to examine the Government's confirmed changes to national qualifications in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The Tiroitiro Anō panel of researchers, is co chaired by Kate Gainsford and Melissa Denzler.

This chapter reports on New Zealand secondary teachers and principals' perspectives on the current qualification reform package captured in research conducted from 2025 – 2026. Practitioners surveyed are responsible each year, for the delivery of the curriculum and the preparation of around 150,000 students studying and sitting assessments towards the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and other qualifications. This report centres on the findings from a survey commissioned by the Tiroitiro Anō panel and other surveys.

Participants

The final analytical sample consisted of 1,816 respondents. Participants were asked to indicate all the professional roles they held, meaning they could select more than one role. A fifth of respondents held multiple professional roles. Classroom teachers, without any additional

role, were the largest professional group (40%), with almost a quarter of participants being middle leaders (23%), and just 5% being Senior Leaders. However, when all teachers with multiple roles are counted a total of 42% of respondents had roles as middle or senior leaders. The majority of participants (81%) were from urban schools.

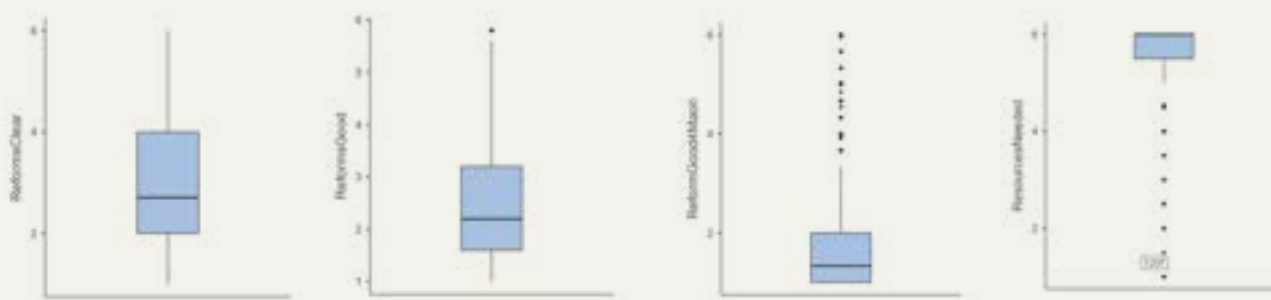
Analysis

Participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements using a 6-point positively packed scale where 1=strongly disagree, 2=mostly disagree, 3=slightly agree, 4=moderately agree, 5= mostly agree, and 6= strongly agree. To group the items into meaningful factors, factor analysis reduced the number of statements into four correlated factors. The benefit of this approach is that instead of having to describe and discuss every item, this report can focus on the big ideas shared by the statements. Items were removed that did not link robustly and uniquely to the most logical factor.

The four interpretable factors with their items were:

1. **Reform Clarity**, reflecting teachers' understanding of the proposed reforms.
 - The purpose of the reforms is clear.
 - The reasons for the reforms have been clearly communicated to me.
2. **Reform Good**, reflecting overall positive evaluation of the proposed reforms
 - Overall, what impact do you expect the reforms to have on learners?
 - I have confidence in the overall direction of the reforms.
 - The reforms will support meaningful learning for ākonga.
 - The reforms will improve learners' preparedness for further education, employment, or training.
 - I'm confident my school can manage this reform effectively.
3. **Reform Good for Māori**, reflecting perceived benefits of the reforms for Māori learners.
 - The reforms actively protect te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori and Māori pathways.
 - The reforms support meaningful partnership with Māori in the implementation.
 - The reform process demonstrates accountability to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
4. **Resources Needed**, reflecting the perceived need and the additional resources to support implementation of the reforms.
 - Secondary schools will require significant resources to implement the reforms.
 - Additional professional development will be required.

Figure 1. Mean Scores for the Four Final Scales, [Note: Dots represent outliers].



Key findings

Teachers and school leaders did not even reach slightly agreed that the reforms were clear (average 2.94) and were even less supportive that the reforms were good (average = 2.57). Very clearly, teachers rejected that the reforms were good for Māori (average = 1.90) and strongly agreed that more resources were needed (average = 5.50).

The factor correlations showed that the greater the reforms were judged to be clear the more participants thought they were good for all and Māori. In addition, if the reforms were deemed to be good, they were then strongly correlated with being good for Māori. In all cases, if the reforms were deemed to be good or clear, fewer resources were needed.

In terms of professional development for the reforms, participants were asked to select all the methods from a list that they would prefer. Given multiple options, clustering was applied to create 4 main groups. The most strongly desired group, with 67% selection was subject-based PLD. Bringing external experts to the school was preferred by 33%, online support by 24%, and shared learning with other schools by just 13%. There were small differences among participants as to the type of PLD they preferred, especially around Subject-based Support. Teachers, Middle Leaders, and Senior Leaders were more likely than teachers not in those roles to select Subject-based Support. Teachers from urban schools were more likely than those from rural schools to select Expert in School Support, as were teachers over other teacher roles. Otherwise, differences were not beyond chance.

Although there were differences between teachers from urban schools compared to rural schools, these differences were small. Teacher opinions and preferences were fundamentally equivalent across the background variables. Participants clearly wanted resources to cope with the reforms.

He Matapaki – Discussion

Reform clarity of purpose, direction and detail.

Communications with teachers and school leaders have not yet translated into widespread, robust understanding of the reasons for the reform, the purpose, or even what the main changes are. Changes to qualifications at a system level rely heavily on every teacher and leader having sufficient understanding and expertise in the new system to give students, parents and communities confidence in the new qualification. Clearly there is work to be done to ensure practitioners (teachers and school leaders) have a good understanding of proposed changes. There is significant risk attached to implementation of new qualifications when changes are not fully understood by practitioners.

Self-managing schools make individual decisions about communications to their community and staff about the reforms. Differences in schools' resources can impact on the amount of time and expertise invested in these communications which can result in patchy coverage.

Impact on learners.

A less than convincing communication strategy from the Government with no details about professional development means the majority of teachers remain unconvinced at this time, that the reforms will achieve better learning outcomes for young people.

Teachers and school leaders express widespread concern about losing the flexibility of multiple pathway provision for all learners, especially with Gateway, STAR funding, or Trades Academies). Teachers and school leaders aligned with Ministry of Education advice to cabinet 1 March 2026, that a decline in student achievement is expected as a result of the reforms.

Consideration of Te Tiriti and Māori.

The very low average score for the reforms benefiting Māori show that secondary teachers and school leaders disagreed that the reforms would improve outcomes for Māori learners. Responses showed partnership with Māori, protection for te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori,

and Te Tiriti o Waitangi are important to teachers and school leaders and that processes to include Māori in the development of the reform package were not evident or supported.

Explanations for the high number of people not agreeing the reforms would support meaningful learning for Māori learners, may reflect lower levels of commitment to fundamental changes in direction away from widely held beliefs that all learners should experience success and that a qualification should demonstrate what a student knows and can do.

Surveys of secondary teachers and school leaders commissioned by Tiroitiro Anō, from terms two and three 2026, reflect strong alignment with findings conducted over the previous year by other organisations and groups – Secondary Principals' Council, SPANZ and NZCER (Appendix 3-5). Despite Ministry of Education 'road shows', bulletins and other sector facing communications, teachers and school leaders continue to express disagreement that reforms will reduce existing inequities in student outcomes.

Supporting implementation with school leaders and teachers.

The volume and pace of changes in education over recent years, and the lack of detail about proposed changes to qualifications have likely contributed to a cluttered, unclear list of reforms for teachers and schools to manage. Given that 42% of respondents participating in the survey identified as middle or senior leaders, whose jobs require managing the new reforms at school level, there are concerns over manageability and timing of reform implementation.

Changes to VET subjects for senior secondary students, were published late term three 2026 with sparse detail about which education agency, if any, is to have oversight of VET qualifications. Nor is there detail about how compulsory exams for industry-based subjects will be run and overseen and by whom.

Respondents clearly identified the need for time and additional professional development to support the reforms. Schools usually plan their assessment and PLD programmes well in advance, so new systems are needed to support students and communities coping with big changes. Neither Government nor the Ministry of Education have as yet provided plans for training and professional development to support the reform's implementation in schools. The lack of a plan and budget for PLD presents a risk to implementation.

Implications

End users of qualifications (i.e., the students, employers and further education providers) need to develop their own detailed understanding of the new qualifications. They rely heavily on the expertise of teachers and schools day-to-day, to support young people's pathway decisions.

Submissions received by Government as part of consultation have not yet been released, a year later, despite numerous requests from teacher or-

ganisations. Insufficient detail and a lack of transparency in decision making is likely to have affected how well the new qualifications are understood and accepted.

Communicating the reasons for the reform, their purpose, and clarity about the main changes, needs to be prioritised for teachers, leaders and industries, along with credible engagement with teacher and school leader concerns.

There are questions about how Government's communications to and with the sector and wider communities can be improved to achieve clear understanding of the reforms and system delivery. Teachers and principals' unions as professional organisations are practised in complementing the flow of professional information to their members to support the smooth running of schools. A constructive, inclusive relationship with teacher and principal unions is necessary to underpin better understanding of qualification proposals.

The reforms constitute a significant change of direction in secondary school qualifications and combined with the volume and pace of curriculum changes, respondents identify significant resources are required to implement the reforms with clarity certainty, and confidence. It is noteworthy, that the data show that if teachers consider the reforms to be good or clear, fewer PLD resources were needed. However, this survey says that few teachers share the perspective, that the reforms were good or clear.

Recommendations

Reform timelines and detailed design of qualification changes must be adjusted to enable:

1. Explanations to teachers, parents and students about the Māori, Pacific and “Dis-abled” learners identified as at risk to prevent a likely decline in secondary qualification attainment (fewer students gaining qualifications) as a consequence of qualification reform.
2. Prioritisation of constructive relationship building and consultation with teacher and school leader unions.
3. Clear and urgent communication with the sector to include
 - credible evidence developed and shared about how the reforms give effect to the Crown’s responsibilities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
 - transparency about the detailed design of new secondary qualifications and the roles of education agencies envisaged to support them.
 - transparency in sharing submissions received by the Ministry of Education during its consultation period on qualifications.
 - clarity for subject associations of expectations, roles, funding and timelines to support the implementation of new qualifications.
 - clarity for the teacher workforce of expectations, roles, workload and engagement in ongoing review of new qualifications.
4. Professional development resources and funding plans to be developed urgently for roll out across all secondary schools.

Acknowledgements

Ying Wang, and Professor Gavin Brown, for their invaluable technical expertise in quantitative data analysis and interpretation. Melissa Denzler for her knowledge and contribution to the survey writing process.

NZPPTA National Office for your support

All the secondary teachers and principals for their time, expertise and willingness to contribute

References

MacDonald J, Bolstad R, Dong J, Boyd S, Gibbs B, Rowe-Williams J, Alansari M, Hunt D, Coblenz D, Fisher J. *Secondary teachers’ perspectives from the 2025 national survey. Uiuinga ā Motu o ngā Kura*. NZCER. 2026.pp7, 25-28

Appendices

- Appendix one Technical Report
- Appendix two – Cabinet paper: Hon Erica Stanford Minister of Education. Public consultation on proposal to replace NCEA. Date considered 30 June 2025,. Date of release 26 August 2025.
- Appendix three NZCER Teachers Perspectives
- Appendix four Secondary Principals' Council (SPC) February 2026.
- Appendix five SPANZ Pulse check April 2026

Appendix one Responses to the Proposed Changes in National Qualifications: Analysis of NZPPTA General Membership Survey

Ying Wang

The University of Auckland

Email: ying.wang@auckland.ac.nz

Quality assurance for this report was provided by Prof. Gavin T L Brown, Faculty of Arts and Education, The University of Auckland.

1. Introduction

The Tiroitiro Anō research group commissioned a national survey to gather teachers' views on the proposed changes to national qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey examined the educational, equity, implementation, and system-level implications of the proposed reforms associated with the new curriculum from 2027 and the replacement of the school qualification system from 2028. This technical report describes the survey scale validation and data analysis processes and presents the findings on teachers' views of the proposed qualifications reforms.

2. Materials

The questionnaire consisted of demographic questions and six sections covering Understanding the Proposed Reforms, Educational Impact, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Implementation and Workload, Confidence and Credibility, and Professional Learning and Development.

The first five sections (Items 1–30) measured teachers' attitudes using six-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree). The final questionnaire item (Item 31) was a multiple-response question asking respondents to select up to three preferred professional learning and development activities. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

3. Data Preparation

Data were collected using an online questionnaire developed by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (NZPPTA). The original dataset included responses from 2,084 participants. Before analysis, a codebook was developed to define variable names, response categories, and coding procedures. All questionnaire items were checked to ensure that the coding was accurate and consistent with the original survey. Two negatively worded items in the Educational Impact factor (EI4 and EI5) were reverse coded prior to analysis. The multiple-response PLD item was recoded into binary variables (0 = not selected, 1 = selected) prior to analysis.

The dataset was then screened for missing data. Cases with more than 10% missing responses were removed to improve the quality and reliability of the dataset (Little & Rubin, 2020). A total of 268 respondents were excluded, resulting in a final analytical sample of 1,816 participants. The remaining missing values were imputed using the Expectation–Maximization (EM) algorithm (Dempster et al., 1977) implemented in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27. The final dataset (N = 1,816) was used for the following analyses.

4. Participants.

The final analytical sample consisted of 1,816 respondents. Participants were asked to indicate all the professional roles they held; Therefore, respondents could select more than one role. School location data were available for 1,757 respondents with Urban n = 1,417 and Rural n = 340.

Table 1 shows the distribution of professional roles by school location. Kaiako/Teachers were the largest professional group in both urban (68.0%) and rural schools (61.5%). Around one-third of respondents held Middle Leader roles, with similar proportions in urban (36.7%) and rural schools (39.1%). Smaller proportions of respondents identified as Senior Leader, Specialist Support, or Another Role, with slightly higher percentages in rural schools than in urban schools.

Table 1

Professional Roles by School Location (N = 1,757)

PROFESSIONAL ROLE	URBAN N (%)	RURAL N (%)
Kaiako / Teacher	964 (68.0)	209 (61.5)
Middle Leader	520 (36.7)	133 (39.1)
Senior Leader	104 (7.3)	36 (10.6)
Specialist Support	137 (9.7)	37 (10.9)
Another Role	96 (6.8)	35 (10.3)

Note. Percentages are calculated within each school location. Respondents could select more than one professional role.

Table 2 shows that about two out of three participants (65%) indicated having just one role. Thus, a third of respondents held multiple professional roles. The largest number of respondents selected both Kaiako/Teacher and Middle Leader (n = 277), followed by Kaiako/Teacher and Specialist Support (n = 140), and Middle Leader and Specialist Support (n = 69). Other role combinations were reported by relatively few respondents.

Table 2

Professional Role Characteristics (N = 1,816)

PROFESSIONAL ROLE	KAIAKO/ TEACHER	MIDDLE LEADER	SENIOR LEADER	SPECIALIST SUPPORT	ANOTHER ROLE
Kaiako / Teacher	1204				
Middle Leader	277	674			
Senior Leader	22	9	153		
Specialist Support	140	69	10	180	
Another Role	66	38	2	9	135

Note. Diagonal values indicate the number of respondents selecting just one professional role. Off-diagonal values indicate respondents who selected two or more roles.

5. Analysis

5.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

On the assumption that the items would aggregate into factors or scales according to the design of the questionnaire, the original five-factor questionnaire structure was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in Jamovi (Version 2.7). All items in this section used a 6-point positively packed agreement rating scale (Brown & Shulruf, 2023) on the grounds that teachers would be expected to endorse Ministry initiatives. Options were 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Mostly Disagree; 3=Slightly Agree; 4=Moderately Agree; 5=Mostly Agree; and 6=Strongly Agree.

CFA was used to test whether observed items adequately represented their intended latent constructs, thereby providing core evidence of measurement validity (Kline, 2005; Schreiber et al., 2006). Model fit was evaluated using conventional criteria:

- Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Gamma Hat Index (γ^2) ≥ 0.90 ,
- Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) ≤ 0.08 , and
- Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) ≤ 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2005).

A robust factor structure happens when items belong to only one factor and do not overlap with other factors or items. The unexplained variance of each item (i.e., the residual) should not be correlated with any other item or residual, because that violates the assumption that unexplained variance is truly unexplained. When models were inadmissible, items with high modification indices, weak loadings, or cross-loadings were sequentially trimmed until an acceptable fit was achieved while preserving the hypothesized structure (Bandalos & Finney, 2018). The initial model showed inadequate fit ($\chi^2(395) = 4965.55$, $p < .001$, CFI = .929, RMSEA = .080, SRMR = .048, $\gamma^2 = .86$). Several factor correlations exceeded .90, suggesting substantial overlap among the factors.

5.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

Because the initial CFA indicated that the original five-factor model did not adequately represent teachers' survey responses, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was undertaken. EFA allowed the survey responses to identify a more appropriate and interpretable factor structure without imposing a predefined measurement model.

EFA was conducted in Jamovi (Version 2.7) using maximum likelihood extraction with oblimin rotation. The number of factors to retain was determined using parallel analysis (Courtney, 2013). Items were retained if they had factor loadings of at least .40 and no cross-loadings greater than .30. Parallel analysis supported a four-factor solution, which accounted for 71.5% of the total variance. In particular, the Educational Impact and Confidence and Credibility items loaded onto a single factor, suggesting that respondents did not distinguish between these two constructs. The four-factor model identified by the EFA was then re-evaluated using CFA. Following model refinement, 12 items were retained from the original 30 questionnaire items. Detailed item evaluation and deletion decisions are presented in Appendix B. The final four-factor model demonstrated excellent fit to the data

Following the final CFA, scale scores were calculated by averaging the retained items within each scale. Averaging item scores preserves the original response metric and provides a single score representing each construct, making the results straightfor-

ward to interpret and appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses when each item loads on only one factor (DiStefano et al., 2009). These scale scores were then used in the descriptive analyses, correlation analyses, and analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to examine differences across participant groups.

5.4 Cluster Analysis

The professional learning and development (PLD) preferences section allowed participants to select all options that they preferred. To make sense of the pattern of selection, hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted to identify distinct patterns of PLD preferences among teachers. The resulting dendrogram was examined to explore potential clustering solutions, while the average silhouette coefficient was used to determine the optimal number of clusters.

After identifying the optimal number of clusters, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to evaluate and refine the cluster solution. Because items were binary (i.e., selected or not), factors were estimated using an estimator designed for binary categories (i.e., WLS-MV). If the initial CFA model showed inadequate fit, the model was revised and re-evaluated. Items with factor loadings below .30 or substantial overlap with other clusters were removed (Appendix C). Following the final CFA, cluster scores were calculated by averaging the binary item scores within each cluster. Pearson correlation and binary logistic regression analyses were then conducted to examine the relationships among the PLD clusters and differences in cluster according to school location and professional role.

6. Results

6.1 Measurement Model

The EFA analysis resulted in a revised four-factor measurement model that provided an excellent representation of teachers' responses to the survey. The revised model demonstrated excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2(48) = 121.00$, $p < .001$, CFI = .997, RMSEA = .013, $\gamma^2 = .99$). The final model consisted of four interpretable constructs: (1) Reform Clarity, reflecting teachers' understanding of the proposed reforms; (2) Reforms Good, reflecting overall positive evaluations of the proposed reforms; (3) Reforms Good for Māori, reflecting perceived benefits of the reforms for Māori learners; and (4) Resources Needed, reflecting the perceived need for additional resources to support implementation. Table 3 provides the items and their loadings for each factor.

Table 3
Item Wording and Loading by Factor

CODE	ITEM	LOADING
Reform Clarity		
U2	The purpose of the reforms is clear.	.92
U3	The reasons for the reforms have been clearly communicated.	.86
Reforms Good		
O11	Overall, what impact do you expect the reforms to have on learners?	.91
CF1	I have confidence in the overall direction of the reforms.	.93
E11	The reforms will support meaningful learning for ākonga.	.93
E16	The reforms will improve learners' preparedness for further education, employment, or training.	.86
CF	I'm confident my school can manage this reform effectively	.59
Reforms Good for Māori		
TT3	The reforms actively protect te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori and Māori pathways.	.97
TT5	The reforms support meaningful partnership with Māori in the implementation.	.95
TT6	The reform process demonstrates accountability to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.	.95

CODE	ITEM	LOADING
Resources Needed		
IM2	Kura will require significant resources to implement the reforms.	.80
IM4	Additional professional development will be required.	.74

Note. Loadings are standardised beta values. U = Understanding; EI = Educational Impact; OI = Overall Impact; CF = Confidence and Credibility; TT = Te Tiriti; IM = Implementation.

As a result of the modelling processes correlations among the four factors were moderate to strong (Table 4). Scale robustness values for Coefficient H, however, were strong, indicating high likelihood of replication in future research. The greater the reforms were judged to be clear the more participants thought they were good for all and Māori. In addition, if the reforms were deemed to be good, they were then strongly correlated with being good for Māori. In all cases, if the reforms were deemed to be good or clear, fewer resources were needed.

Table 4
Reform Factor Intercorrelations and Factor Robustness

SCALES	M	SD	III	IV
Reform Clarity	2.94	1.42		
Reforms Good	2.57	1.28		
Reforms Good for Māori	1.90	1.22	(.97)	
Resources Needed	5.50	0.88	-.44	(.75)

Note. Coefficient H value for scale robustness on diagonal.

Figure 1 presents the final four-factor CFA model.

Figure 1. Revised Four-Factor CFA Model



6.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the four scales are presented in Table 5. Teachers reported relatively low agreement (almost slightly agree) for Reform Clarity) and less than slightly agree for Reforms Good. Reforms Good for Māori had the lowest mean score (i.e., below mostly disagree), while Resources Needed had the highest mean score (i.e., almost strongly agree). Overall, teachers generally expressed very slight levels of agreement or disagreement on the first three scales, while showing strong agreement that additional resources would be needed to implement the reforms.

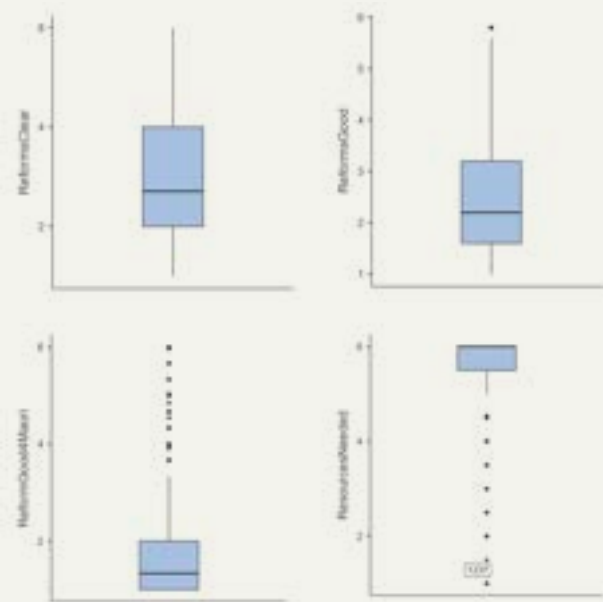
Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Final Scales (N = 1816)

SCALES	M	SD
Reform Clarity	2.94	1.42
Reforms Good	2.57	1.28
Reforms Good for Māori	1.90	1.22
Resources Needed	5.50	0.88

Note. SD = standard deviation. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of each construct; maximum mean is 6.00.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of mean scores for each of the four scales.

Figure 2. Mean Scores for the Four Final Scales



6.3 Differences Between Urban and Rural Schools

As shown in Table 6 and Figure 3, teachers working in urban schools reported significantly higher levels of Reform Clarity and Reforms Good than those working in rural schools ($p < .001$). Urban teachers also reported significantly higher scores on Reforms Good for Māori

($p = .026$). No significant difference was found between urban and rural teachers on Resources Needed ($p = .062$). Although statistically significant differences were observed for three of the four scales, the effect sizes were small (Cohen's $d = 0.14$ – 0.25), indicating only trivial to modest differences between teachers working in urban and rural schools.

Table 6

Differences in Scale Scores by School Location

SCALE	MEAN (SD)		t	p	COHEN'S d
	URBAN	RURAL			
Reform Clarity	2.99 (1.43)	2.71 (1.33)	3.32	<.001	0.20
Reforms Good	2.63 (1.32)	2.31 (1.07)	4.12	<.001	0.25
Reforms Good for Māori	1.93 (1.26)	1.77 (1.09)	2.23	.026	0.14
Resources Needed	5.48 (0.88)	5.57 (0.85)	−1.87	.062	−0.11

Note. Independent samples t -tests were used. Degrees of freedom = 1755 for all comparisons.

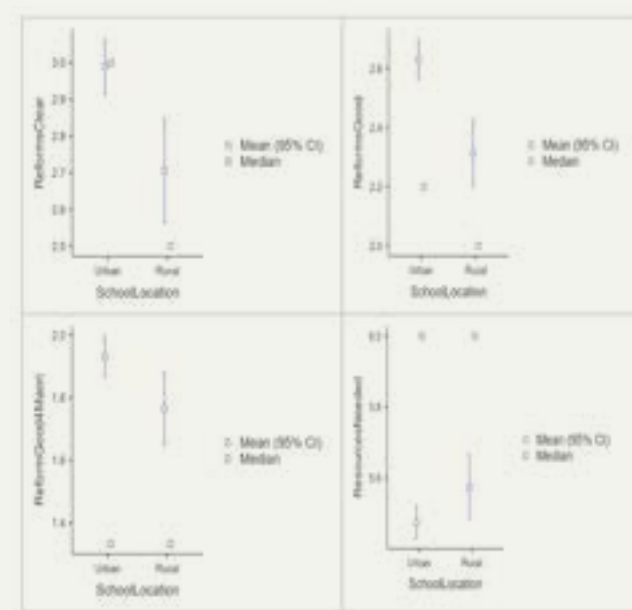


Figure 3

Mean Scale Scores by School Location

6.4 Differences between Professional Roles and Reform Attitudes

Table 7 shows that professional role was related to several of the four reform attitude scales. Kaiako teachers, specialist support staff, and teachers in another role differed significantly on Reform Clarity. For Reforms Good, significant differences were found for middle leaders and specialist support staff (both $p < .001$). For Reforms Good for Māori, middle leaders ($p < .001$), senior leaders ($p = .011$), and specialist support staff ($p < .001$) differed significantly. Finally, for Resources Needed, middle leaders ($p = .005$) and senior leaders ($p = .019$) differed significantly. However, the effect sizes were small across all significant findings (partial $\eta^2 = .002$ – $.013$), indicating that professional role explained only a trivial proportion of the variation in teachers' attitudes towards the proposed reforms. Overall, the results suggest that teachers in different professional roles differed on several dimensions of the proposed reforms, although these differences were modest in magnitude.

Table 7

ANOVA Results for Professional Roles

SCALE	KAIAKO/ TEACHER	MIDDLE LEADER	SENIOR LEADER	SPECIALIST SUPPORT	ANOTHER ROLE
Reform Clarity	11.93 (< .001, .007)	2.65 (.104, .001)	0.06 (.800, <.001)	15.63 (<.001, .009)	3.86 (.049, .002)
Reforms Good	3.08 (.080, .002)	11.46 (<.001, .006)	3.46 (.063, .002)	19.10 (<.001, .010)	1.72 (.190, .001)
Reforms Good for Māori	2.91 (.088, .002)	13.65 (<.001, .007)	6.44 (.011, .004)	23.05 (<.001, .013)	1.80 (.180, .001)
Resources Needed	0.19 (.665, <.001)	8.02 (.005, .004)	5.50 (.019, .003)	3.27 (.071, .002)	0.08 (.781, <.001)

Note. Values are reported as F (p ; partial η^2). Partial η^2 values indicate effect sizes. Significant effects ($p < .05$) are shown in bold.

6.5 Professional Learning and Development Cluster Analysis

Table 8 presents the frequency of each professional learning and development (PLD) option selected by teachers. PLD1, PLD4, and PLD6 were selected by more than half of the teachers. In contrast, PLD9 and PLD10 were selected least frequently. The variation in response frequencies across the ten PLD options was examined further using cluster analysis.

Table 8
PLD Items and Frequency

CODE	ITEM	n (%)
PLD1	Regional Teacher Only days for each subject resourced by MOE and NZQA	1411 (77.7%)
PLD2	Online webinars from MOE and NZQA	389 (21.4%)
PLD3	Online self-accessed materials/modules from agencies or experts	496 (27.3%)
PLD4	Subject association resources and conferences	1179 (64.9%)
PLD5	In-school based PLD with in-house expertise	460 (25.3%)
PLD6	In-school based PLD with external subject experts	1050 (57.8%)
PLD7	In-school based PLD with external assessment experts	750 (41.3%)
PLD8	Regional cluster based PLD	696 (38.3%)
PLD9	Inter-school visits and observations	276 (15.2%)
PLD10	Tertiary institution continuing education for further credentials	198 (10.9%)

Three items were selected by more than half the sample (i.e., PLD1, PLD4, and PLD6). The lack of variability for those items, mean that they are unlikely to discriminate how teachers think about PLD needs. Nonetheless, support for the new qualifications through subject-based regional teacher only days, through subject-based associations, and in-school subject-based experts was fundamentally wanted.

Rather than report each item separately, hierarchical cluster analysis was used to determine if the items could be aggregated into highly similar groups. This identified a three-cluster solution for selections of the professional learning and development (PLD) items. The dendrogram and average silhouette coefficient supported the three-cluster solution (Figure 4). The dendrogram shows the distance between items. There were four pairs of items that exhibited very similar selection patterns (i.e., PLD1-4, PLD 6-7, PLD2-3, and PLD9-10). The distance between pairs indicates how unique those pair are. Thus, PLD9-10 is separated vertically and horizontally from the set of items PLD1-4 and PLD 6-7 showing that those items had very different response patterns. As noted above, the subject-based items PLD1, 4, and 6 were very close to each other in the dendrogram.

Figure 4. Hierarchical Cluster Dendrogram of Professional Learning and Development (PLD)



Confirmatory factor analysis further supported the three-cluster solution after model refinement. The final PLD cluster model demonstrated acceptable fit ($\chi^2(6) = 20.01, p = .12, CFI = .985, RMSEA = .033$, and $SRMR = .026$). The three clusters were labelled Expert in School Support (PLD5 In-school based PLD with in-house expertise, PLD7 In-school based PLD with external assessment experts), Online Support (PLD2 Online webinars from MOE and NZQA, PLD3 Online self-accessed materials/modules from agencies or experts), and External Learning (PLD9 Inter-school visits and observations, PLD10 Tertiary institution continuing education for further credentials). Unfortunately, due to the lack of variance around the subject-based items, no meaningful scale could be achieved. Nonetheless, that scale was created and analysed further despite not being supported in CFA.

Table 9 shows descriptive statistics for the PLD clusters. Two-thirds selected Subject-based Support and half selected Expert in the School. Online Support had support from a third and a fifth chose External Learning in other schools.

Table 9

Descriptive Statistics for the PLD Clusters (N = 1816)

PLD CLUSTER	M	SD	INTER-CORRELATIONS (<i>r</i>)		
*Subject-based Support	0.67	0.26	--		
Expert in School Support	0.33	0.36	.15	--	
Online Support	0.24	0.34	-.04	.14	--
External Learning	0.13	0.28	.18	.31	.20

Note. *not found in CFA; Higher mean scores indicate a greater proportion of participants selecting the corresponding PLD cluster. Scores represent the meaning of each PLD cluster.

Table 10 shows variation in the selection of the three PLD clusters by school location. Urban teachers were somewhat more likely to select Expert in School Support than rural teachers, whereas rural teachers were more likely to select Online Support. The proportion selecting External Learning was identical for urban and rural teachers. A t-test of independent samples for the four PLD scores found no statistically significant difference for three clusters (i.e., subject-based, online, and external learning). The difference for Expert in the School was statistically significant but small ($t(3,1755) = 2.71$, $p = .007$, $d = .16$) in favour of the urban schools, where access to such expertise may be expected to be higher.

Table 10

Mean (SD) Selection of PLD Clusters as Percentage of Sample by School Location

SCHOOL LOCATION	SUBJECT-BASED SUPPORT	EXPERT IN SCHOOL SUPPORT	ONLINE SUPPORT	EXTERNAL LEARNING
Urban	67% (26%)	34% (37%)	24% (35%)	13% (28%)
Rural	66% (26%)	29% (35%)	27% (35%)	13% (27%)

Note. Percentages indicate the proportion of teachers within each school location who selected each professional learning and development (PLD) cluster. School location data were available for 1,757 respondents (Urban = 1,417; Rural = 340).

Table 11 presents the results of the binary logistic regression examining whether school location and professional role predicted teachers' selection of the four PLD clusters. Teachers in Kaiako, Middle Leader, and Senior Leader roles were more likely than teachers not in those roles to select Subject-based Support. Teachers from urban schools (code 0) were more likely than those from rural schools (code 1) to select Expert in School Support. Kaiako teachers (code 1) were also more likely to select this cluster than teachers who were not Kaiako (code 0) ($OR = 1.33$, $p = .028$). No significant predictors were identified for Online Support or External Learning (all $p > .05$). Nonetheless, the size of effect for these two results was trivial ($|d| = .16$ each). Hence, discrepancies here are ignorable.

Table 11

Logistic Regression Results

PREDICATOR	SUBJECT-BASED SUPPORT	EXPERT IN SCHOOL SUPPORT	ONLINE SUPPORT	EXTERNAL LEARNING
School location	1.42 (.408)	0.75 (.017)	1.21 (.125)	1.00 (1.000)
Kaiako/Teacher	2.67 (.018)	1.33 (.028)	1.05 (.731)	1.08 (.166)
Middle Leader	3.30 (.007)	1.16 (.219)	1.05 (.680)	1.06 (.698)
Senior Leader	8.99 (.042)	1.16 (.479)	1.05 (.834)	1.02 (.928)
Specialist Support	0.64 (.318)	0.97 (.838)	0.73 (.061)	1.15 (.466)
Another role	0.62 (.321)	1.21 (.318)	0.93 (.711)	1.28 (.259)

Note. Entries are odds ratios (OR), with p-values shown in parentheses.

Table 12 shows the Pearson correlations between PLD preferences and teachers' attitudes towards the proposed reforms. Teachers who expressed stronger preferences for Subject-based Support tended to report lower levels of Reform Clarity, Reforms Good, and Reforms Good for Māori, but higher levels of Resources Needed. In contrast, preferences for Online Support were positively correlated with Reform Clarity, Reforms Good, and Reforms Good for Māori, and negatively associated with Resources Needed. This pattern indicated contrasting correlation between Subject-based Support and Online Support in relation to teachers' attitudes towards the proposed reforms. However,

these values fall in the range of trivial to small ($d < .25$). Moreover, preferences for Expert in School Support or External Learning were weakly and negatively correlated with Reform Clarity, suggesting that greater clarity of the reforms reduced need for expert and external PLD. Regardless, all statistically significant associations were practically weak or trivial ($|d| = .10 - .25$).

Table 12

Correlations Between PLD Preferences and Attitude Scales

PLD PREFERENCE	REFORMS CLEAR	REFORMS GOOD	REFORM GOOD FOR MĀORI	RESOURCES NEEDED
Subject-based Support	-0.104 (<.001)	-0.110 (<.001)	-0.139 (<.001)	0.193 (<.001)
Expert in School Support	-0.051 (.029)	-0.022 (.351)	-0.039 (.100)	0.033 (.160)
Online Support	0.084 (<.001)	0.122 (<.001)	0.109 (<.001)	-0.052 (.026)
External Learning	-0.068 (.004)	-0.036 (.129)	-0.032 (.172)	0.019 (.419)

Note. Values are Pearson correlation coefficients (r), with p -values shown in parentheses.

7. Conclusion

The analyses that aggregated data into plausible scales show that participants fundamentally disagreed that the reforms were clear, that they were in general good, and were specifically bad for Māori learners. Participants clearly wanted resources to cope with the reforms and preferred Subject-based and Expert Advice in the schools, over online and learning with other schools.

The large overall sample size has contributed to many statistically significant differences across school location and teacher roles. However, inspection of the effect sizes of the differences suggests more strongly that teacher opinions and preferences were fundamentally equivalent across the background variables.

Appendix A (Technical Report)

PPTA Survey QuestionnaireThe questionnaire used in the PPTA Tiroiro Anō survey is provided below.

SECTION ONE – Introduction and purpose.

Tiroiro Anō is an independent research inquiry project, commissioned by Te Wehengarua (NZPPTA) examining proposed changes to national qualifications in Aotearoa New Zealand. The inquiries bring together research evidence and sector perspectives about the educational, equity, implementation and system-level implications of proposals based on the proposed new curriculum from 2027 and replacement of the school qualification system from 2028.

By taking part in this survey, you have the opportunity to share your perspective and current thinking about proposed qualification changes to ensure the voices of teachers and school leaders are formally noted in this time of change. Your contribution helps ensure future research and discussions are informed by the voices and realities of those working directly with the curriculum and assessment and most importantly with the young people of Aotearoa and their whānau.

NZPPTA survey - rationale

Each item in the survey connects to inquiries in the research undertaken by the Tiroiro Anō panel. The survey will gather evidence about

- Whether the reform is understood (do respondents have enough clarity to make informed judgements?)
- Whether kaiako see educational value in them (this connects the reforms to learners, equity and pathways)
- Whether they appear equitable and Te Tiriti aligned (Tiroiro Anō explicitly asks how reforms align with Te Tiriti)
- Whether the reforms appear workable
- Whether the profession sees them as credible
- Any opportunities, risk and conditions that kaiako identify from lived experience

About you

To be in the draw to win one of three \$50 book vouchers, please tick here and provide your email details. Your details will be kept separate from your survey responses and will not be used for any other purpose.

☐ Yes, I would like to be in the draw to win one of 3 \$50 book vouchers

Email



About you section

Please indicate if

- you currently teach in a rural or urban school
- you have a leadership role in curriculum and or assessment
- You are in senior leadership

SECTION TWO: Understanding the proposed reforms.

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale.

Strongly disagree | *Mostly Disagree* | *Slightly Agree* | *Moderately agree* | *Mostly Agree* | *Strongly Agree*

1. I understand the main changes to NCEA and senior secondary qualifications
2. The purpose of the reforms is clear
3. The reasons for the reforms have been clearly communicated to me
4. The reforms address important issues in secondary education
5. The reforms maintain the strengths of the current NCEA system.
6. I am aware of the guiding principles underpinning the proposed changes to NCEA

SECTION THREE: Educational Impact

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale.

Strongly disagree | *Mostly Disagree* | *Slightly Agree* | *Moderately agree* | *Mostly Agree* | *Strongly Agree*

7. The reforms will support meaningful learning for ākonga.
8. The reforms will improve equity for learners.
9. The reforms will support diverse learner pathways.
10. The reforms will narrow curriculum opportunities for some learners.
11. The reforms will increase pressure on learners.
12. The reforms will improve learners' preparedness for further education, employment, or training.
13. The reforms will improve opportunities for learners who are more likely to go into trades or vocational pathways.
14. Overall, what impact do you expect the reforms to have on learners?
 - Strongly negative impact
 - Negative impact
 - No significant impact
 - Positive impact
 - Strongly positive impact

SECTION FOUR- Te Tiriti o Waitangi principles

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale.

Strongly disagree | *Mostly Disagree* | *Slightly Agree* | *Moderately agree* | *Mostly Agree* | *Strongly Agree*

15. Māori have been meaningfully involved in the development of the reforms
16. The reforms strengthen opportunities for ākonga Māori to succeed as Māori within the education system.

17. The reforms actively protect te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori and Māori pathways.
18. The reforms will support equitable outcomes for ākonga Māori
19. The reforms support meaningful partnership with Māori in the implementation.
20. The reform process demonstrates accountability to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

SECTION FIVE: Implementation and workload

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale.

Strongly disagree | *Mostly Disagree* | *Slightly Agree* | *Moderately agree* | *Mostly Agree* | *Strongly Agree*

21. The reforms will be manageable to implement.
22. Kura will require significant resourcing to implement the reforms
23. The reforms will increase workload for teachers and leaders.
24. Additional professional development will be required for successful implementation.
25. The timelines for implementation are realistic and achievable.

SECTION SIX- Confidence and credibility

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements using the scale.

Strongly disagree | *Mostly Disagree* | *Slightly Agree* | *Moderately agree* | *Mostly Agree* | *Strongly Agree*

26. I have confidence in the overall direction of the reforms.
27. I trust the education agencies (e.g., MoE, NZQA, ERO) will support implementation effectively.
28. I view the reforms as credible
29. I look forward to the introduction of the new NCEA qualification system
30. I'm confident my school can manage this reform effectively.

SECTION SEVEN – Professional Development

31. Identify modes of PLD you believe will help you best prepare for the implementation of the reforms.

Choose up to three

- Regional Teacher Only days for each subject resourced by MOE and NZQA
- Online webinars from MOE and NZQA
- Online self- accessed materials/ modules from agencies or experts
- Subject association resources and conferences
- In school based PLD with in-house expertise
- In school based PLD with external subject experts.
- In-school based PLD with external assessment experts
- Regional cluster based PLD
- Inter school visits and observations
- Tertiary institution continuous education for further credentials

Appendix B

Summary of Attitude Scale Item Evaluation and Deletion Decisions

ITEM	PRIMARY EVIDENCE	DECISION
U1	Cross-loading (MI = 41.10); residual covariance with U3 (MI = 30.30)	Deleted
U4	Cross-loading (MI = 90.72); residual covariance with U6 (MI = 119.92)	Deleted
U5	Residual covariance with EI3 (MI = 44.07)	Deleted
U6	Residual covariance with U4 (MI = 119.92)	Deleted
EI2	Cross-loading (MI = 126.35); residual covariance with EI3 (MI = 329.17)	Deleted
EI3	Cross-loading (MI = 108.75); residual covariance with EI2 (MI = 329.17)	Deleted
EI7	Residual covariance with EI3 (MI = 118.21)	Deleted
EI4_R	Residual covariance with EI5_R (MI = 239.83)	Deleted
EI5_R	Cross-loading (MI = 88.24); residual covariance with EI4_R (MI = 239.83)	Deleted
TT1	Residual covariance with TT5 (MI = 116.43)	Deleted
TT2	Cross-loading (MI = 63.39); residual covariance with TT4 (MI = 122.63)	Deleted
TT4	Cross-loading (MI = 137.20); residual covariance with TT2 (MI = 122.63)	Deleted
CF2	Cross-loading (MI = 36.91); residual covariance with CF5 (MI = 54.48)	Deleted
CF3	Residual covariance with CF1 (MI = 118.77); residual covariance with CF4 (MI = 94.19)	Deleted
CF4	Residual covariance with CF3 (MI = 94.19)	Deleted
IM1	Cross-loaded on two factors during EFA	Deleted
IM3	Cross-loading (MI = 87.00 on Combined factor; MI = 50.02 on Te Tiriti)	Deleted
IM5	Cross-loading (MI = 64.50); residual covariance with CF2 (MI = 46.99)	Deleted

Appendix C

Summary of PLD Item Evaluation and Deletion Decisions

ITEM	EVIDENCE	DECISION
PLD1	Very low standardized loading ($\lambda = .006$, $p = .878$), indicating little contribution to Cluster 1.	Deleted
PLD4	Low standardized loading ($\lambda = -.119$) and evidence of cross-loading on Cluster 3 (MI = 22.59).	Deleted
PLD6	High residual covariance with PLD7 (MI = 108.29) and substantial cross-loadings on Cluster 2 (MI = 57.32) and Cluster 3 (MI = 62.00).	Deleted
PLD8	Low standardized loading ($\lambda = -.237$), cross-loading on Cluster 3 (MI = 28.88), and correlated residuals with PLD9 (MI = 25.96) and PLD10 (MI = 24.59).	Deleted

References

- Bandalos, D. L., & Finney, S. J. (2018). Factor analysis. *The Reviewer's Guide to Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences* (pp. 98–122). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315755649-8>
- Brown, G. T. L., & Shulruf, B. (2023). Response option design in surveys. In L. R. Ford & T. A. Scandura (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Survey Development and Application* (pp. 120–132). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529617757.n9>
- Cattell, R. B. (1966). The scree test for the number of factors. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 1, 245–276.
- Courtney, M. G. R. (2013). Determining the number of factors to retain in EFA: Using the SPSS R-Menu v2.0 to make more judicious estimations. *Practical Assessment Research & Evaluation*, 18. <https://doi.org/10.7275/9cf5-2m72>
- Dempster, A. P., Laird, N. M., & Rubin, D. B. (1977). Maximum likelihood from incomplete data via the EM algorithm. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series B, Statistical Methodology*, 39(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2517-6161.1977.tb01600.x>



Hu, L.-T., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 6(1), 1–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705519909540118>

Kline, R. B. (2005). Principles and practice of structural equation modeling (2nd ed.). Guilford Press <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/bios/guilford051/2004019784.html>.

Little, R. J. A., & Rubin, D. B. (2020). *Statistical Analysis with Missing Data* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Schreiber, J. B., Nora, A., Stage, F. K., Barlow, E. A., & King, J. (2006). Reporting structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis results: A review. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 99(6), 323–338. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JOER.99.6.323-338>

The jamovi project (2025). jamovi. (Version 2.7) [Computer Software]. Retrieved from <https://www.jamovi.org>.

Appendix two – Excerpts from Cabinet Paper material (Pages 8,11,12)

Proactive release

Minister & portfolio Hon Erica Stanford Minister of Education.

Name of package Public consultation on proposal to replace NCEA

Date considered 30 June 2025

Date of release 26 August 2025

These documents have been proactively released:

Public consultation on proposal to replace NCEA

Date considered: 30 June 2025

Author: Office of the Minister of Education

Cabinet Social Outcomes Committee Minute

Date considered: 25 June 2025

Author: Committee Secretary

Cabinet Minute CAB-25-MIN-0208

Date considered: 30 June 2025

Author: Secretary for the Cabinet

The changes will be a big shift for some kura (Page 8)

37 The overhaul of our national qualification will be a big shift for many kura¹², because the consistency of the subject-based approach will not align with current practices, which rely on local flexibility. The proposed changes need to have the right level of flexibility so that kura can continue to achieve great outcomes for their students as part of a strengthened national qualification.

38 9(2)(f)(iv) The Ministry will work closely with sector representatives, including Te Rūnanga Nui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori o Aotearoa, Ngā Kura ā Iwi o Aotearoa and curriculum design experts, in designing an approach appropriate for kura.

Impact Analysis (Page 11)

Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS)

56 As required by the Ministry for Regulations, the Ministry of Education's Quality Assurance panel has reviewed the discussion document and determined that it will lead to effective consultation and enable the development of future impact analysis. Therefore, a RIS is not required at this stage.

Population Implications (Page 12)

58 The proposals could improve equity in post-school outcomes for students, including Māori, Pacific and disabled students. Under the current NCEA settings, Māori and Pacific students are more likely to be 'streamed' into learning programmes that do not provide access to coherent learning and core subjects. The proposed changes would make sure that

all learners get access to high-quality teaching and learning that will better support their post-school outcomes in the medium to long-term.

59 Achievement rates are likely to decline under the proposals in the short-term, especially for Māori, Pacific and disabled learners and learners facing more socio-economic barriers. These students are more likely to do more unit standards, engage in project based and out-of-school learning, and therefore, be disproportionately affected by the proposals which will limit these practices.

60 This table sets out any specific implications for some population groups:

POPULATION GROUP	HOW THE PROPOSAL MAY SPECIFICALLY AFFECT THIS GROUP
Māori	For ākonga Māori learning in a kura, the proposals limit kura autonomy to tailor teaching and learning programmes, as full subjects are required for the new qualification.
Disabled people	The proposals make sure that all disabled learners have access to deep and coherent learning, which they may not currently receive through very individualised approaches. Learners may still need some individualisation, especially in terms of assessments, and further work is needed on how to accommodate this
Realm Nations	Realm nations use NCEA as their national qualification, predominantly NCEA Level 1. Removing NCEA Level 1 will have a significant impact on learners in these nations, as it will remove their access to a qualification
Learners in tertiary settings	The proposals make it very difficult for students to achieve the new qualification in tertiary settings as they will no longer be able to 'top up' credits from any standards. They will need to offer full subjects or subject packages, which is very difficult for tertiary providers to offer. There are currently nearly 2,000 learners per annum achieving NCEA after leaving school in tertiary settings. These risks are partially mitigated by incentivising more students to stay in school for longer, which could be achieved by raising the school leaving age.
Learners in alternative education settings	The proposals make it very difficult for learners who may miss large periods of learning e.g., students with health needs, to attain the new qualification. Students will be assessed on whole subjects, including on content that they may have missed.

61 Public consultation is an opportunity to understand what forms of targeted support would be most effective in supporting these learners to succeed.

Appendix three – NZCER Secondary Teachers' Perspectives October 2025 – March 2026

NZCER has conducted national surveys of teachers and principals since 2015 in Aotearoa New Zealand and have asked questions about NCEA and senior secondary qualifications since 2003. "The purpose of the national survey is to monitor educational trends and policy impacts over time. ... to provide a comprehensive national picture of education in Aotearoa New Zealand."

NZCER's research on Secondary Teacher Perspectives involved data collected from October 2025 – March 2026. Participants were principals and teachers from English-Medium secondary schools, composite schools and Teen Parent Units.

The start date of the NZCER research coincided with the release of the "updated curriculum for Years 0-10 for the first time, though some parts were still in draft." The updated Years 11-13 curriculum documents had not yet been released. Ministry led consultation on the proposal to replace NCEA with new qualifications happened in August and September 2025, prior to NZCER's research. Submissions received by Government in their consultation have not yet been released, a year later, despite numerous requests from teacher organisations.

NZCER noted a "significant policy shift with the Government in 2025 proposing to replace NCEA entirely with a new national qualification system (including removing Level 1 and introducing new Year 12 and Year 13 certificates). These proposals were confirmed by Government in March 2026.

Most teachers indicated agreement (71%, with 45% strongly agreeing) that NCEA should be improved rather than removed, with almost as many (68%) indicating concern that the proposed changes will limit the learning opportunities and pathways for students in their school.

More teachers indicated disagreement (44%) than agreement that the proposed change to the new Year 12 and Year 13 certificates was going in the right direction, and nearly a third chose a neutral response.

The highest rate of disagreement (54% with 33% strongly disagreeing) was that the proposed changes to senior secondary qualifications will reduce existing inequities in student outcomes."

The NZCER findings that the majority of teachers thought NCEA should be "improved rather than removed" combined with a common theme noted in the open-ended responses in the survey, questioning the rationale for change and the pace of change, are the same themes in research conducted later in 2026.

Appendix four – Secondary Principals’ Council (SPC) February 2026.

Tiroiro Anō consulted with NZPPTA’s Secondary Principals’ Council (SPC) in February 2026. Council members identified six important priorities concerning the reform package as it appeared at the time. They identified the following:

- Equity concepts did not appear to be clearly understood or apparent in the proposed reforms.
- Māori and Pacific voices were not included meaningfully in consultation or development processes.
- There are ongoing concerns about the lack of transparency in decision making processes about reforms.
- There was a mismatch between the settings for Literacy assessment and the needs of a wide range of Diverse Learners.
- Implementation was moving too quickly.
- Principals were facing challenges with the prospect of narrowed subject choices, a standardized curriculum and the scale of flexibility constrictions in proposed qualification design.

Other items of concern noted were:

- Unanswered concerns and a lack of clarity about the role of AI in the reformed qualification.
- Unreasonable challenges faced by Careers Advisors as a result of uncertainty about VET pathways and subject designs in the senior school.
- Huge workload impact on specialist teachers in all subject areas.
- Concerns about the teaching workforce available to implement reforms.

Appendix five – SPANZ pulse check with principals – April 2026.

The Secondary Principals’ Association New Zealand (SPANZ) conducted a ‘pulse-check’ survey with secondary principals in term one, 2026. Information from this survey was made available to the Tiroiro Anō panel. Responses were received from 144 Secondary school principals in April 2026.

Significant concerns were raised regarding the potential for widening inequities between schools, the removal of requirement for school boards to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the levels of engagement, consultation and co-design by the secondary sector in the changes. Other concerns raised include

- the ability for schools to attract and retain quality teachers and leaders to
- implement the changes, the pace and scale of change and the direction of change of new curriculum.

Statements with strong agreement or disagreement. Statements in the survey with more than 75% agree / strongly agree or more than 75% disagree/strongly disagree and the percentage in brackets showing the percentage of respondents with no clear view yet / insufficient information.

- 88.5% agree: There is a risk that current changes may widen inequities between schools. (15.3%)
- 85.7% disagree: I support the removal of the requirement for school boards to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. (7.6%)
- 85.8% disagree: The current process taken for curriculum development has met the expectations of the sector in terms of engagement, consultation, and co-design. (13.2%)
- 84.2% disagree: I am confident that I will be able to attract and retain enough quality teachers and leaders to successfully implement the changes to curriculum, assessment, and reporting. (16.7%)
- 84.1% disagree: The pace of curriculum change is reasonable. (8.3%)
- 82.8% disagree: The direction of National curriculum change, including the structure and content of draft learning areas and framework for Te Mātaiaho | The New Zealand Curriculum and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa currently out for consultation honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi. (39.6%)
- 82.8% disagree: The current pace and scale of system change is manageable for secondary schools and teachers. (9%)
- 81.5% disagree: Engagement and consultation with the secondary sector on recent changes has been appropriate. (9.7%)
- 76.0% disagree: As they stand, the current draft curriculum documents and framework are fit for purpose and meet the Ministry’s stated curriculum standards. (33.3%)

Statements with high levels of uncertainty: more than 25% of respondents indicating no clear view yet / insufficient information.

- The direction of National curriculum change, including the structure and content of draft learning areas and framework for Te Mātaiaho | The New Zealand Curriculum and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa currently out for consultation honours Te Tiriti o Waitangi. (39.6%)
- The curriculum and assessment changes will improve outcomes for all learners. (36.1%)
- Overall, the new curriculum is fit for purpose in my school context. (33.3%)
- As they stand, the current draft curriculum documents and framework are fit for purpose and meet the Ministry’s stated curriculum standards. (33.3%)
- The knowledge-rich and explicit teaching focus is a positive direction for the NZ curriculum. (31.3%)
- Overall, leaders and teachers in my school support the changes to their curriculum areas. (29.2%)

Part 02

Flexibility, Multiple Pathways, Learning,
Curriculum, and Qualifications.









2.1 Flexibility is doing equity work

How recent assessment reforms will impact localised curriculum design

by Claire Amos

Abstract

This article draws on case studies of six secondary schools using the flexibility of NCEA to develop locally responsive, culturally connected and future-focused learning. Semi-structured interviews with school leaders identified six themes: curriculum starts with context, relevance drives engagement, flexibility supports high expectations, pathways require more than subjects, community is part of the curriculum and greater prescription risks narrowing what works. The findings suggest that curriculum flexibility is not simply an administrative feature of NCEA. It is an important mechanism through which schools respond to inequity, sustain engagement and connect learning with the lives, identities and futures of ākonga.

Key points

- Curriculum flexibility allows schools to respond to the cultures, communities, aspirations and employment contexts of their learners.
- Relevance and rigour are not competing priorities. Relevant learning can increase engagement while maintaining high expectations.
- Effective pathways include mentoring, projects, work experience and opportunities to explore future possibilities, not just subject selection.
- Partnerships with iwi, industry, tertiary providers and community organisations can extend the expertise and opportunities available to learners.
- Greater prescription, compulsory subject structures and nationally standardised assessment may have the greatest impact on learners who depend on responsive pathways.
- Reform should strengthen coherence and consistency without removing schools' capacity to make curriculum with their communities.

The problem with treating flexibility as failure

At the centre of current debates about senior secondary curriculum and assessment is a deceptively simple question: how much agency and flexibility should schools have?

For critics of NCEA, flexibility is often presented as a weakness. It is associated with fragmented programmes, inconsistent assessment, credit counting and schools supposedly constructing easy pathways (gaming the system) through the qualification.

There are legitimate concerns within this critique. NCEA has not always produced coherent programmes. Credit accumulation has sometimes displaced deeper attention to curriculum. Variation between schools has not always been well supported by clear guidance, high-quality moderation or equitable access to specialist expertise.

However, there is another side to the story.

Across Aotearoa, schools have used flexibility to design learning that makes sense for the young people, whānau and communities they serve. They have integrated subjects, localised curriculum, recognised learning across different contexts and created pathways that combine academic, vocational, cultural and community-based learning. In many schools, this is not an optional extra; rather, it is how they keep young people engaged, maintain meaningful expectations and address longstanding inequities.

The Government has confirmed that NCEA will be replaced by the New Zealand Certificate of Education at Year 12 and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education at Year 13. A Foundational Award will be introduced in 2028, followed by NZCE in 2029 and NZACE in 2030. Year 11 students will be required to study English or Te Reo Rangatira, Mathematics or Pāngarau and Science or Pūtaiao. At Years 12 and 13, students will normally be enrolled in at least five subjects and will need to pass at least three, as well as the Foundational Award, to receive the qualification. Each subject will include coursework and at least one examination, with assessment intended to be consistent nationally (Ministry of Education, 2026).

The intention is to produce a more coherent, credible and easily understood qualification. Yet coherence designed from the centre can come at the cost of responsiveness at the school and classroom level. The key question is therefore not whether the system needs greater coherence. It does. The question is whether that coherence must be achieved by reducing the capacity of schools to design learning around their students.

This chapter examines that question through the experiences of six schools.

Research approach

The study used a qualitative, multiple-case-study approach. Six schools were selected because they had developed distinctive responses to the needs of their learners and communities:

1. Queen Charlotte College
2. Porirua College
3. Manurewa High School
4. Rototuna Senior High School
5. Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery
6. Edgewater College

The sample was also deliberately spread. Two schools are in the South Island (Queen Charlotte College in the Marlborough Sounds and Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery in central Christchurch) and four are in the North Island (Porirua College, Manurewa High School, Rototuna Senior High School and Edgewater College, across Wellington, Auckland and Hamilton). The schools range from a small, rural Year 7–13 school of around 380 students to one of the country's largest secondary schools, with a roll of well over two thousand, and include a dedicated Years 11–13 senior school and a Years 1–13 special character area school.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with seven principals and senior leaders during 2026. The interviews explored each school's context, the problems or opportunities that had prompted curriculum change, the evidence informing decisions, the design and implementation of pro-

grammes, observed impacts and leaders' views of the proposed qualification reforms.

Interview transcripts were reviewed thematically. Six recurring themes were identified. These themes are not intended to represent every secondary school or every possible use of NCEA. The sample was purposive and the evidence reflects the perspectives of school leaders rather than directly gathered student or whānau voice. The cases do, however, illuminate the mechanisms through which flexibility can support local curriculum making.

Case studies do not establish that one model should be reproduced everywhere. They help us understand how policies operate in real settings and what may be lost when the conditions supporting successful local practice are changed.

The six themes were: curriculum starts with context, relevance drives engagement, flexibility supports high expectations, pathways need more than subjects, community is part of the curriculum and reform risks narrowing what works. While each case study below is organised around the theme it illustrates most clearly, all six schools showed evidence of several of these themes at once – a reminder that in practice they operate together rather than in isolation.

Curriculum starts with context

A strong curriculum does not begin with an NCEA assessment; it begins with questions about people and place.

Who are our learners? What knowledge and experiences do they bring? What opportunities exist in their community? What futures are they moving towards? What responsibilities do they have to their whānau, whenua and wider world?

Across all six schools, curriculum design began with some version of these questions. Localisation was not simply the addition of a local example to a pre-existing unit or task. It was the starting point for design, influenced what was taught, how learning was organised, who contributed expertise and how success was recognised.

At Porirua College and Manurewa High School, curriculum was shaped by the cultural knowledge, languages and aspirations of predominantly Māori and Pacific communities. At Ao Tawhiti, programmes grew from students' interests and concerns, including climate anxiety. Edgewater organised junior learners around interest-based learning adventures rather than fixed-ability groups. Rototuna Senior High School used its community vision to design a curriculum intended to help young adults enter the world with "dignity, purpose and options".

Real Life Example: Queen Charlotte College

Queen Charlotte College is a Year 7 to 13 school of approximately 380 students in the Marlborough Sounds, one of the two South Island schools in this study and among the smallest and most rural. Its community is closely connected with marine farming, the port, tourism, hospitality, wineries and local trades. The school has a relatively high Equity Index and only a small proportion of its learners move directly into university study.

Rather than treating these characteristics as peripheral to the curriculum, Queen Charlotte has placed them near its centre.

Its marine-farming programme operates across three senior levels and is developed with the Marine Farming Association, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology and local industries. Students learn about mussel, oyster and salmon farming. The school has a wet laboratory, a mussel line and access to a mussel barge. Learners can gain practical boating and diving experience and may undertake work experience connected with local employers.

The programme has evolved as the regional economy has changed. When employers identified opportunities connected with offshore salmon farming, diving became more prominent. The school has also introduced biotechnology, robotics and automation in response to changes in local industry.

Additional opportunities include workplace health and safety, barista training and support with driver licensing. These are not included because the school is trying to collect miscellaneous credits. In some cases, the credits are not the primary consideration at all. The learning is offered because it gives young people access to work, mobility and participation in their community. As principal Brendan Carroll put it, the credits from these micro-credentials are “just a byproduct, it’s the actual skill they learn that matters.”

Curriculum planning is informed by destination data, student pathway interviews and ongoing conversations with employers. The result is an ecosystem linking school, tertiary education, iwi, industry and employment. “We’re only a minute away from the boat ramp,” Carroll said, “so you don’t have to drive far to get onto the water.”

The flexibility that supports this context-driven design also underwrites pathways and community partnership in practice, not just in principle. Two former students became apprentices on the tugs in the port after completing the boating components of the course, and another moved directly into marine servicing work at the local marina. Partnerships extend beyond industry to iwi, with students now contributing to cultural mussel-bed research with the University of Otago. Carroll speaks about the outcomes with unambiguous confidence: “I’d happily sit on a boat with them and let them drive me around the Sounds, because I know they’ll be safe.”

Queen Charlotte is not alone in beginning with context. Manurewa’s curriculum is grounded in a community-designed framework for culturally sustaining teaching. Porirua’s integrated courses emerged from consultation with students and whānau. Ao Tawhiti’s Climate Action Campus responded to young people experiencing climate anxiety and a loss of hope.

The common principle is straightforward: local context is not an obstacle to curriculum coherence. It is one of the sources from which coherence can be built.

Implication for practice: Schools can begin curriculum review by mapping local knowledge, iwi relationships, industries, environmental issues and community expertise. Curriculum and assessment decisions can then be tested against a simple question: does this design help our learners understand and participate in the world around them?

Relevance drives engagement

Relevance is sometimes misrepresented as entertainment or as an attempt to make learning easier. The case studies suggest something different.

Relevant learning makes the purpose of learning and assessment visible. It creates an entry point into challenging knowledge by connecting it with a learner’s identity, interests or lived experience. It does not remove the challenge; rather it gives learners a reason to persist with it.

At Edgewater, interest-based classes provide young people with an immediate sense of belonging and a way into subject learning. At Manurewa, English courses have been redesigned around areas such as sport, social activism and Pacific contexts, while continuing to assess demanding English outcomes. The philosophy course at Ao Tawhiti engages students with complex ethical, political and epistemological questions by drawing on current events.

Real Life Example: Porirua College

Porirua College serves a culturally rich community in the Wellington region. Approximately 56 percent of its students are Pacific and 34 percent are Māori, with learners from refugee backgrounds also forming part of the school community. The roll has grown from under 500 to around 645 over principal Ragne Maxwell’s decade in the role, making it one of the mid-sized urban schools in the North Island included in this study.

When the school examined local Kāhui Ako data, it encountered a challenging finding. As Maxwell recalled, the data across schools was consistent: “kids liked coming to school, they liked their teachers, they liked their peers, and they thought school was boring.”

The school did not respond by blaming learners for lacking motivation. It examined the learning itself.

Students participated in discussions led by student leaders. Whānau were invited into the school to respond to student ideas and contribute their own perspectives. Teachers then worked with the resulting information. This process identified priorities including cultural connectedness, engagement, independence,

resilience, real-world skills, pathways and community involvement.

The school began by creating a curriculum “sandpit”, suspending the usual timetable for a series of trial days. The emerging model included integrated and cross-curricular learning, mixed-age participation, more than one teacher working in a learning space and opportunities to bring culturally significant activities into curriculum time.

Not every experiment succeeded. Some models were difficult to sustain and others were revised when assessment became cumbersome. The school treated these difficulties as part of an inquiry cycle rather than evidence that innovation itself had failed. The change was not without cost to staff: at one point, working through the data together, one teacher stood and said what several were thinking, “this is madness, this is crazy, why are we still talking about it?”. Eventually she worked through to a shared understanding of why the change mattered.

Over time, student interests generated courses in areas such as Korean language and culture, carving and vocal music. A local carver was initially brought into the school for his community expertise, then supported through Teach First NZ into a permanent teaching role. Carving became an established curriculum pathway, with one student progressing to further study at wānanga after five years of experience at school.

The important point is not that every school should introduce carving or Korean. It is that sustained engagement was built through

listening, trialling, evaluating and redesigning, to design in a way to reflect the specific needs, interests and capabilities of their community. Parent response has borne this out in practice: Maxwell says almost every parent enrolling a child now tells her, “gosh, I wish school had been like this when I was at school.”

Relevance in these cases did not mean allowing learners to avoid important knowledge. It meant choosing contexts through which that knowledge became worth acquiring. Porirua’s work also shows that relevance is relational and cultural. It cannot be determined entirely by a national subject document. It must be negotiated with students, whānau and community.

Implication for practice: Student engagement data should lead to curriculum inquiry, not simply attendance or behaviour interventions. Teachers can ask students what helps learning matter, then retain disciplinary expectations while varying texts, contexts, products and pathways.

Flexibility supports high expectations

One of the most persistent criticisms of NCEA is that flexibility allows schools to lower expectations. We have, on a number of occasions, heard the expression that the failing of NCEA is that schools and students can “game the system”. Manurewa High School provides a useful counterexample.

The school has not used flexibility to move students away from meaningful qualifications. It has used flexibility to increase the number who succeed within them.

Real Life Example: Manurewa High School

Manurewa High School is a large and rapidly growing school with a predominantly Māori and Pacific roll, serving South Auckland. With a roll approaching 2,500 students, it is one of the largest secondary schools in the country and the largest of the schools in this study, in contrast to

smaller schools such as Queen Charlotte and Edgewater. Its leaders identified inequitable access to University Entrance and meaningful subject pathways as a central concern.

The school set a clear expectation: students should achieve at least 14 credits in each of their selected subjects. This was intended to prevent young people accumulating disconnected credits that produced a qualification but did not sustain a credible pathway into further study, training or employment.

The work was highly systematic. Leaders and learning areas examined achievement class by class and subject by subject. Teachers developed their ability to interpret data and identify which students were progressing, where barriers remained and what changes were required. The proportion of students meeting the subject-credit target rose from around half to approximately 72 percent, with some classes achieving considerably higher results. As deputy principal Michelle Hards put it, “you can’t get above 72 percent... you can’t get there without being culturally responsive.”

This improvement did not come from data tracking alone. Leaders emphasised three interconnected elements: culturally sustaining pedagogy, localised and engaging curriculum and shared accountability for learner progress.

NCEA flexibility was important because it allowed courses to be redesigned for particular cohorts. Internal assessment could provide secure opportunities to demonstrate learning, while external assessment became an additional challenge rather than a single high-stakes barrier. Leaders observed that when students had already established success within a subject, more were willing to attempt examinations. “When you take the high stakes out of externals,” Hards said, “students will do them.”

The English learning area illustrates the approach. Student feedback contributed to pathways connected with sport, social activism, visual learning and Pacific contexts. These remained English courses. They did not abandon literacy, interpretation or critical analysis. They located these capabilities within areas that encouraged students to participate.

The school also contextualised English and mathematics within trades programmes and recognised learning connected with Polyfest through relevant

achievement standards, an ecosystem of “identity spaces” that principal Pete Jones describes as underpinning everything else: “if we’re all looking after ourselves, we’re all well and healthy, then we’re all in the best place to do our best.” These decisions were not ad hoc. They sat within a community-designed framework for culturally sustaining teaching (Tapasā) and a detailed school-wide improvement strategy.

The Manurewa example challenges the assumption that standardisation is the main route to high expectations. A common assessment does not automatically create equitable access to success. Learners need high expectations, strong teaching, coherent courses and opportunities to demonstrate learning in ways that do not unnecessarily privilege a single mode or moment of performance.

Nationally, the concern is shared. NZCER’s 2025 survey found that 70% of responding secondary principals believed NCEA should be improved rather than removed. 68% were concerned that the proposed changes would limit learning opportunities and pathways in their schools.

Implication for practice: Set ambitious subject-level goals, but examine progress at classroom and learner level. Use multiple forms of evidence, culturally sustaining contexts and a planned balance of internal and external assessment to help students build both confidence and capability.



Pathways need more than subjects

A timetable can show where a student is meant to be. It cannot, by itself, show them who they might become.

Young people need opportunities to explore identity, contribution, employment and further learning. They need adults who know them well, encounters with unfamiliar possibilities and safe opportunities to discover that a proposed pathway may not be right for them.

These functions are easy to undervalue because they do not fit neatly inside conventional subject boundaries.

Real Life Example: Rototuna Senior High School

Rototuna Senior High School serves Years 11 to 13 in a rapidly growing and increasingly diverse part of Hamilton. It is the North Island's dedicated senior school in this study, sharing a campus with its junior high, and has nearly doubled in size over five years, from around 650 to more than 1,000 students. Its curriculum was designed around three connected elements: specialist subject learning, a whānau-based advisory structure and Puna Wānanga.

The whānau structure gives each learner an academic champion. This is not treated as administrative form time. It has planned curriculum and protected time for developing connection, critical thinking, pathways and learner agency.

Puna Wānanga is an all-day Wednesday programme through which students undertake projects, work with community partners and explore possible futures. It includes project-based learning, Gateway, STAR courses, internships and work experience. More than 100 students may be learning in community or workplace settings in a single week.

Students can test possible pathways while the school is still there to support them. A learner interested in early childhood education can spend time in that setting and discover whether the work matches their expectations. Another may work with an employer, tertiary provider or community organisation. Students apply knowledge from their specialist subjects while developing collaboration, communication, self-management and problem solving.

The school does not describe these as “soft skills”. As principal Miranda Makin put it, they are “necessary skills”, or, as she prefers, “durable skills”, that young people “need to test out” before they leave school,

because “they need to be able to fail safe... we are here to pick them up if it doesn't quite go according to plan.”

NCEA flexibility has helped the school protect time for this wider curriculum. It has also supported integrated modules connecting subjects and authentic contexts, and community partnerships that extend well beyond the school gate: students run a Model United Nations series for the wider Waikato region, hosted at the University of Waikato. “If you can take the lid off learning for students,” Makin said, “they are capable of amazing things.” Leaders are now considering how much of this design can survive within a system organised more tightly around five discrete subjects and nationally consistent subject assessment.

Similar pathway-building can be seen elsewhere. Queen Charlotte monitors intended destinations and designs programmes with local employers. Manurewa combines academic and trades learning and works across a network of schools and alternative providers. Edgewater's senior students can construct self-directed programmes around goals not otherwise available in a small school.

These are not alternatives to academic learning. They are structures that help young people understand why academic learning matters and where it might take them.

Implication for practice: Protect time for mentoring, pathway exploration and authentic projects. Track not only credits and grades, but also whether each learner has an adult advocate, a developing plan and experience of learning beyond the classroom.

Community is part of the curriculum

Schools cannot employ every kind of expert or reproduce every meaningful learning environment within their grounds. Partnerships expand what is possible.

The case studies included relationships with iwi, artists, employers, polytechnics, universities, industry associations, early childhood centres and community organisations. These partners did more than host occasional visits. They helped design curriculum, provided expertise, created authentic audiences and connected learning with contribution.

Real Life Example: Ao Tawhiti and the Climate Action Campus

Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery is a special-character area school in central Christchurch, one of two South Island schools in this study and, unusually, a Years 1 to 13 school. Its approach places the learner at the centre of decisions about learning and seeks to retain young people's enthusiasm and curiosity.

The Climate Action Campus emerged partly in response to increasing climate anxiety among young people. Rather than treating this only as a wellbeing problem, educators created a place in which learners could build knowledge, agency and hope through action.

Located on the former Avonside Girls' High School site – deliberately on Christchurch's east side, a lower-income part of the city with limited transport options – the campus includes gardens, greenhouses, chickens and spaces for outdoor and experiential learning. Ao Tawhiti manages the site, but it is accessed by approximately 64 education organisations, from early childhood services to secondary schools and tertiary providers.

Programmes are designed responsively. A school might request learning about chickens, horticulture, food production, sustainability or Matariki. Some groups visit for a day, while others attend regularly. Senior students can undertake horticulture standards and contextualise literacy, numeracy and other assessment through practical environmental work.

The campus therefore operates as a shared educational resource rather than a conventional school course. Learning is shaped by place, ecological need, student interest and community participation. Principal Anita Yarwood describes the effect as a “ripple effect” that reaches well beyond the school gate: kids

who are “learning how to grow their own food... are going home and showing their parents,” and students from partner schools' learning-support units bring their families in on weekends to work on the gardens they have started at school.

The same relevance-driven engagement seen at Porirua and Manurewa is visible here too, notably in the school's philosophy course, its most popular NCEA offering with 40 to 50 students enrolled each year. Yarwood describes watching learners who arrive with low confidence – “a lot of second-chance learners” – gradually “blossom” once their voice and thinking are taken seriously. As she put it, “giving kids that experiential learning that's linked to their own reality gives them a sense of hope.”

The same pattern is visible across the other cases. Queen Charlotte's marine programme depends on industry and tertiary partnerships. Porirua brought local cultural expertise into the curriculum and created a pathway into teaching. Rototuna works with employers and community partners through Puna Wānanga. Manurewa's trades academy supports students from several schools and alternative providers.

These arrangements require coordination, trust and time. They also require a qualification flexible enough to recognise learning that crosses settings and, at times, subject boundaries.

Implication for practice: Treat community partnership as curriculum design rather than enrichment. Begin with a shared problem or purpose, clarify what each partner contributes and design learning and assessment around authentic participation.

Reform risks narrowing what works

All six schools expressed concern about the potential effects of a more prescriptive curriculum and qualification structure.

Their concern was not simply resistance to change. Each school had already undertaken substantial change, often over many years. Their programmes had been trialled, evaluated and refined. Leaders were worried because features likely to be constrained by the reforms were the same features they believed had improved engagement, equity, retention and achievement.

Real Life Example: Edgewater College

Edgewater College is a relatively small, high Equity Index school in Pakuranga, East Auckland, with a roll of around 650 students drawn from a highly multicultural community – almost half of students have Pacific heritage, alongside significant Māori and Asian communities. Its roll includes learners from a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds.

The school's guiding philosophy is that once a learner enters the school, the school must find a pathway that works for them. Its response has included removing fixed-ability grouping and creating interest-based "learning adventures". Students choose contexts such as creative design, community action, problem solving, kaupapa Māori or sports leadership. These groups develop identity and belonging without being ranked by perceived ability.

Approximately 20 percent of students participate in an integrated innovation pathway. At Year 11, courses such as Future Studies combine learning and assessment from areas including English and science. At Years 12 and 13, students can design increasingly self-directed programmes connected with future goals. This enables a small school to support interests, such as psychology, composition or extended statistical work, that it could not necessarily offer as separate timetable subjects.

Other popular courses include criminology and creative enterprise combining Māori

and Pacific design, art-making, business and marketing, courses that also carry the community and cultural partnership seen at Porirua and Manurewa into Edgewater's own context. The impact reported by the school includes greater engagement, improved retention, experiences of success and stronger pathways for learners who had not flourished in conventional programmes.

The school's concern is that nationally specified subjects and uniform subject-assessment structures may make this integration impossible or leave valued learning outside the qualification.

Edgewater makes the equity risk particularly visible. Students with the greatest access to family resources, private tutoring and conventional academic capital may adapt to a more examination-focused system. Those who have re-engaged through integrated, practical, cultural or interest-based learning may have fewer alternatives.

The risk is not only the loss of unusual course titles. It is the loss of the design freedom that allowed schools to construct meaningful routes into success.

Implication for practice: Before changing a programme in response to reform, identify which features are producing engagement and success. Protect the underlying purpose wherever possible and document evidence of impact so that decisions are not driven by compliance alone.

What independent evaluation shows

None of this rests only on leaders' own accounts. Independent evaluation by the Education Review Office (ERO) offers a useful, external check on several of these cases, though it is worth being upfront that the picture is not uniformly glowing – as ERO evaluation should not be.

At Porirua College, ERO's most recent review found that the “junior school has implemented comprehensive systems for monitoring and reporting progress, enabling timely support for students in literacy and numeracy”, that leaders have “established a settled school environment” with programmes “responsive to individual student needs”, and that “an inclusive school climate contributes to establishing school conditions necessary for student success”, with leaders and teachers who “affirm and acknowledge students' cultures and identities”.

At Manurewa High School, ERO has recorded “consistently high levels of achievement in NCEA numeracy and literacy for all groups of students”, sustained over time. The school's own 2024 NCEA results place Level 2 and Level 3 pass rates above the national average, with particularly strong gains for Pacific students – evidence that lines up with the subject-credit tracking Michelle Hards and Pete Jones describe above.

At Rototuna Senior High School, ERO found that “students have a high level of learner agency” and that its impact projects “provide students the opportunity to lead their own learning” – an outside confirmation of exactly the Puna Wānanga model Miranda Makin describes.

At Ao Tawhiti, ERO's 2025 evaluation reported “high levels of trust, collaboration and a focus on purposeful learning among leadership and staff” and evidence that “relational approaches to leadership” have been strengthened, “resulting in a positive school learning culture”, alongside a continued focus on lifting attendance and supporting Māori students to achieve equitably.

At Edgewater College, ERO's most recent visit found that students “report feeling a powerful sense of belonging at the school”, supported by “a rich curriculum” and teachers who “create positive, purposeful learning environments”, with leaders “foster[ing] a culture committed to quality teaching and improving equity and excellence in student outcomes”.

Queen Charlotte College's public ERO reporting tells a more complicated story, and it would misrepresent the record to smooth this over. ERO has identified that many Year 7 learners enter the school below expected curriculum levels in literacy and numeracy, and that Year 11 achievement at NCEA Level 1 has declined over the past five years – a decline that lines up with what Brendan Carroll himself describes above, when co-requisite literacy standards tightened and pass rates fell by around 20 percent almost overnight. It is a useful reminder that flexibility is not a guarantee of equitable outcomes on its own; it is the vehicle through which a school's other work – on literacy support, on relationships with industry, on culturally responsive teaching – gets delivered. Where that other work is strong, as the other five cases suggest, flexibility appears to amplify it. Where a school is still building it, as at Queen Charlotte, flexibility alone will not close the gap, and the tightening of literacy requirements under reform is likely to bite hardest precisely where that work is least complete.

The answer is not unlimited flexibility

These findings should not be read as an argument that every current feature of NCEA should remain unchanged.

Flexibility without sufficient guidance can produce inconsistency. It can leave curriculum quality dependent on local capacity and make it difficult for students, whānau and employers to interpret achievement. Schools with strong leadership, established partnerships and experienced curriculum designers may make better use of autonomy than schools without those resources.

Greater national clarity may therefore be valuable. Schools need coherent curriculum progressions, high-quality assessment tasks, dependable moderation, accessible exemplars and confidence that achievement has comparable meaning across contexts.

However, prescription creates its own risks. Hughson and Poulton's (2026) comparison of high-autonomy and more prescriptive curriculum environments concludes that both have benefits and limitations. Autonomy can produce gaps in knowledge and challenge, while prescription can create overload, coverage-driven teaching and reduced responsiveness to students. They argue for a balance point rather than a swing to either extreme.

The six cases in this study suggest what that balance might involve.

Nationally, the system should be clear about important learning, progression and expectations. Locally, schools should retain authority to determine contexts, programme structures, partnerships and valid ways for learners to demonstrate that learning. The task is to strengthen the relationship between national entitlement and local curriculum making, not to replace one with the other.

Curriculum is not simply written by government and delivered by teachers. It is made across multiple sites through the interaction of policy, school leadership, teachers, students, whānau and communities (Priestley et al., 2021). When the national level becomes too dominant, knowledge held within communities and professional practice can be pushed to the margins.

This is particularly important for Māori learners. Several cases showed curriculum becoming more meaningful when mātauranga Māori, iwi relationships, kaupapa Māori pathways and Māori community expertise were treated as substantive parts of curriculum design. A system committed to Te Tiriti o Waitangi must provide space for these relationships to shape what learning looks like in particular places. Inclusion cannot be achieved by adding culturally familiar examples to an otherwise centrally determined programme. It requires shared authority and genuine partnership.

Implications for qualification reform

The case-study evidence supports five principles for future curriculum and qualification design.

First, coherence should be strengthened without enforcing uniformity. Students need coherent programmes, but coherence can be achieved across integrated and locally designed learning, not only within conventional subject packages.

Second, assessment should preserve multiple ways of demonstrating achievement. Examinations may provide useful evidence, but they should not become a universal barrier in every subject. Coursework, practical performance, oral evidence, portfolios and extended projects can all support valid judgements when accompanied by strong moderation.

Third, the system should recognise learning across contexts. Industry, iwi, tertiary and community-based learning should be able to contribute to a coherent qualification without being treated as secondary to classroom subjects.

Fourth, schools need implementation time and professional support. The NZCER national survey found widespread concern about the pace and volume of educational change, with equity prominent in principals' concerns about replacing NCEA (MacDonald et al., 2026). Reform on this scale requires genuine co-design, staged evaluation and opportunities to alter direction when unintended consequences become visible.

Finally, evaluation should focus on the students most likely to be affected. Before implementation, each element of the new system should be tested against its likely impact on Māori and Pacific learners, disabled and neurodivergent learners, students in rural schools, students combining school and employment and those currently succeeding through integrated or vocational pathways.

An apparently simpler qualification is not necessarily a more equitable one.

Conclusion

Across these six schools, flexibility is doing serious educational work.

It allows curriculum and assessment opportunities to begin with place, culture and aspiration. It gives teachers ways to make demanding learning relevant. It supports high expectations without assuming that every learner must reach them through the same route. It creates space for projects, mentoring, community partnership and pathway exploration. It enables schools to respond to students rather than waiting for students to conform to a predetermined structure.

That does not make every use of flexibility effective. Nor does it remove the need for stronger coherence, moderation and public confidence. It does however suggest that flexibility should not be dismissed as a design flaw.

For many schools, it is how equity is being pursued in practice. Any replacement qualification should therefore be judged not only by how tidy it appears from the centre, but by whether it enables schools to make meaningful, rigorous and culturally located learning possible for the young people in front of them.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Brendan Carroll, Ragne Maxwell, Michelle Hards, Pete Jones, Miranda Makin, Anita Yarwood and Louise Addison for sharing their schools' experiences and reflections.

References

Education Review Office. (2018, June 28). Manurewa High School: Education review <https://www.ero.govt.nz/institution/99/manurewa-high-school>

Education Review Office. (2024, December 3). Queen Charlotte College: School evaluation report. <https://www.ero.govt.nz/institution/287/queen-charlotte-college>

Education Review Office. (2025a, September 23). Ao Tawhiti Unlimited Discovery: School evaluation report. <https://www.ero.govt.nz/institution/683/ao-tawhiti-unlimited-discovery>

Education Review Office. (2025b, December 10). Porirua College: School evaluation report. <https://www.ero.govt.nz/institution/255/porirua-college>

Education Review Office. (2026, March 18). Edgewater College: School evaluation report. <https://www.ero.govt.nz/institution/79/edgewater-college>

Hughson, T., & Poulton, P. (2026). The possibilities and pitfalls of curricular autonomy and curricular prescription: Seeking a balance point. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 53, Article 65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-026-00985-y>

MacDonald, J., Bolstad, R., Dong, J., Boyd, S., Rowe-Williams, J., Coblenz, D., Hunt, D., Alansari, M., Gibbs, B., & Priestley, H. (2026). *Secondary principals' perspectives from the 2025 national survey: Uiuinga ā-Motu o ngā Kura*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0098>

Ministry of Education. (2026, May 16). *Further details confirmed for new senior secondary qualifications replacing NCEA*. Tāhūrangi.

Priestley, M., Philippou, S., Alvunger, D., & Soini, T. (2021). Curriculum making: A conceptual framing. In M. Priestley, D. Alvunger, S. Philippou, & T. Soini (Eds.), *Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts* (pp. 1–28). Emerald Publishing.

2.2 Navigating Secondary Education – Multiple pathways to multiple futures

by Karen Dobric

Introduction

Senior secondary education, Years 11-13, has experienced a significant amount of change across generations of learners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Multiple pathways have typically included university study, Vocational education and training (VET), and employment. This range has over time become even more comprehensive, yet the tension historically has been between senior secondary serving a ‘filtering out’ purpose privileging the academic/higher pathway, or that of providing for the needs of all learners following all multiple pathways, through to the end of secondary school.

This chapter seeks to track some of the key patterns and points of tension historically, to show where the qualification reforms fit in this pattern; allowing for a greater awareness of the purposeful and conscious choices still to be made.

Titiro whakamuri, kōkiri whakamua.

Look back and reflect, so we can move forward.



Executive Summary

This chapter examines the historic journey of qualification system reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand including the current qualification reforms. It considers the tensions in what defines meaningful learning, questions if diverse learner pathways are provided for, and asks how the obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi have been addressed.

This chapter draws on policy documents, literature, achievement data and research in relation to the historic and current tensions and patterns. Sector voice has been gained through presentations at the NZ Vocational Education and Training Research Forum 2025; regular weekly meetings with the Pathways and Transitions Network Aotearoa (including careers experts), and frequent meetings with the Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association Executive, both groups assisting in highlighting opportunities and discussing issues as they have been announced across 2026; and occasional meetings with some of the Industry Skills Boards Chief Executives, various school leaders, Private Training Establishments (PTEs) and other VET providers.

Key Findings:

1. The proposed Industry-led subjects may offer an opportunity for ākongā to pathway into diploma-level vocational-technical study post-school.
2. The uncertainty of access to Industry-led subjects and the possible removal of current unit-standards based opportunities for achievement, are likely to restrict the progression of many ākongā into Year 12 and Year 13.
3. The raising of the literacy and numeracy requirement, to be benchmarked at Year 11, is likely to restrict the progression of many ākongā into Year 12 and Year 13.
4. The current flexibility in curriculum and assessment that supports ākongā to progress through multiple pathways will likely be compromised and create serious challenges for many kura and ākongā.
5. To gain the best possible opportunity to navigate the qualification reforms, ākongā at Year 11 will likely require substantial careers support.

Implications for reform:

The qualification reforms promise new opportunities with the Industry-led subjects. As at August 2026 only a general statement has been released to explain each of the nine that have been announced. Details of curriculum and assessment, of delivery methods, delivery locations and who will teach them are uncertain. Given that students in Year 11 in mid-2028 will need to be making informed choices for Year 12 in 2029, it is imperative that these details are finalised well before the end of 2027 so that principals can plan.

Probable removal of the range of unit standards assessment opportunities and the benchmarking of literacy and numeracy at Year 11, are likely to restrict ākongā progressing into Year 12 and Year 13. School leaders may need to rethink not only staffing and resourcing across learning areas, but the impact on their school community of a possible reduction in student numbers and how this will affect funding and strategic planning.

Kura currently operating with high levels of flexibility, such as unit standards based courses, Trades Academies, Gateway, Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resources (STAR) funding, dual enrolments with tertiary, community work experience, and different models of timetabling, may need to redesign their senior school with the consequent negative impact on staffing and resourcing. A redesign could lead to a change in community perception and school reputation.

A likely restriction of ākongā progressing into Year 12 and Year 13 could increase the percentage of students leaving school without a school qualification—currently 15-19%.

School leaders will need to seek guidance about how to best inform Year 11 ākongā about the Year 12 Industry-led and other subjects, due to the impact a poor decision could have on a young person's school achievement and possible pathway. Students may need to decide at age 15 years what their possible future pathway is so that their decision-making regarding subject choice is sound and fit for purpose.

Overall conclusion:

The definition of meaningful learning will change and its impact will be substantial. It appears as of August 2026 that the emphasis will be on degree and possibly diploma level pathways post-school, and that what

used to be included as meaningful learning leading to certificate, foundation, supported learning/employment and social/cultural/civic participation pathways post-school will no longer be present in the senior secondary curriculum.

The learner pathways that are currently provided for will be severely restricted with the qualification reforms.

The pattern of Māori achievement is reprehensibly consistent historically through to the 2025 school leaver data. If what used to be seen as meaningful learning is no longer present in senior secondary, and if learner pathways are severely restricted, then what will not change is the subjugation of Māori achievement, where systemic, historical, and institutional processes have limited Māori success, knowledge, and socioeconomic advancements across the generations in Aotearoa New Zealand. The obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi will have been reduced and compromised.

Recommendations:

1. Co-design with Māori to meet Te Tiriti obligations
2. Create a clear, connected and understandable pathway system
3. Support the successful design and implementation of Industry-led subjects
4. Create skills-rich micro-credentials for ISB-supported Vocational Pathways for Year 11, Year 12 and Year 13.
5. Provide a clear school pathway for students with diverse learning needs who are not able to access learning at Year 11.
6. Reduce the planned level of literacy and numeracy for the Foundational Award to avoid the possibility of a progression gap
7. Provide funding for support mechanisms and a range of pathways equitably for all ākonga in Year 11, 12 and 13

Limitations:

The limitations to this chapter are that there is a great deal of information yet to be decided, so key findings need to be understood in this light. So far the Industry-led subjects only have a title and a brief description. There is no further information as at August 2026.

There are tensions within this information vacuum. There is no announcement about the relationship between Industry-led subjects and Trades Academies, or how Trades Academies will connect to the new qualifications. Hon Minister Stanford has both expressed a disapproval of unit standards being present in the secondary system, and at the NZVET Research Forum last November, described Trades Academies which have utilised unit standards for well over a decade, as her ‘North Star’ (Gerritsen, 2025).

A joint announcement in the 2026 budget that there will be a doubling of Trades Academy places was lacking in detail.

Finance Minister, Hon. Nicola Willis said “Budget 2026 invests an additional \$69 million to double the number of trades academy places from 10,000 to 20,000.”

“This investment means thousands more students will be able to access hands-on learning, gain industry experience, and develop the skills and knowledge they need for apprenticeships, further training, and employment while they are still at school,” Erica Stanford says.

“Alongside the expansion of trades academy places, the Government is investing a further \$15 million for Industry Skills Boards (ISBs) to develop new vocational subjects as part of New Zealand’s new senior secondary qualifications” (Willis & Stanford, 2026).

By saying that “alongside the expansion of trades academy places” there is further funding “to develop new vocational subjects” it suggests that the two are separate projects not connected. It is this level of uncertainty that is creating anxiety in the sector.

There is currently no information on whether there will be alternative qualifications, despite the announcement of two national qualifications, one for Year 12 and one for Year 13. Cambridge and IB may or may not be continued with the qualification reforms, so any effect this might or might not have on the sector is currently unknown. Indeed, Tim O’Connor, Headmaster of Auckland Grammar School, agreed that his “school was positive about the government’s changes because the new qualification would place a stronger emphasis on independent assessment and external examinations [and that his] school would support the new national qualification if it proved rigorous enough in practice. ‘We’d be fully supportive of the National Qualification Framework if it became rigorous enough in future years’ (Smith, 2026).

The discussions in gaining sector voice for this chapter need to be understood as occurring in a situation where reform details are still unresolved.

The implications, conclusions and recommendation are based on interpreting the most accurate information currently available from government.

A brief history of Aotearoa New Zealand secondary education

When has the school leaving age increased in Aotearoa New Zealand history?

What patterns of vocational and academic pathways and qualifications in secondary education have there been in the past?

School Leavers 13 and Early school development

The Education Act 1877 set up a free, secular and compulsory state education system for students aged seven to 13 years of age. Secondary schools were not covered, making 13 years the default age for entering academic post-primary study. The Act provided scholarships for academically talented students to attend secondary school for free and established district high schools (primary schools with some secondary teachers attached).

In 1881 residential Industrial Schools were officially recognised to train poor, neglected and delinquent children, giving them a basic education and training in vocational skills. Despite the theory of separation, these students were educated together. They included those who were orphaned, destitute, directed by the courts, or whose parents were deemed unfit. The intent for boys was to learn a trade and earn a living upon leaving.

School Leavers 14 and Manual and Technical Instruction 1900

The 1900 Manual and Technical Instruction Act and 1902 Amendment funded technical and vocational subjects in some secondary schools. This was an important milestone, as it signalled the importance of manual, technical and vocational learning for students at a post-primary level. This was endorsed by raising the school leaving age to 14 in 1901.

The Secondary Schools Act 1903 made secondary education free for students passing the primary school Certificate of Proficiency. However, secondary schools still offered a traditional curriculum serving those bound for university matriculation.

The first Technical High School opened in 1905, offering practical subjects for students seeking particular work opportunities and for whom academic study was not desirable. As newer schools were opened a range of academic and practical subjects were offered. For district high schools, further growth meant the eventual planning of a full secondary school.

In 1912, Inspector-General of Schools, George Hogben, argued to the Cohen Commission that an academic curriculum was inappropriate when only

5% of students pursued university, and that the future vocational requirements of the vast majority of students were not closely related to the academic curriculum (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.103). He intended technical high schools to take on 'practically-minded' students and hoped they would influence urban schools, but many rural parents, still demanded an academic curriculum (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.103).

In 1914 the school leaving age remained 14, but early exemption clauses were tightened; students now needed to be 13 and have passed the Certificate of Proficiency Standard 6, to be exempt.

Curriculum debates continue 1915–35

From 1915 to 1935, debates over curriculum breadth led to some flexibility, making agriculture and dairying compulsory for third and fourth formers in district high schools.

The 1929 Syllabus of Instruction for Public Schools (New Zealand Department of Education, 1929) adopted a liberal, child-centered approach including greater freedom for teachers. It was the first curriculum to fully apply to Māori schools. It renamed Standards 5 and 6 to Forms 1 and 2 to ease the secondary transition. Crucially, it introduced gendered subjects at ages 11–12: woodwork, metalwork, and agriculture for boys; domestic science, needlework, and home craft for girls. Teachers used this and the Proficiency Exam to steer students into academic or technical/agricultural pathways, which often funnelled working-class children into manual or domestic training.

The abolition of the Proficiency Examination in 1936 ended this selective approach and entitled all children to free secondary education. This triggered an influx of students. District high schools, technical high schools and secondary schools were merged into a single system of post-primary education and for many students the subjects available were inappropriate, prompting plans for a School Certificate Examination to cater to all pupils rather than just those sitting University Entrance.

An early School Certificate in 1934, early leavers, and a University Entrance Examination in 1944

In 1913, William Thomas, Rector of Timaru Boys' High School, expanded his curriculum to include agricultural and commercial courses to accommodate boys not entering higher education. Believing schools needed varied courses to suit real aptitudes and vocational destinations, he advocated for a lower-status "school leaving certificate." In 1934, the Form 5 School Certificate was introduced (Lee & Lee, 2016).

NZCER researchers cited in a 1972 UNESCO Report expressed concern about mid-1930s early leavers:

"Most of the children who do not continue their formal education are from homes with resources limited by the occupational status of the parent. Many are below average in ability and cannot profit from schooling of the conventional kind... It is not surprising that their distaste for school is frequently one of the conditions that lead a boy or girl to go to work at the close of the primary school course" (McQueen et al., 1941, p.80-81) in (New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, 1972, p.90).

Once again, it is surprising that so little has changed. Students continue to leave school when there are barriers to their progress.

Writing in a book published by the Department of Internal Affairs, Campbell (1941) compared British elitist and American state university models. He concluded: "A democracy cannot rest satisfied so long as some children leave school for good at thirteen or fourteen and so long as the professions requiring prolonged full-time training at the university are largely recruited from a restricted social group that has no monopoly of talent" (Campbell, 1941, p. 181).

In 1942, Thomas chaired a consultative committee on the post-primary curriculum. The University of New Zealand had already decided to move the Form 5 Matriculation exam to Form 6 in 1944, renaming it the University Entrance Examination. This committee presented the 'Thomas Report' in 1943, resulting in the Education (Post-primary Instruction) Regulations 1945 (New Zealand Department of Education, 1959, p. 79).

School Leavers 15 and the Thomas Report 1944

The next secondary school roll increase came when the school leaving age was raised to 15 in 1944, following the Thomas Report recommendations (New Zealand Department of Education, 1944). This established a common core curriculum and led to the 1946 introduction of the School Certificate examination.

Subjects for examination (1945, amended 1949) for School Certificate in 1949 were:

- English, History, Geography, Mathematics
- Drawing and design, Music, Embroidery, Clothing, Homecraft
- Book-keeping, Commercial practice, Shorthand and typewriting
- Biology, Human biology, Chemistry, Electricity and magnetism, General science, Heat light and sound
- Animal husbandry, Dairying, General agriculture, Horticulture
- Applied mechanics, Engineering shopwork, Heat engines, Technical drawing, Technical electricity, Woodwork
- Latin, Greek, French, German, Maori, Other

(Education [Post-primary Instruction] Regulations, 1945/1949; p.8).

These subjects resulted from being “fully discussed over the past two years by teachers and other interested in education” with draft syllabuses “widely circulated and commented on” (Education [Post-primary Instruction] Regulations, 1945/1949; p.3). For music, embroidery, clothing, homecraft, engineering shopwork, technical drawing, and woodwork, the “examination” had two parts: “a written examination and a practical examination”. Science or modern languages required a Principal’s statement verifying that “practical training” or “dictation and reading aloud” was adequate (Education [Post-primary Instruction] Regulations, 1945/1949; p.4).

By 1949, the revised School Certificate required more than examinations; students had to complete a three-year course where they were “given instruction” under the following minimum hours:

- English and social studies: 4-5 hrs per week
- General science and elementary mathematics: 2-3 ½ hrs per week
- Music and craft or fine art: 2-2 ½ hrs per week (an individual exemption could be sought after one year)
- Physical education: 2 hrs per week (½ hour could be games”, hence Wednesday afternoon early finish for school sports)

(Education [Post-primary Instruction] Regulations, 1945/1949; p.6).

In 1949, a School Certificate required a 30% pass in English and three other subjects, plus an aggregate score of “not less than 50% of the total possible marks” across those four subjects. For students with a music/craft exemption, the requirement applied to four subjects other than English instead of three (Education [Post-primary Instruction] Regulations, 1945/1949; p.8).

As a successful post-war qualification, School Certificate increased secondary student achievement but reduced its own scarcity value. Participation grew by 405.9% from 1946 to 1967, while fifth and sixth-form student numbers increased by 256% and 411.3% respectively (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.222).

Vocational change in the 1940s – 1960s

The 1946 establishment of the Technical Correspondence School in Wellington enabled students nationwide to undertake vocational study toward apprenticeships. Consequently, The Apprentices Act 1948 required apprentices to attend trade classes away

from the workplace for the first time (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2004, cited in McGuinness, 2016).

In 1949, the New Zealand Trades Certification Board was established to prescribe courses, set standards, and conduct exams, putting New Zealand ahead of the United Kingdom. The introduction of the New Zealand Certificate of Engineering in 1955 spurred the development of vocational training institutions over the next decade, with certificates later added for building, architecture, and land surveying (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2004, cited in McGuinness, 2016).

A new pattern emerged in the 1960s as technical secondary schools phased out and technical institutes opened in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, and Hamilton. They offered varied training from apprenticeships to four-year diplomas. Harrison (1970) contends this growth was fast and market-responsive rather than centrally planned, operating as “the practical training arm of production in a capitalist economy” (p.135).

He regretted the lack of planning mechanisms, noting: “New Zealand finds out it needs more carpenters or electricians or doctors when it realises there is a shortage... Everybody just looks at it and makes plaintive sounds, hoping it will go away” (p.137). Harrison exhorted modernizing the apprenticeship scheme, accelerating technician training, incentivizing skills, and promoting “short-term courses in specialised fields” (p.137). It is astounding how little has changed 56 years later.

He suggests that secondary teachers “still regard technical education as a slightly grander version of the old technical school trade classes. They still have a strong tendency to condition students – particularly the brightest – to accept the idea that the only type of appropriate further education is to be found at a university” (Harrison, 1970, p.140). Consequently, student knowledge of alternatives is constrained by their teachers’ knowledge. He recommends informing students so they can “choose vocations on a rational basis... (to) help them to choose subjects within the existing curriculum with a view to later study at an institute or university” (Harrison, 1970, p.140). These challenges persist decades later.

Single subject School Certificate passes, Sixth Form Certificate 1969, and trialling new ideas

After 1967, School Certificate shifted to single subjects instead of an aggregate. Minister of Education A.E. Kin-

sella argued this allowed “less academically inclined” students to leave school with evidence of achieving the standard, even in only one subject (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.223). Students who undertook a broad education through Form 5 could sit the exam in one or more subjects, with the 50% pass rate now applied individually rather than requiring a 200-mark aggregate.

Alongside this was a ‘hierarchical scaling’ policy where subject mean marks differed. This reflected a belief that ‘hard’ academic subjects needed higher pass rates for ‘good calibre’ students, whereas ‘soft’ subjects should have lower pass rates for ‘poor calibre’ students (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.225). For example, in 1974 the pass rate for Typewriting was 44.9% and Latin was 64.4%. Later, rates ranged from below 45% to above 70%, with languages and physical sciences at the top, and home economics, woodwork, engineering, typewriting, biology, agriculture, and clothing at the bottom (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.226).

Due to a 411.3% increase in students staying into the sixth form between 1946 and 1967, a Sixth Form Certificate was created in 1969 as an alternative to University Entrance (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.221). Under this certificate, locally developed subjects held the same status as national ones. By the late 1970s, the Department of Education (1977) reported positively on “strongly pupil-centred courses” and “integrated studies programmes which are tending to break down the traditional separation of subjects” (p. 8).

An interesting development by 1977 was the 1976 trial of fully internally assessed science subjects. “Three new School Certificate science subjects using a modular approach have been on trial in 40 schools... assessed internally with moderation exercised by the School Certificate Exam Examination Board. The approach and the freedom from external examination has provided flexibility and choice for schools and students and has enabled courses to be designed to meet individual needs. The trial and evaluation of the subjects and approach will continue in 1977.” (Department of Education, 1977, p. 11). This showed a commitment to providing flexibility and recognizing that students had individual needs in a credentialing system. Under the heading Alternatives in Education, the Report recognised the importance of avoiding a ‘one size fits all’ model, saying:

“In response to local interest in alternative schooling... Auckland Metropolitan College was opened in Febru-

ary 1977 with a roll of 80 pupils. These schools are organised to meet the needs of individual pupils, and to develop a high degree of self-motivation, self-evaluation, and self-discipline... Students are helped to enjoy the many and varied learning situations which exist in the community as well as the opportunities within the school itself. It is clear that the self-reliance required by these approaches is stimulating for the students...” (Department of Education, 1977, p. 17).

Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in Forms V to VII

By 1985, Minister of Education Russell Marshall favoured abolishing the School Certificate. Two reports from the Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in Forms V to VII critiqued the qualification, highlighting unequal pass rates between Māori and Non-Māori, as well as disparities based on social class and school type. The Committee recommended replacing it with a fully internally assessed, criterion-referenced Fifth Form Certificate. This sparked intense debate. Traditional and private schools, including Mt Albert Grammar, Auckland Grammar, and Christ’s College, feared that removing external examinations would eliminate excellence and lower educational standards (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.227).

This tension built on earlier post-primary reforms. As early as 1967, the PPTA requested a dual sixth-form pathway, leading to an Endorsed School Certificate. This became the forerunner to the internally assessed Sixth Form Certificate, introduced in 1969 as an alternative to the University Entrance Examination. Debate over these two qualifications intensified through the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in the inquiry reports.

The Labour government abolished the University Entrance (UE) Examination starting in 1986. Conservatives heavily criticized this move; former Minister of Education Merv Wellington expressed dismay that UE was replaced by the “inferior” Sixth Form Certificate (Wellington, 1985, p. 56, cited in Openshaw et al., 1993, p. 238). Similarly, John Graham, Rector of Auckland Grammar School, argued that UE offered “real subjects” and that the “paranoic desire to fudge or remove any sense of failure” lowered educational standards to the “level of the mediocre” (Graham, 1990, pp. 101-121, cited in Openshaw et al., 1993, p. 238).

However, post-war exam-taking patterns had already shifted significantly. By 1980, 15.8% of school leavers

held a UE qualification. Between 1980 and 1988, the University Bursary pass rate more than doubled to 16.6%, meaning Bursary effectively replaced the role previously held by School Certificate and University Entrance.

During this period, the PPTA's campaign to abolish the University Entrance (UE) Examination gained critical teacher support, leading to a boycott of UE administration in November 1984. The election of the Labour government in July 1984 accelerated this dismantling process. Since 1981, the New Zealand Employers' Federation had also supported the shift, arguing that the Form VI curriculum favoured an academic minority and that the Sixth Form Certificate was far more practical for recruiting employees (Openshaw et al., 1993, p. 236).

Implementation challenges centred on ensuring comparability across different schools and subjects. To address this, a major public relations campaign was launched to explain the Sixth Form Certificate to employers and the public. Experienced principals David Hood and John Murdoch were seconded to lead this effort, reporting strong community support for the qualification's ability to recognize varied achievement levels.

However, a major structural complication arose: the Sixth Form Certificate was moderated against the School Certificate Examination, which Minister of Education Russell Marshall planned to abolish by 1990. Hood and Murdoch recommended creating independent moderation procedures. This task was referred to the newly established Secondary Board of Studies—created from the second CICAQ report to oversee senior

secondary assessments—before its functions and powers were ultimately transferred to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) in 1990 (Openshaw et al., 1993, p. 237).

Openshaw et al. conclude this history by observing that New Zealanders historically reject dual examination arrangements—such as Competency and Proficiency, School Certificate and Matriculation, or University Entrance and Sixth Form Certificate—where students choose pathways based on vocational or educational destinations. In every instance, the options pitted a high-status, academic, university-administered exam against a vocationally-oriented Department of Education qualification. Without exception, the academic pathway consistently enjoyed the greatest popularity (Openshaw et al., 1993, p. 239).

The pattern of Māori achievement in secondary education

What has been the experience for Māori students in secondary pathways?

Early patterns, The Hunn Report and the Currie Report re Māori achievement

In 1901, George Hogben, Inspector-General of Education, visited the Māori denominational boarding schools. He recommended “these schools strengthen their teaching in English and introduce manual and technical instruction such as carpentry, metalwork, cooking, sewing, hygiene and military drill (Jenkins & Matthews, 1998, p.94) cited in (McGuinness Institute, 2016, p.19).

Hogben also wanted them to stop their studies of Latin and Euclid; his thinking was that manual training was

“[...] more important than bookish forms of instruction which might tend to unfit Māori boys and girls for the simple life of the pa and give them no training that would enable them to perform willingly and intelligently the work that had to be done in connection with their homes.” (Matthews, 2008, p.41) cited in (McGuinness Institute, 2016, p.19).

The 1929 curriculum was the first to “fully apply to Māori schools and included emphasis on skills that were thought to be of use to Māori such as woodwork and housecraft” (Ewing, 1970, p.183) cited in (McGuinness Institute, 2016, p.23). This was followed in 1931 by an official shift towards an education policy of adaptation in Māori schooling. It was thought positive to encourage students attending Māori schools to “further their knowledge of their culture”, though this proved problematic as most of the teachers were non-Māori. The Minister of Education Peter Fraser took steps to improve this situation by encouraging Māori pupils to become qualified teachers. (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.63).

In 1955 the Department of Education convened a National Committee on Māori Education. The resolutions from this group, the majority of them Māori

leaders, included a recommendation to “increase... the number of secondary scholarships to enable Maori from rural district high schools access to a wider range of subjects” (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.71).

The Report of the Department of Māori Affairs (Hunn Report) in 1960 was strong in its message about education. Its conclusion was that Māori were a ‘depressed ethnic minority’ and education had a ‘major role to play in the economic and social advancement of Māori’ (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.72). A key aspect of the Hunn Report was a recommendation to shift to a policy of integration rather than assimilation. The second Labour government accepted and initiated the establishment of a Māori Education Foundation to “provide financial assistance to Māori students to attend secondary school and university” (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.72).

This was closely followed by the Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand (Currie Report) in 1962. There was acknowledgement of the gap between Māori and non-Māori in educational achievement and rates of retention in education. The Currie Report rejected the idea that there was a difference in intellectual potential between Māori and Europeans. Māori pupils were instead described as “the greatest reservoir of unused talent in the population” summing up that

“Too many [Māori children] live in large families in inadequately sized and even primitive houses, lacking privacy, quiet, and even light for study; too often there is a dearth of books, pictures, educative material generally, to stimulate the growing child”. (Openshaw et al., 1993, p.74).

By 1968 only a small proportion of Māori students left having gained School Certificate and an even smaller proportion left from Sixth Form. The number of students leaving with UE or higher was extremely small. A very large number of ākonga left from Form V without any qualifications.

Figure 1. Classification and Probable Destination of Māori Pupils leaving Public and Private Secondary Schools in 1968 (excerpts)

Year	1968
Form III Boys	236
Form III Girls	185
Form IV Boys	734
Form IV Girls	672
Form V (No S.C.) Boys	1086
Form V (No S.C.) Girls	1121
Form V (With S.C.) Boys	330
Form V (With S.C.) Girls	319
Form VI (No UE) Boys	112
Form VI (No UE) Girls	176
Form VI (With UE+) Boys	77
Form VI (With UE+) Girls	57

(Department of Education, 1969, p.26)

Ten years later, in 1978, the pattern of achievement had hardly altered.

In 1978, Māori students made up roughly half of all students who dropped out in their very first year of secondary school (45% of boys and 51% of girls). Similarly, 33% of Form IV boys and 36% of Form IV girls who left school without qualifications were Māori.

The systemic concentration of “no attainment” outcomes within Māori communities showed 27% of all New Zealand non-attainment leavers were Māori despite being only 14% of all students. This also indicates that the educational system was failing to retain Māori students at a greater rate than all students.

Figure 2. Years of Attendance and Attainments of all Pupils Leaving Secondary Schools 1978 (Excerpts) (Māori being approx. 14% of total students)

Year	Total (No Attainment)	Māori (No Attainment)	Māori % of Total
Form III Boys	385	172	45%
Form III Girls	304	154	51%
Form IV Boys	3,072	1,015	33%
Form IV Girls	2,323	846	36%
Total	20,913	5,679	27%

(Department of Education, 1979, p.46)

The silently assumed and accepted intersection around ‘failure’

What assumptions have existed about early leaving and leaving without qualifications, and manual, technical and vocational learning?

Students with diverse learning needs (excerpt from Diverse Learners chapter)

Students in secondary education represent a diverse population with varying abilities, identities, and forms. For the purposes of this report, the term “Diverse Learners” include students with disabilities, neurodivergent learners, students experiencing mental health challenges, learners with interrupted educational pathways, and other students facing physical, sensory, mental, social or environmental barriers that affect their participation and achievement.

Disabled learners include students with physical disabilities, sensory disabilities such as vision or hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, communication difficulties, learning disabilities, and ongoing health conditions. The impact of disability is influenced not only by an individual student’s impairment, but also by the extent to which environments, systems and practices enable or restrict participation.

Five themes that appear plausible in the brief educational history are:

The Vocational Dilemma (Since 1900): The ongoing debate surrounding the status of manual, technical, and vocational learning in secondary qualifications reflects a century-long tension over whether schools should democratize academic knowledge or sort students into the workforce.

The Persistence of Racialized Tracking (Since 1929): Although the 1929 reforms introduced a “curriculum for everyone,” the deep-seated institutional expectation that Māori students should pursue manual pathways ensured that tracking patterns persisted in practice.

The Evolution of Diverse Needs (Since 1874): The shifting policy responses to learners with diverse needs demonstrate how the state has continually struggled to separate genuine learning challenges from broader socio-economic barriers.

The Long History of Non-Attainment (Since 1941): Debates since 1941 regarding early school leavers highlight that non-attainment has never been an accidental flaw in the system; rather, it is a predictable outcome of a credentialing framework designed to select an academic minority.

The Fluidity of ‘Success’: Because “what success looks like” is a politically motivated policy decision interpreted by the government of the day, measurements of system performance are highly variable, making long-term equity and achievement difficult to compare or evaluate.

The intersection of the five themes has been silently assumed, and thus accepted, based in the following statements which appeared to have become normalised across generations of education setting bodies in the brief education history above.

Figure 3. Apparent Systemic Assumptions and Structural Tracking in Secondary Schooling History in NZ

Dimension	System Assumption & Structural Mechanism	Target Student Cohort
Socio-Economic Barriers	Progress through senior secondary and university is restricted by a lack of financial means; advancement relies strictly on competitive scholarships.	Poor students with talent and ability

Dimension	System Assumption & Structural Mechanism	Target Student Cohort
Educational Direction	Students are tracked directly into manual, technical, and vocational learning as their primary educational path.	Poor students Students with diverse learning needs
Systemic Overlaps	Significant overlap exists between socio-economic barriers, diverse learning needs, early leaving, and exit without qualifications.	Disadvantaged student cohorts
Institutional Expectations	The system accepts and expects early departure without qualifications, viewing it as a normal outcome.	Māori students Students with diverse learning needs
Workforce Pathwaying	Default exit pathways channel students into manual and entry-level jobs, unless vocational training raises them slightly above manual labour.	Poor students Māori students Students with diverse learning needs
Structural Continuity	These statements and expectations remained deeply embedded within the structures and systems of ongoing schooling.	Entire secondary school system

Due to the complexity, the costs, and the political risk of this silently assumed intersection, this inter-connected area has seldom been purposefully researched and never resolved at a policy and implementation level; and ‘what success looks like’ is a policy decision that is interpreted by the government of the day. The debates about ‘what success looks like’ and ‘what needs to be done’ have seesawed between successive governments.

O’Neill (2023) cites: “Beeby concluded his 1992 Biography of an Idea (i.e., the myth of equality of opportunity) by saying that ‘since I cannot comment on both left and right, I shall comment on neither, except to say that whichever policy wins, if it lasts long enough it is destined to become a myth’ (Beeby, 1992, p.304). He was referring to the periodic pendulum swings in education sentiment (from conservative to progressive and back again) across the professional education polity and civil society that he had witnessed since leaving the directorship of the former Department of Education in 1960.”

Thus, despite the efforts of some governments, diverse learners have experienced early leaving, leaving without qualifications, and being pathwayed into manual, technical and vocational learning. A large proportion of these diverse learners have been poor and Māori students, meeting socio-economic barriers and challenges.

Leavers at 16+ and seamless credits

Where and why have students been able to gain credits from for NCEA?

Patterns of multiple pathways in the past

In the past there were broad patterns that guided direction when leaving school. Students with the highest level qualifications would follow degree pathways into professions; the next most successful school leavers would gain diplomas and move into technical roles; those with the potential to further their skills would begin apprenticeships; and students with neither qualifications nor skills would take on labouring jobs.

In practice these patterns were moderated by location and opportunity. The raising of the school leaving age to 15 in 1944 had a significant impact on the numbers of students remaining in school. Added to this was the changing pattern of rural-urban populations, with a rural-urban movement of people, especially Māori. Before World War Two over 80% of Māori were rural, primarily living in their iwi areas. Between 1945 and 1956 the Māori population living in the towns and cities grew from 26% to 35%. This increased to 62% in 1966 and reached nearly 80% by 1986. (Meredith, 2015).

This population shift was part of wider changes, especially the increase in urban secondary schools and the eventual decline in the number of district high schools. In 1940 there were 39 secondary, 96 district high schools and 21 technical high schools. By 1960 there were 102 secondary, 96 district high and 41 technical schools, and by 1980 there were 265 secondary schools and 35 district high schools. (Swarbrick, 2012).

Figure 4. Numbers of Secondary, District High and Technical Schools 1940, 1960, 1980

Year	1940	1960	1980
Secondary schools	39	102	265
District high schools	96	96	35
Technical high schools	21	41	

(Swarbrick, 2012).

Geographic location and socio-economic status have historically dictated curriculum access and qualification pathways. Rural students were traditionally funneled into agricultural lines, including farming, herd testing, and stock agent roles. Conversely, urban students in higher socio-economic areas accessed a wider range of advanced senior subjects, boosting their entry into university degree pathways. While the Correspondence School mitigated some rural curriculum gaps, affluent rural families bypassed local constraints by sending children to boarding schools and university halls, frequently subsidized by government boarding scholarships.

Careers education has long reinforced these multi-pathway options, though it generally promotes destinations strictly within the existing system framework. In 1974, the Department of Education distributed a comprehensive physical careers booklet to every school leaver to foster informed choice. By 2026, this system evolved into Tahatū, a sophisticated online career resource. However, digital delivery may make it less accessible for casual, at-home browsing than the physical 1974 booklet.

A key theme in multiple pathways is that education serves as the vehicle for all students to achieve to the best of their ability. This ethos anchors back to the seminal 1939 statement by Peter Fraser and C.E. Beeby:

“The Government’s objective, broadly expressed, is that every person, whatever his ability, whether he be rich or poor, whether he live in town or country, has a right, as a citizen, to a free education of the kind for which he is best fitted, and to the fullest extent of his powers. So far is this from being a mere pious platitude that the full acceptance of the principle will involve the reorientation of the education system.” (Fraser, 1939, p. 2-3).

To implement this vision, the Thomas Report (1944) introduced core curriculum regulations. By December 1958, these were updated to include findings from the 1956 Wallis House Committee, which reviewed the post-primary curriculum and the School Certificate [Department of Education, 1959, p. 82].

The Committee highlighted a long-standing structural divide: prior to 1945, standard secondary schools maintained a strictly academic curriculum tied to university requirements, while technical schools focused on pre-vocational training. For over twenty years, groups like the Secondary Schools Association and the Technical School Teachers’ Association had advocated for a more general education to free secondary schools from the dominating influence of the University Entrance Examination [Department of Education, 1959, p. 82].

This institutional tension existed primarily between the University of New Zealand, which controlled the University Entrance (UE) Examination, and secondary teaching professionals. Seeking autonomy, the Secondary Schools’ Association passed a resolution in 1936 advocating for a common core curriculum alongside flexible pre-vocational options tailored to individual student needs.

By 1956, the Wallis House Committee noted that student abilities and interests had diversified significantly, classifying the student body into three distinct pathways: early leavers who exited as soon as they reached the compulsory school leaving age and required a practical general education; School Certificate candidates rounding off their secondary studies at the Fifth Form level; and university-bound students who required specific academic preparation for higher education (Department of Education, 1959, p. 83).

To accommodate these groups under The Equality of Subjects framework, the School Certificate offered a wide range of options designed to cater to differing aptitudes and vocational goals. Crucially, the Committee backed the practice of treating all optional subjects as equal for examination purposes [Department

of Education, 1959, p. 87]. They clarified that while subjects inherently required different types of intelligence or scholastic aptitude, true equity meant validating the right of all children to develop their unique capacities through courses that demanded an equivalent level of student effort [Department of Education, 1959, p. 88].

Crucially for contemporary 2026 perspectives, the 1956 Committee harboured deep reservations about the standardized examination of English. They highlighted the systemic advantage given to verbally adept children over those with a practical bent, who struggled to express technical or tactile knowledge through written exams [Department of Education, 1959, pp. 89-90]. Acknowledging how difficult it was to design papers fair to literary and non-literary pupils alike, they proposed splitting the subject into two distinct streams: a purely utilitarian paper focusing on comprehension, composition, and language usage, and an elective paper dedicated to literature [Department of Education, 1959, pp. 89-90]. While they ultimately maintained the status quo—leaving literature questions optional—their critique remains highly salient to ongoing debates about linguistic bias in assessment.

By 1988, this focus on dismantling structural barriers shifted toward the wider educational landscape. In his seminal report, Professor Gary Hawke asserted that the Department of Education needed a Postcompulsory Education and Training (PCET) framework that opened access to all New Zealanders seeking further training, rather than one administering sorting mechanisms to filter out students based on perceived tiers of intellectual ability [Department of Education, 1988, p. 11]. This marked a definitive policy pivot toward inclusivity.

Under Hawke's terms of reference, PCET was defined broadly to encompass the plural curricula experienced by individuals over the age of 15 [Department of Education, 1988, p. 14]. This spanned all formal state and independent training institutions, alongside informal, on-the-job workplace training. Crucially, under this model, secondary schooling lacked its own distinct, standalone policy domain within both the Department of Education and the newly formed Ministry of Education. Even as late as 1997, the state administrative division remained strictly split between compulsory schooling and post-secondary education, leaving senior secondary education straddling a fragmented, non-cohesive policy space.

Consequently, the secondary education system had to evolve to broaden tertiary access. Hawke explicitly advocated for senior secondary schools to offer diverse, flexible pathways, backing structural changes to remove “the present congestion of upper school qualifications” and eliminate barriers preventing students from studying simultaneously across schools and other publicly funded institutions (Department of Education, 1988, p. 12).

To operationalize this, the 1988 Working Group delivered six core conclusions regarding school reform:

Deconstruct Barriers: Transition secondary schools away from acting as gatekeepers that administer increasingly demanding academic filters, framing them instead as hubs that open multiple future pathways.

Enable Dual Enrollment: Eliminate institutional and regulatory barriers to allow students to take courses concurrently at more than one training provider.

Rethink Custodial Roles: De-emphasize the traditional “custodial” or policing function of high schools, paving the way for community-led alternative models like senior colleges.

Modularize Curriculum: Broaden the curriculum using modular courses, allowing students to satisfy diverse qualification criteria simultaneously.

Establish a Descriptive “Profile” Certificate: Replace the crowded upper-school exam framework with a single, national leaving certificate. This descriptive portfolio would record completions, skills, knowledge, and attitudes across both secondary and external training providers. Any national external exam, if retained, must be limited to one single award.

Separate Quality Assurance: Leverage a dedicated Review and Audit Agency to cleanly decouple the monitoring of teaching standards from the administration of qualifications and assessments.

(Department of Education, 1988, p. 90)

The introduction of the Sixth Form Certificate shifted secondary schools away from their traditional role as high-stakes sorting mechanisms. By prioritizing broad subject accessibility, the qualification allowed schools to locally develop and approve specialized subjects tailored to regional industries, vocational pathways, and student interests. These local options—including Vocational English, Media Studies, Computer Studies, Automotive Engineering, and Māori Performing Arts—held equal status with traditional academic courses.

This programmatic expansion fundamentally transformed the senior secondary landscape, moving away from a system designed to filter out the majority of learners:

By replacing this strict elimination structure with a 1–9 grading scale for all participants, the Sixth Form Certificate realized Professor Gary Hawke’s vision of an education system providing “services available to all New Zealanders,” rather than one administering barriers marking the end of education based on perceived intellectual ability (Department of Education, 1988, p. 11).

Under the Hawke Report (1988) framework, schools were integrated as a foundational sector within the Postcompulsory Education and Training (PCET) landscape. They were redefined as institutions meant to deliver a broad range of general personal, social, work-related, and intellectual skills, enabling young people to continue learning, function in everyday life, and collaborate with others (Department of Education, 1988, p. 15). Crucially, Hawke’s recommendation to remove structural barriers blocking simultaneous study across multiple publicly funded bodies opened a completely new direction for cross-institutional learning.

This systemic integration eventually extended to outer labour frameworks. In 1992, the newly formed Education and Training Support Agency (ETSA) absorbed the Department of Labour’s industry training roles, taking over funding oversight for Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) under the Industry Training Act 1992. Reflecting the evolving nature of New Zealand’s tertiary infrastructure, ETSA transitioned into Skill New Zealand in 1998, before ultimately merging into the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) in 2003 (McGuinness Institute, 2016, p. 45).

The *Todd Task Force Report* in 1994 (Ministerial Consultative Group on Funding Growth in Tertiary Education, 1994) argued that all New Zealanders would require tertiary education and training in the 21st century,

and with the passing of the Education Amendment Act 1999 funding in Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs) funding became entirely demand driven without funding caps. Private Training Establishments (PTEs) were put on the same level as TEIs for funding of qualifications at level 3 and above, however after rapid growth in the tertiary sector limits started to come into place by 2002 (McGuinness Institute, 2016, p. 45).

During these years the introduction of Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource (STAR) funding in 1996 (Vaughan & Kenneally, 2003) allowed schools to buy tertiary level courses such as the National Certificate in Tourism, bringing specialised polytechnic and vocational courses into the secondary sphere. In effect these opportunities were to become a replacement for the local courses in Sixth Form Certificate that sat alongside ‘conventional school subjects’.

“The National Administration Guidelines now require schools to specifically target students who are “at risk” of leaving school “unprepared for the transition to the workplace or further education/training” (NAG 1.vi, Ministry of Education, 2000). To provide information on the programmes schools are developing to assist these students, we targeted low decile schools for this study and focused on the programmes which the schools considered best supported “at risk” students in their transition decision-making.”

“Although the emphasis of each programme varied, they all had a focus on: · hands-on or experiential learning; · providing students with unit standards and/or the National Certificate in Employment Skills or other national certificates (and in some cases, other qualifications); · providing connections to tertiary study options; · providing work experience opportunities; and · assisting students to develop personally and to develop work-readiness skills, attitudes, and behaviours.”

“The programmes and the schools included in this study are the: · Advanced Studies Academies at Linwood College, Christchurch; · Academy Programme at Aranui High School, Christchurch; · Institute of Studies at Western Heights High School, Rotorua; · World of Work and Sir Edmund Hillary and Outdoor Education and Tourism Studies Programmes at Tongariro High School, Turangi; · Gateway Programme at Auckland Girls’ Grammar School; · Tertiary Pathways Programme at Aorere College, Auckland; and · Senior Integrated Programme at James Cook High School, Auckland” (Boyd & McDowall, 2003, p. 2-3).

By the late 2000s, rising youth unemployment and higher school achievement drove up tertiary demand. In response, the fifth National Government launched ‘Youth Guarantee’ in 2009, consolidating long-standing vocational programs for 16-to-19-year-olds. Initially, it provided roll-driven funding to secondary schools, generating nationwide discussion and promotional roadshows.

By 2013, the **Youth Service** via the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) complemented this initiative. It targeted 16-to-19-year-olds Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs), supporting them into study for recognized qualifications (McGuinness Institute, 2016, p. 47). The enduring component of this strategy extending into 2026 is fees-free learning at lower levels across polytechnics, PTEs, and Wānanga.

School Leavers 16 and major policy shifts for schools from 1989

In 1989, raising the school leaving age to 16 increased senior student retention. More students remained through Form Six and Form Seven, which maintained a strong focus on university preparation. This shift reflected a tightening late-twentieth-century job market where qualifications became essential to engage in the labour market, a major contrast to the high-employment economy of the 1960s where school leavers often chose between multiple job offers (Swarbrick, 2012).

Simultaneously, the New Zealand Treasury (1987) introduced a market-driven fiscal logic to education, arguing that formal schooling is unavoidably part of the market economy. Treasury maintained that the government must closely evaluate the efficiency and profitability of its education spending, laying the foundations for systemic reforms across the next decade.

This fiscal logic culminated in significant administrative and curriculum restructuring:

- Tomorrow’s Schools (1988): Stemming from the Picot Report (Taskforce to Review Education Administration [Taskforce], 1988), this initiative targeted institutional flaws like over-centralized decision-making and a lack of effective management practices (Openshaw et al., 1993). It abolished the Department of Education, establishing a policy-focused Ministry of Education and transferring operational autonomy directly to individual school Boards.
- The Education Act (1989): Codified these self-managing structures. It established core oversight entities—including the Education Review Office (ERO) and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)—to manage qualifications and performance.
- Indigenous Education Reforms: The Education Act 1989 also formally recognized Kura Kaupapa Māori. Supported by the Ministry, these state schools delivered the curriculum in te reo Māori within a whānau-based philosophy (Calman, 2012).



- The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (1993): Following years of discussion after the 1987 Curriculum Review, this framework standardized learning by defining eight core curriculum areas, which rolled out incrementally over the subsequent decade (Ministry of Education, 1993).
- Market-Driven Enactments: Under the National government's "Investing in People" policy (Ministry of Education, 1991), the Education Amendment Act 1991 was passed. This Act abolished school enrollment zoning to improve educational quality through open market competition. However, because this competitive model failed to improve standards, school zoning was ultimately reintroduced in 2000.

How did secondary education adopt unconventional school subjects?

The 1988 Hawke Report, officially titled the *Report of the Working Group on Post-Compulsory Education and Training*, was published by the Cabinet Social Equity Committee. Convened by Professor Gary Hawke, this report provided the blueprint for the Fourth Labour Government's "Learning for Life" reforms, transitioning the nation toward a unified, decentralized, and market-driven tertiary system. The report conceptualised a system that dismantled the previous rigid barriers between academic "education" and practical "training." Prior to this, apprenticeships and vocational qualifications lacked designated levels, but the report recommended a single continuum of post-compulsory education that included vocational, work-based learning.

Apprenticeships and industry training had, up until the late 1980s, required time served in learning for completion. Professor Hawke recommended replacing this with specified levels of achievement in practical and theoretical components, offering a potentially shorter qualification route for trainees. Additionally, the report advocated for degree-level qualifications to be offered outside of universities and suggested publicly funding private education providers across all levels of post-compulsory learning, allowing for a much greater range of learning alternatives.

The notion of a Unified Qualifications Framework for tertiary, work-based, and foundational learning eventually evolved into the National Qualifications Framework. Importantly, this allowed learners to transfer credits be-

tween different providers and pathways in a seamless way. The eventual National Qualifications Framework set up in 1991 comprised sub-degree vocational and technical qualifications constructed out of competency-based unit standards, meaning students were assessed on whether they could reliably perform a skill.

The impact on secondary education was that it allowed schools to diversify their senior curriculums, letting students earn school credits that also contributed to vocational training through tertiary providers. Some schools in the 1990s began offering programmes like the National Certificate in Computing, the National Certificate in Tourism and Travel, and the National Certificate in Building and Construction. As time proceeded, some students completed unit standards in school and progressed to local polytechnics to finish qualifications they already possessed in part, which removed the need to repeat prior learning but introduced some complexity.

The development of the NCEA that proceeded out of these 1980s reports, including the Hawke Report, was an effort to make school qualifications more accessible and inclusive. Diverse learners—who had traditionally experienced early leaving, leaving without qualifications, or being pathwayed exclusively into manual, technical, and vocational learning—were now able to access school qualifications. This was achieved through a framework constructed of standards developed from both conventional and non-conventional school subjects. What success looked like changed, shifting the focus toward making learning and achieving more equitable and accessible for all students. School leavers with the new qualifications discovered and moved through multiple seamless pathways into tertiary education and employment. The notion of required failure was gone, replaced by a new perspective on assessment rooted in criterion-referenced and standards-based assessment wherein all students who reached the standard could achieve.

Sector changes and the National Certificates in Educational Achievement Level 1–2–3

The 1990s brought massive structural and systemic change to secondary education. Schools became self-managing under local Boards, controlling their own budgets and staff, while a rolling schedule introduced new curriculum learning areas sequentially each year. During this decade, traditional qualifications like School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate,

and the University Bursary exam—which determined University Entrance and identified top Scholarship recipients—remained the norm. Simultaneously, early NCEA unit standard trials began in mathematics and geography following a 1995 trial school meeting at Lincoln University. This forced trial teachers to navigate a “dual qualification” landscape, awarding both Sixth Form Certificate and competency unit standards from identical assessment tasks.

This initial curriculum implementation largely targeted junior subjects. Although achievement objectives existed for years 11 to 13, the rapid development of unit and achievement standards soon overtook the senior curriculum outlines. Because the overarching curriculum broadly covered eight brief learning areas (such as music within the arts or materials technology within technology), schools continued teaching conventional senior classes exactly as before, meaning initial curriculum shifts left the senior years largely unaffected.

According to Wylie (2012), early unit standard trials illustrated how NCEA could systematically improve secondary student performance. Because these trials imposed no limits on the number of students who could achieve a standard, they forced teachers to clarify exactly what students should gain and how their work demonstrated it, embedding concepts of valid evidence and fair assessment into the teaching profession (Wylie, 2012, p. 124).

By 2007, the fifth Labour Government published the full New Zealand Curriculum, solidifying eight distinct learning areas: English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social sciences, and technology. It mandated eight foundational principles for teaching consistency, including high expectations, cultural diversity, inclusion, future focus, and the Treaty of Waitangi (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9).

Subsequent strategic policy shifts increasingly targeted systemic equity and inclusion. *Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012* focused on maximizing Māori potential and eliminating deficit-based thinking by demanding the education system adapt to learners rather than forcing learners to fit the system (Ministry of Education, 2008). This approach was later reinforced by *Ka Hikitia – Accelerating Success 2013-2017*, which prioritized expanding the supply of Māori language teachers (Ministry of Education, 2013). Administrative and special education

structures also evolved; in 2010, NZQA merged the National Qualifications Framework and the Register of Quality Assured Qualifications into a unified New Zealand Qualifications Framework (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2001). Following a major review, the fifth National Government also issued *Success for All – Every School, Every Child* to establish a fully inclusive education system by reinforcing successful practices and correcting systemic gaps (Ministry of Education, 2010a; Ministry of Education, 2010b).

New curriculum and qualifications for 2028–2030

How are these policies different and how have people across the sector reacted?

Is the bar high enough?

In 2018 Ministry of Education’s Dr Craig Jones was Deputy Secretary of Evidence, Data and Knowledge. He wrote and presented *What do we know about system performance?* (Ministry of Education, 2018) to the Tomorrow’s Schools Task Force. He highlighted numerous patterns based on a range of data. To begin with, he writes that New Zealand punches above its weight – citing placement in the top six countries in the OCED (2017) Education at a Glance – for 15 year-old Science scores and Collaborative problem-solving, and first time tertiary entrance rates is shown at number one. New Zealand ranked number 11 for Adults with at least a Bachelor’s degree, and in the top nine for 15 year-old reading scores. He then claims that student performance slows over time, based only on e-asTTle data – mathematics (where we placed 16th in the OECD data) – and the estimated curriculum level. His claim that the ‘performance of a median student’ slows because it sits at curriculum level 5. The vague, shaded diagram in the curriculum document that shows levels 6 and 7, allows him to claim that the performance of a median student should maintain a trajectory which reaches slightly above level 5. However year 10 has always been associated with level 5 curriculum. His key message here is at best, somewhat misleading.

What his presentation does claim, according to 2012–2015 primary school data, is that student achievement in writing and mathematics drops considerably between year 4 and year 8. He also shows drops in 15 year-old performance in PISA 2009–2015, yet in

both of these data sets there is no acknowledgement of any possible contributing factors such as poverty rates. The percentage of children living in material hardship between 2013-2015 was 16-17.5% (Stats NZ, 2021), a result of six years of a conservative government and its fiscal restraint relating to beneficiaries.

Although these rates had improved somewhat by 2020, the Child Poverty Action Group state that “2019/20 rates of poverty for tamariki Māori on [material hardship] are over 70% higher than the national average: 19.5% of all tamariki Māori or approx. 56,000 children. This over-burdening of tamariki Māori is a reflection of ongoing colonisation, discrimination and breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi” (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022).

NCEA results are shown (Ministry of Education, 2018) as steadily climbing between 2009 and 2016. Rather than viewing these data as successful and linking them to the OCED (2017) data showing high rankings for science and collaborative problem-solving, and good rankings for reading, with his ‘New Zealand punches above its weight’ statement, he instead questions the level of student success with the question “Is the bar high enough?” based on ‘Estimated percentage without adequate literacy and numeracy skills’ which he defines as “band 3 of the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey. The OECD defines this as a baseline level necessary to operate in an information-rich society.” (Ministry of Education, 2018). So from being in the top nine countries for 15 year-old reading scores in 2017, he claims in 2018, by way of a graph, that 45-50% of students with NCEA Level 1 (no year stated) do not reach an adult competency level as necessary to ‘operate in an information-rich society’. It is plausible that this was one of the policy drivers over ensuing years, for raising the level of literacy and numeracy for the proposed Foundational Award at Year 11. It is far from sound.

The same presentation (Ministry of Education, 2018) then shared data (no date) titled “Some NCEA pathways are strongly associated with later attainment...” claiming in the diagram that 42% of students are taking something called ‘Academic’ – where achievement standards are implied but not stated - in Year 11, and of those, 67% achieve an ‘Academic’ Level 2 and 81% of those Level 2 students achieve an ‘Academic’ Level 3. By contrast, 8% of Year 11 students take ‘Core generic’ defined as including “Core Generic, Health Studies, Occupational Health and Safety, Communi-

cation Skills, Service Sector Skills, Outdoor Recreation (among others)’ (Ministry of Education, 2018) and of these, 57% do not achieve Level 2. There is no information to show the later attainment of the missing 50% of Year 11 students. The presentation, however, makes a clear claim despite this; using the words “Some NCEA pathways are strongly associated with later attainment...” in one slide, and ‘While others are not’ in the next slide. The undated, unpublished source is “Analysis by Michael Johnstone for NZQA”. Again, it is plausible that this was a policy driver over ensuing years, this time for reducing the credibility of unit standards on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

The Hon. Erica Stanford said in 2026 “As a parent, I didn’t understand NCEA. After years of helping my daughter through it, it just never made sense why an E is better than an A? Why do you get credits for part time jobs or filling in forms? Why do kids say they don’t need to sit exams because they’ve already got enough credits? Half of parents don’t understand NCEA. Students can patch together random credits that don’t lead anywhere.” (Stanford, 2025). The title of this explanation is “We are proposing to replace NCEA with new national qualifications that ensure young people have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed.”

In the slides mentioned above, 50% of NCEA Level 1 students were not mentioned in the data. 8% were mentioned as taking a range of ‘core generics’ which included other unit standards as well as core generics. These 8% were the ‘while others (pathways) were not...associated with later attainment’ in the diagrams on the two slides. These students would have been taking a range of Trades Academy courses, later praised by the Minister as her ‘North Star’ at the Vocational Education and Training Summit in Wellington, November 2025; Gateway courses, including health and safety, forklift and first aid courses, all acknowledged as successfully supporting students into employment; and school-based subjects developed by industry such as hospitality, tourism and building and construction. These were included in the ‘random [unit standards] credits’ students were ‘patching together’ that ‘don’t lead anywhere’ (Stanford, 2025). The data from 2018 claiming that 57% of these 8% of Level 1 students did not achieve Level 2, is implied as showing a pathway that was not strongly associated with later attainment. This is disturbing and misleading because many of these students would have used their success in unit standards at Level 1 to pathway into employment, apprenticeships or other tertiary

education. The issue here is the definition of 'pathway into later attainment' and 'knowledge and skills they need to succeed'.

The Conversation (Deerness, 2025) commented that "As New Zealand introduces new qualifications, it's worth remembering the loudest voices calling for educational change don't always represent what all students need. The real test of any system isn't whether it satisfies the most articulate parents or prestigious schools. It's whether it serves the educational hopes of all New Zealand families without accidentally creating new forms of inequality." It is no accident that the Minister thought it 'never made sense that E is better than A' because A to E grading is the Cambridge system that Auckland Grammar began to introduce in 2011. Cambridge is one of the multiple pathways present in Aotearoa New Zealand, serving an elite of already successful schools to maintain their prestige. (Deerness, 2025).

As Dr Grant Klinkum, CEO of NZQA stated in 2021 (NZQA, 2022), "School contexts vary significantly. For that reason, NZQA does not support the use of the data for league-table-like comparisons. Out of context these can paint an inaccurate picture of student and school achievement, which has the potential to cause harm to students, schools and their communities," and "The reporting population covered by the enrolment measure includes all enrolled students including those not on an NCEA pathway. Many schools have a significant involvement in providing specialist support for students including students with specialist learning support needs,

ORS funded students and students in Alternative Education" (NZQA, 2022).

There are some other schools that offer non NZQF qualifications (such as the International Baccalaureate, Cambridge, or Accelerated Christian Education) in addition to NCEA. For this reason, NZQA does not consider league tables to be a valid use of this data" (NZQA, 2022). In 2021, Klinkum said "Approximately 1,300 students leave school each year with a non-NZQF award at the equivalent of NCEA Level 3 of University Entrance." There are now more than 70,000 leavers in Aotearoa New Zealand each year. In 2023 with 65,790 leavers, 2.3% - 1,500 - gained international school qualifications. Of these, 540 or 0.8% were from public schools, and 960 or 1.5% were from private schools. (Scott, 2025).

The lost students

More important than these 2.3% who gain international qualifications, there are those who gain nothing at all from our public education system. Gerritsen (2026, August 11) reports that 19% of students leave school without qualifications. Rather than saying 'Half of parents don't understand NCEA' (Stanford, 2025) to identify a policy problem, it would be coherent to consider the pathway needs of the nearly one in five students who leave school with nothing. Steve McCracken, PPTA Secondary Principal Council Chair, commented that while there are high numbers of leavers without qualifications, "there should be an avenue in which the students that are leaving actually have a way to exhibit the learning and things that they've done over the last 11 or 12 or 13 years of their schooling" (du Plessis-Allan, 2026).

Policy should be prioritising and addressing why there are 20% of leavers with no clear pathway or guidance, and no system-wide school-based interventions to support them. Even with the current unit standards, these students are not managing to thrive. The potential cost to the country and lack of economic and social progress is enormous.

In August 2026 Radio New Zealand reported that the "Number of teens with no qualifications [is] higher than reported" (Gerritsen, 2026, August 11). "The number of teens leaving school with no qualification is much higher than officially reported at nearly one-in-five of last year's 70,786 leavers. The figure has been under-reported because since 2004 the Education Ministry has counted students half-way to a level two or three NCEA certificate as if they had a qualification, even if they didn't. Including those students took the number of school-leavers with no qualification equivalent to at least NCEA level one to 13,165 last year - 19 percent of the total number of leavers and well above the previously reported figure of 10,496 or 15 percent" (Gerritsen, 2026, August 11).

Jen McDonald, manager of the Whanganui Learning Centre, expressed concern that high numbers of leavers without qualifications "felt like it was becoming the new normal" and explained stories of anxiety, missing literacy and numeracy, and not coping with exams as some of the key issues. Emphasising how challenging the situation is, she said if students are

“wanting to have an apprenticeship, they need to have at least level 2, so again even if they’ve got aspirations to be a builder or whatever, they’ve got a lot of work to do”. Mandy Patmore, Director of the Kakano Youth Arts Collective in West Auckland said their teens “had not coped with school or with alternative education”. Explaining that “there’s [not] a whole lot of nets to catch them...it just seems like they go into an abyss’, she also emphasised that they did not have the skills or networks to enter employment. (Gerritsen, 2026).

The Education Review Office published a report in June 2026 highlighting the increase in students leaving mainstream education. These can be through “early-leaving pathways... prolonged non-enrolment, chronic disengagement, or referral into alternative forms of education” where limited options and outcomes from the alternative providers can impact their whole lives (Education Review Office, 2026).

Secondary Principals’ Association NZ president Louise Ānaru in a TVOne Breakfast interview called for adequate resources to keep these students in schools rather than alternative education settings. She emphasises that qualified, specialist teachers are needed for these students, with wrap-around support, and that positive life outcomes are more likely when students stay in school. (‘Call for education reform for at-risk and challenging students’, in Gerritsen, 2026).

There are already successful models to support at-risk students in secondary schools, for example the New Zealand Certificates in Foundation Skills, where the purpose statement is to ‘engage and re-engage learners’ (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2026). Programmes have been written by the Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association (AFSAPA), which supports schools to deliver programmes leading to the Level 1 and Level 2 (and soon Level 3) tertiary qualifications. The programmes target students with low reading ages, anxiety, neurodiverse learning needs and more. The website says “This [Level 1] qualification provides an alternative pathway for Year 11 students. Its purpose is to equip learners with the skills, knowledge, and attributes needed to engage or re-engage with learning, and to continue into further study, training, or work in structured environments. Grounded in the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the programme is designed to support success for learners whose needs are not being met by the current NCEA qualification framework.” (Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association, n.d.). Tertiary qualifications can be and are delivered in secondary schools with the appropriate approvals (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2024).

On 25 August Radio New Zealand released the story ‘Schools adopt NCEA alternative as number of unqualified school leavers soars’ that quoted Esther Williams, a Co-chair of AFSAPA, saying “There’s a group of students who either for cognitive reasons or high neurodiversity or maybe other reasons are unable to engage with the curriculum level that is required for those literacy and numeracy exams and they simply need more time to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. We feel every student deserves a successful pathway through school. We want to keep these kids at school and allow them to finish school with a qualification and so

that’s why we’ve brought in these qualifications” (Gerritsen, 2026c).

Commenting about the numbers of leavers without qualifications, Principal of Papakura High School, Simon Craggs, said that he doesn’t “see in the near future that figure coming down... that was signalled in the advice to the minister, that there would be a decrease in achievement for students with a new qualification” (Gerritsen, 2026).

Radio New Zealand’s Alexia Russell wrote in ‘The Detail’ (RNZ, 2026) that transitions for leavers are bleak with the high rate of youth unemployment, yet for those with no qualifications it is particularly hard. In her interview with Jen McDonald (cited above), she heard that students at the Whanganui Learning Centre are often those “with trauma, anxiety, bullying issues, or they’re neurodivergent and haven’t fitted into the school system”; and they also see what happens when students don’t get support and “they come back through the youth justice system”.

Dr Craig Jones acknowledged in his presentation to the Tomorrow’s Schools Taskforce that “We have a problem with bullying” (Ministry of Education, 2018). He shows graphs that indicate New Zealand is at a very serious level of student exposure to bullying, from Year 5, through Year 9, to second to bottom in the PISA 2015 and OCED 2016 data for Year 11 (Ministry of Education, 2018). On the website of Bullying-Free NZ (Bullying-Free NZ. (n.d.). there is a very sobering statement. “Representative national data from the Youth 2000 surveys, carried out in 2001, 2007, 2012 and 2019 by the Adolescent Health Research Group at Auckland University... found little

change in rates of bullying in New Zealand schools over the decade to 2019, with the exception of cyber-bullying which rose.” The website cites that “trends from... large-scale [international] studies over the past two decades show very little change in bullying rates in New Zealand overall and even some rises in certain bullying types, alongside a related decline in feeling safe at school” (Bullying-Free NZ., n.d.). Importantly, “A Ministry of Education synthesis of research studies found that the students who tend to experience the most bullying are lower achievers, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, boys, students with disabilities, and gender-diverse students” (Bullying-Free NZ., n.d.). This study by Mercy Mhuru, Ministry of Education, was published in 2021 (Mhuru, 2021).

Ministry of Justice published a report from a Youth Health and Wellbeing survey in 2025 (Ministry of Justice, 2026) which covers young people age 13-19 and their experiences with bullying, verbal harm, physical harm, and sexual harm. It is the “largest survey capturing youth voices in New Zealand. Around 9,400 young people completed... [it] between March and September 2025.” It found that 26% of young people reported being bullied in the last year. Disabled (46%) and Rainbow (41%) youth reported higher rates. The most common types of bullying were verbal abuse (64%), online bullying (53%) and social exclusion (51%) (Ministry of Justice, 2026).

Given these extremely high rates of current bullying, and the historic data of internationally concerning and ongoing rates, it is difficult to understand how Ministry of Education is not making this a policy priority in schools; nor clearly connecting the low achievers, students with disabilities, gender diverse and disadvantaged students as being the ones at risk of not achieving at school and leaving without qualifications.

The pendulum swings again?

Bronwyn Wood, Associate Professor in Education at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington & Taylor Hughson, PhD Candidate at the University of Cambridge (2024) discuss the issues facing the New Zealand education system, acknowledging the previous Labour government that recognised the prioritising of ‘learning that can’t be left to chance’. Inequalities identified by New Zealand-based research suggested that a less ‘open-ended’ curriculum would support greater equity with equally “challenging ma-

terial being provided for students in lower socio-economic areas, and for Māori and Pasifika learners” (Wood & Hughson, 2024). Rather than a “radical policy swing away from the last 20 years” they advocate for attention to ‘complex issues’ and a “delicate balance between the binaries that tend to shape education policy shifts: knowledge versus skills, teacher-led versus student-led learning, national versus local curriculum.” We need “a broad bipartisan course – not an ideological one... [that allows] students... to access learning that takes them further and reduces inequalities” (Wood & Hughson, 2024). They emphasise that the “top predictor of student outcomes remains poverty, so this must be a priority”, and add that teaching knowledge as well as skills, and valuing and supporting teachers are crucial for the way forward. (Wood & Hughson, 2024).

Already, by August 2025, there was concern about the qualification reforms. Lisa Maurice-Takerei, Senior Lecturer in Education at the Auckland University of Technology, wrote that the “structural reform... would effectively see New Zealand return to a “tracking” system where students are grouped into either academic or vocational pathways.. [where] the vocational pathway will include a dual mix of workplace and classroom learning” (Maurice-Takerei, 2025). Her perspective was that more structured VET could improve numbers of students in work-based learning, raise school engagement and improve “skill shortages in key industries”. She explains that the New Zealand Institute have been positive about school-based learning and work-based training for students not heading for university. She then goes on to explain that Germany, the gold-standard in VET, is experiencing problems. Issues with declining participation, equity, access and trying to encourage broader general development are identified. The cost, she explains, is high, and embedded in a highly structured system where the teachers have “degree-level learning and qualifications on top of industry experience” (Maurice-Takerei, 2025).

Maurice-Takerei’s ‘lessons from history’ lists tracking as not being successful in the past, and NCEA being designed to integrate both, but falling short of effective change management and the system then defaulting to the academic pathway to university. She explains that policy borrowing has seen New Zealand trace most changes back to the USA and the UK, without “due diligence for local needs”. Her advice is

to take care of adopting “bits of policy from another country” without a great deal of care. Maurice-Takerei concludes that the key questions are how to decide if a student takes a VET or academic track, and “who will make that decision?” (Maurice-Takerei, 2025).

NCEA to be replaced

The announcement about the qualification reforms came in May 2026. Hon Erica Stanford’s press release said that it would “provide clearer, more credible recognition of student achievement... widely understood by parents, employers, tertiary providers and students themselves” (New Zealand Government, 2026). However, 24 years since it was implemented, a generation of parents and employers aged 37 years and under are familiar with NCEA through their own direct experience.

The qualification reforms state that “Under the new system, students in Years 12 and 13 will study at least five subjects each year, with a minimum of three subjects required to achieve each qualification. Obtaining the new literacy and numeracy Foundational Award, benchmarked at Year 11, will be a requirement to gain the new qualification.”

“The new qualifications will introduce a six-point grading scale from A+ to E for every subject, making achievement easier to understand for parents, employers, tertiary providers and students themselves.”

“Every subject will include internal assessments and an examination, with the weighting of the examination varying depending on the curriculum area and the nature of the subject. The qualification changes are being developed alongside the new knowledge-rich senior secondary curriculum so that what students learn and how they are assessed are properly aligned” (New Zealand Government, 2026).

The literacy and numeracy issue

What is the possible effect of the Foundational Award and its planned level?

Literacy and numeracy

In the December 2025 publication OECD Skills Outlook 2025 (OECD, 2025), there is a clear statement about what governments can do to build the skills

needed for growth and social progress: “Build strong foundations in compulsory schooling”. The recommendation is that “curricula must ensure proficiency in core 21st-century skills, including literacy, numeracy, problem solving and social-emotional learning” (OECD, 2025).” This and other reports are no doubt encouraging the reappraisal of the literacy and numeracy levels.

In 2023 Ministry of Education explained that “NCEA Literacy covers foundational literacy. This is approximately Phase 3 (Year 8) and Phase 4 (Year 9) of the New Zealand Curriculum, whereby a student has full control over Phase 3 (Year 8) and is beginning to work at Phase 4 (Year 9)” (Ministry of Education, 2023). The same was stated for NCEA Numeracy. Note that the wording of ‘Phase’ did not last as those plans were discontinued.

From 2024 this changed from a requirement of 8 credits for each of literacy and numeracy, to 10 credits for each of literacy and numeracy. The new Common Assessment Activities (CAAs) were benchmarked to “upper Level 4 / lower Level 5 NZC [New Zealand Curriculum] and TMoA [Te Marautanga o Aotearoa], ensuring functional capability rather than subject-specific depth” (NZQA, 2026). Thus from prior to 2023, the literacy and numeracy requirement shifted from full control of Year 8, to Year 9 (which is lower level 5) from 2024 onwards.

The qualification reforms, however, state that literacy and numeracy will be ‘benchmark at Year 11’. It is probable that the CAAs will continue as an option for the new qualifications for the first cohort of students, covering the years 2028-2030 until the first cohort of students complete Year 13. This means that students first required to complete the ‘benchmark at Year 11’ literacy and numeracy will do so from 2029. This shows that Ministry of Education is willing to raise the literacy and numeracy benchmark by three full years of learning in the space of six calendar years. This would be a huge feat even if students were all already achieving at the expected level, which they are not.

When the number of school-leavers with no qualification equivalent to at least NCEA level one is clarified as being “13,165 last year - 19 percent of the total number of leavers” (Gerritsen, 2026, August 11), it is hugely concerning that the literacy and numeracy benchmark is being raised. Currently a limited number of the standards contributing to 2023 literacy and

numeracy are still able to be used to contribute to literacy and numeracy requirements in 2026 and 2027 – under the title ‘additional standards’ rather than the more recent ‘CAAs’. So whereas some students can get literacy and numeracy in 2027 with Year 8 equivalent level, by 2029 this level changes to Year 11. The results could be staggeringly poor.

So, the bar is going to be raised significantly, and this is causing concern in the sector. The message is that from a reading age equivalent of 12 (Year 8) the Foundational Award will require a reading age equivalent of 15 (Year 11). Students will realise that in order to achieve at Year 12 the expectation is that they will have a reading age of 15. For some students this will be a barrier so significant that it may deter them from continuing on to study in Year 12, even if they are able to still sit the Foundational Award in Year 12 or Year 13.

In the past some senior students were provided with support through the Resource Teachers Learning and Behaviour – services to students in Years 11 to 13. This was \$13.8m of flexible operating funding stopped in Budget 2025 and redistributed to the Learning Support Package focusing on Years 1-8 (Ministry of Education, 2026). This could have been used to support some senior students in a literacy/numeracy acceleration programme but is now no longer available.

Considering the number of students currently leaving school with no qualifications, one in five, and the challenges of finding employment in the current climate with the youth unemployment rate at 17.2% (second quarter of 2026), up from 11.2% (third quarter of 2023) (Trading Economics, n.d.), it is a time when young people need support. However, there is a bill before parliament that intends to introduce a parental assistance test, expecting parents to support their children aged 16-19 financially if their combined income is above \$67,225 per year. The Social Security (Jobseeker Support and Accommodation Supplement) Amendment Bill was published on 20 May 2026 and closed for submissions on 10 June 2026. “The overall objective is to reduce long-term benefit dependency for young people and target assistance to young people who have no other resources to rely on” (Social Security (Jobseeker Support and Accommodation Supplement) Amendment Bill 2026).

Where to next for students who leave with no qualifications?

For students leaving school with no qualifications, little guidance, minimal support and trying to find a job, it is challenging indeed. There is a Youth Guarantee fund from the Tertiary Education Commission. Smyth (n.d.), in a briefing for the incoming Minister for Tertiary Education and Skills in 2023, explained that it covers fees and some support for students enrolling in Level 1 and Level 2 tertiary programmes, however he also emphasised that these were not well advertised and marketed and students were generally not aware of them. There are many Private Training Establishments that offer Youth Guarantee funded programmes. Typical providers include NZMA (New Zealand Management Academies), Y Education (part of the YMCA network), NZSE College (New Zealand Skills and Education), Vision College and Target Education.

As of April 2026 TEC has updated its funding rules and stated that Youth Guarantee funding in tertiary education can cover NCEA Level 1-3 or Level 1-3 certificate on the NZQCF and the NCEA co-requisite standards (Tertiary Education Commission, 2026a). This is not well known to many schools, so students can miss out on this opportunity.

One polytechnic, Unitech, has recently found success with a small group of 10 students who graduated in June 2026 from Level 3 programmes. Student Support and Scholarships Adviser Duzan Castellanos explained that the model they use has changed. From helping students to re-engage through mostly financial support, they are now providing “a more flexible and personalised support model” that responds to a growing need “around socialisation and connection, especially since the COVID pandemic” (Unitech, 2026).

Industry-led subjects and pathways

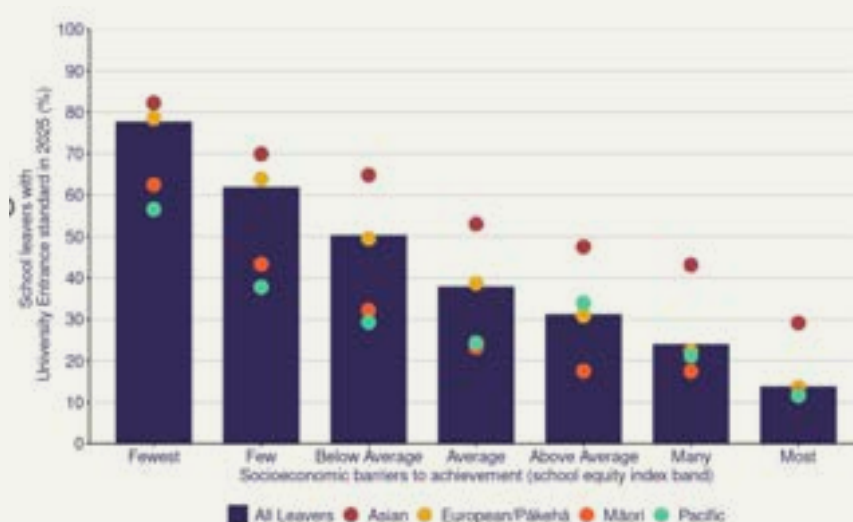
Which students will be unlikely to access industry-led subjects at years 12 and 13 and how could this affect the secondary system?

It matters which schools ākonga attend – achievement is a pattern

First, it is necessary to acknowledge the overarching pattern of achievement in the system. When Garry Hawke wrote about schools in the Hawke Report, he said “they are moving away from an emphasis on a series of mental exercises which over many years have proved to be an effective screen which identified those who are most likely to succeed at university, and which screen out students from low SES backgrounds (including many Maori) with devastating effectiveness” (New Zealand Working Group on Post Compulsory Education and Training, 1988, p. 89-90).

When we look at the 2025 leaver data, it is clear that this hopeful observation has been comfortably blocked for almost four decades since the Hawke Report. The ‘effective screen’ has been maintained.

Figure 5. Figure 18, Ministry of Education, (2025b, p16).



Students from schools with fewer barriers to achievement are more likely to attain University entrance than students from schools with more barriers, regardless of ethnicity Ministry of Education, (2026b, p. 16)

In addition to the above graph, the current achievement rates are clear:

- “UE Standard was attained by 21.7% of Māori school leavers overall (38.3% of Māori school leavers predominantly learning in te reo Māori and 20.8% of Māori school leavers predominantly learning in English attained UE).
- In schools where students have the fewest barriers to achievement, 62.5% of Māori leavers attained UE, compared to 12.0% from schools where students have the most barriers to achievement.
- UE Standard was attained by 27.3% of Pacific school leavers overall.

- In schools where students have the fewest barriers to achievement, 56.6% of Pacific school leavers attained UE, compared to 11.6% from schools where students have the most barriers to achievement.
- For European/Pākehā school leavers, 45.1% attained UE standard overall. In schools where students have the fewest barriers to achievement, 78.6% of European/Pākehā school leavers attained UE, compared to 13.6% from schools where students have the most barriers to achievement.
- Asian leavers had the highest proportion attaining UE Standard, with 63.7% of Asian school leavers attaining UE standard overall. In schools where students have the fewest barriers to achievement, 82.2% of Asian school leavers attained UE, compared to 29.1% from schools where students have the most barriers to achievement.”

Ministry of Education, (2026b, p. 16)

It is astonishing that with data this consistent across the decades, there is not greater care being taken to manage the funding relating to the school equity index bands in order to achieve greater equity, which is surely the goal of the something called ‘equity index funding’. Overall it is clear that without the school equity index funding, these data would be much, much worse.

As it stands, the public can be very confident that it matters which school students attend, and that

parents should continue to try and send their children to what have always been known as ‘higher decile’ schools if they wish them to achieve school qualifications.

However, if this pattern is so embedded in the system, what really needs to change?

What are multiple pathways in secondary education?

Multiple pathways acknowledge the various directions students navigate through secondary school into future learning and life. This long-standing debate in Aotearoa New Zealand centers on practical access. For instance, rural geographical isolation has historically been countered by policy infrastructure like school bus allowances, specialized boarding funding, and the online evolution of Te Kura (the Correspondence School). However, curriculum and qualification equity remains uneven, with specific societal sectors retaining disproportionate decision-making influence. Resolving these contentious qualification frameworks has inspired foundational literature by prominent education experts, including Roger Openshaw, Gary McCulloch, David Hood, and Bali Haque.

Fundamentally, multiple pathways seek to provide flexible learning opportunities that support all students regardless of destination or capability. Between 2009 and 2017, the Centre for Studies in Multiple Pathways at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT), directed by Dr. Stuart Middleton, spearheaded targeted research and advocacy. In March 2020, Middleton presented a proposal to the Minister of Education, Hon. Chris Hipkins, advocating for a Center of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) at MIT to serve young people classified as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted immediate implementation, post-pandemic recovery sustained these critical system debates. The ensuing 2018–2020 NCEA Review initiated broad public consultation on structural qualification reforms, though a subsequent change in government later redirected its core trajectory.

In the twenty-first century, transitional next steps are highly fluid, spanning vocational certificates, diplomas, degrees, direct employment, apprenticeships, or caregiving roles. Because transitioning between these combinations can cause student experiences to fluctuate, secondary school qualifications serve as the primary currency to meet diverse entry requirements.

These base academic milestones are frequently combined with portfolios, specialized licensing, practical tests, or baseline competency assessments. Ultimately, these critical transitions out of secondary schooling are shaped through distinct variations in timing, driven by long-term strategic whānau planning, real-time adjustments, or sudden local opportunities.

Is the only currency school qualifications, to access the next steps post-school?

The long-standing assumption is that qualifications serve as the currency for demonstrating school achievement to employers, acting as the fundamental building blocks for a student’s next steps. However, school-specific qualifications have not been the only options available.

The drive to offer overlapping secondary and tertiary qualifications stemmed from the concept of “seamlessness” between sectors espoused by Dr. Lockwood Smith, Minister of Education from 1990 to 1996, which was built upon the recommendations of the Hawke Report (New Zealand Working Group on Post Compulsory Education and Training, 1988). This perspective prioritized the acquisition of qualifications over the specific location of delivery, positioning secondary schools as active participants in facilitating smooth transitions.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) focuses on hands-on learning requiring the practical manipulation of resources or machinery, such as construction, hospitality, logistics, and manufacturing. Supporting topics like financial literacy and interview skills are categorized as “Core Generics.” Historically labeled “non-conventional,” these subjects are evaluated via competency-based unit standards either at school by teachers holding the required Unit Standard 4098 credential or directly at a Tertiary Education Organisation (TEO) under a Memorandum of Understanding.

Tertiary providers, including polytechnics, Industry Training Organisations, and private training establishments (PTEs) like The Learning Place—the sector’s largest provider—sell teaching resources and assessments for NCEA Levels 1 to 3. These pathways typically feed directly into higher qualifications on the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF) across fields like early childhood, automotive engineering, and computing. While early “seamless” models aimed for students to complete full tertiary certificates

while still at school, the modern trend prioritizes integrating these unit standard credits directly into standard NCEA qualifications. Nonetheless, some schools maintain provider accreditation and programme approval from the New Zealand Qualifications Authority to award full tertiary qualifications independently (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2024).

Gateway and Trades Academies provide two additional routes for unit standards to contribute to NCEA. Gateway funding from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) allows Year 11–13 students to undertake structured, workplace-based learning across industries like retail, construction, and healthcare. Students are assessed directly in the workplace, and schools are encouraged to align these placements with Vocational Pathways. These pathways, which originally mapped to Industry Training Organisations and later Workforce Development Councils, were replaced in 2026 by eight Industry Skills Boards (ISBs).

Meanwhile, 24 Trades Academies operate across Aotearoa. These secondary-tertiary programs (STPs) can be based in Tertiary Education Organisations like MIT, individual schools like Manurewa High School, or organized regionally and nationally through ISBs. Students typically attend these academies one day per week for Level 2 or two days for Level 3, supported by joint funding from the Ministry of Education and the TEC.

A third stream, Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource (STAR), provides an operational funding grant based on school rolls to help schools guide students into further work or study (Ministry of Education, 2024). STAR offers immense flexibility; it can fund practical work experiences or coordinator salaries, and it does not mandate that students earn NCEA credits.

This existing framework gives schools the exact vocational flexibility they wish to retain. If a restricted set of nine Year 12 and nine Year 13 Industry-led subjects replaces this diverse landscape—with most schools only able to offer one or two—flexibility will be lost, forcing all learning and assessment to funnel exclusively into the new National Certificate of Education (NCE) and National Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE) framework.

Industry-led subjects

There are nine new Industry-led subjects announced recently, to be developed by the new Industry Skills

Boards and delivered in schools at Year 12 and Year 13. Hon Minister Stanford described them as giving “students an exciting range of options... building skills [that] sectors need... and [gaining] knowledge that sets them up for work, trades, training or university” (New Zealand Government, 2026a).

They are

- Next-Gen Manufacturing – Manufacturing and Engineering ISB
- Applied Intelligent Systems – Electrotechnology, Information Technology and Creative ISB
- Construction and Built Environment – Construction and Specialist Trades ISB
- Energy and Infrastructure – Energy and Infrastructure ISB
- Engineering Technology – Transport ISB
- Food and Fibre Systems – Food and Fibre ISB
- Health Services and Care – Education, Health and Community ISB
- Hospitality Food and Beverage – Services ISB
- Tourism - Services ISB

(New Zealand Government, 2026a)

There are currently four key problems with this.

Firstly, students will have no understanding about what they are, and which to choose because there is no subject offering at Year 11 to give students any experience or information.

Secondly, schools will only offer these new subjects if they have staff to teach them. To date there is no guidance on what qualifications would be appropriate, given that teachers generally take a degree majoring in a university-entrance approved subject to be able to access a teacher education programme and become registered as a teacher.

Thirdly, it is expected that few schools will offer more than one or two of the new subjects. Thus, the idea of a range of options for students is at best, aspirational.

Fourthly, there is tension in the intent of the subjects. Until now, there has been a sector-wide understanding that Trades Academy, Gateway and STAR opportunities help students to decide pathways that they either like or do not like. This flexibility and experience is highly valued by students and schools, and a student deciding they do not want to be a plumber after doing a Trades

Academy course, is seen as a positive. The new Industry-led subjects, however, are seen as an opportunity to commit to a particular direction or trajectory of learning. How students reach this conclusion in Year 11, with the refreshed subjects on the Ministry of Education curriculum list, is seen as puzzling.

That said, the Industry-led subjects are an exciting opportunity to develop a new direction in secondary learning. They fill a gap in the system, where students can pathway to diploma level learning post-school. This level of technical and specialised learning will be very welcome. What needs to happen quite urgently is collaboration with the school sector to improve the likelihood of successful implementation and reduce the challenges ‘on the ground’. A Network of Expertise (NEX)-led group (NEX are approved subject associations with targeted funding) – the Pathways and Transitions Network Aotearoa (PaTNA) - has been connecting with the ISB CEOs to support this development.

In May 2026 “two experts in the area of education pathways” were interviewed by The Detail. Josh Williams, principal consultant for the Skills Development Group, said “where we’re talking about a shared curriculum that has industry subjects and curriculum subjects sitting within a shared curriculum I think is very positive... every young person is on a trip to the workforce” (Russell, 2026). He explained that the flexibility of NCEA was “absolutely seen as a strength” but that “the assessment system... [used was] grafted on to a schooling system that hasn’t changed very much”.

He explained that “the main game is to chase a thing called University Entrance because it’s really the only clear recipe in the whole cookbook of school. Everything else is a bit of an add-on” (Russell, 2026). Dr Michael Johnston, a Senior Fellow from the think-tank New Zealand Initiative, commented that “there’s never been a formal national curriculum for vocational education at secondary school. We’ve had technology for a long time, but not subjects that are so completely geared towards getting young people into apprenticeships and tertiary training, where these subjects will be very responsive to the needs of industry. This is the first time where we would have had formal curricula for that kind of subject” (Russell, 2026). Clearly these two experts see the idea of industry subjects in the school curriculum as an absolute positive moving forward.

The progression gap

It is expected that the Trades Academies will be offering only the nine Industry-led pathways from the first year they are offered to Year 12, in 2029, thus restricting much of the flexibility in courses that Trades Academies currently have.

The Minister has made it clear that she does not want unit standards to be part of the new landscape of secondary education. This then removes Gateway credits entirely and leaves in doubt the position of this very successful student experience. Students will be very unlikely to commit to an experience without ‘something to show for it’.

With the new ‘subject’ requirement in the refreshed curriculum, there will be no unit-standards based courses purchased from tertiary providers, as described above. Some will be converted to Industry-led subjects, such as hospitality, building and construction, and mechanical engineering. What will be missing from those is the high level of practical learning that is currently integral to those subjects in school.

To access this type of learning, it is likely that ākonga unable to progress through senior secondary, will need to leave school to attend Youth Guarantee funded courses at Private Training Establishments, which post-NCEA are likely to continue to provide students with foundation and certificate level qualifications (unit standards and/or skills standards based) at NZQCF Levels 1, 2 and 3.

This ‘gap in progression through school’ is a serious breach of a student’s entitlement to all the sporting, cultural, arts-based, service and leadership experiences and richness of a New Zealand secondary school education.

It is serious because there will be a large number of ākonga, as Hawke inferred, who will be ‘screened out’. Through not reaching a literacy and numeracy age equivalent of 15, ākonga will not be able to gain the Foundational Award in Year 11. This is a clear message that the learning at Year 12 will be a challenge for them. The range of practical subjects that currently exist, the Gateway opportunities, the flexible offerings of Trades Academies, and the possibility of STAR funded experiences will all be gone.

Students will be expected to enter a one-size-fits-all senior secondary environment where the learning will by default, assume that they can access the academic levels required to thrive in those limited learning situations.

More students will fail. More students will leave school without qualifications.

Profiles of dedicated learners who will miss out

(Names have been changed) These are two of the thousands of stories in our secondary schools.

Sione has Level 2 Gateway credits and did barbering for Trades Academy, is working 6 nights a week for his brother in allied trades, gets 3 hours of sleep each day after school and wants to do a course in barbering after leaving school. He is achieving well in Level 3 Mathematics. Sione would not manage in the new secondary landscape.

Lucky has Level 3 Gateway credits in retail, has been accepted for a Level 5 Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care mid-year and wants to continue and complete a Degree in ECE. She is good at Level 3 Tikanga. Lucky would not manage in the new secondary landscape.

What both of these students have been able to do in school is build relationships with key adults over years, benefit from deans knowing their whanau, and feel a sense of belonging that keeps them coming to school each day. When students have worked hard, and schools have worked hard, to manage complex situations, often with learning barriers and other challenges as well, the system should support them and build stronger networks.

The challenge for industry and schools

If industry wishes to step into the breach – the progression gap – in secondary education, there is an opportunity. The ISBs need to be invited to work out ways to encourage students to stay in school then progress into their industries.

All students will eventually move into one or more of the industries represented by the ISBs. Students who are going to move into careers which require a more practical and relational type of employee will need a pathway.

There are two possibilities. The first is that schools offer full tertiary qualifications on the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF) that have been through programme approval and provider accreditation with NZQA. This is already happening, and there is no indication that it will not continue into the future. (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2024).

The second is that ISBs consider two opportunities that currently exist, and they could be connected.

The first opportunity is that the NZQA / Ministry of Education Vocational Pathways Award is shared by both secondary and tertiary. Secondary schools have been using it for many years and it is present in the KAMAR software used by the majority of secondary schools. It is mandatory for tertiary Youth Guarantee programmes that use NCEA Level 1, 2 or 3, that they are aligned to one of the six Vocational Pathways. The Vocational Pathways Award Level 2 (whether in secondary or tertiary) is embedded in NCEA Level 2. It must include a maximum of 40 credits from a list of 'recommended' standards for the specific pathway, and at least 20 credits from a list of 'sector-related' standards in the specific pathway (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

There are six Vocational Pathways, and the ISBs they align to are:

- Construction and Infrastructure (Construction and Specialist Trades ISB) (Energy and Infrastructure ISB)
- Creative Industries (Electrotechnology, Information Technology and Creative ISB)
- Manufacturing and Technology (Manufacturing and Engineering ISB) (Transport ISB)
- Primary Industries (Food and Fibre ISB)
- Service Industries (Services ISB)
- Social and Community Services (Education, Health and Community ISB)

If ISBs decided to bridge the newly identified progression gap through a micro-credential, there is already a model here. For each Vocational Pathway, an identified list (or lists) of sector-related standards totalling at least 20 credits at Level 2, could be converted into skills standards and then stacked into a coherent micro-credential. This could be submitted to the Ministry of Education for approval as a 'practical subject'. This could either contribute as a subject to the new NZCE or be a stand-alone micro-credential on a student's Record of Learning with NZQA.

Micro-credentials like this could be used by providers such as The Learning Place and EATucation who have developed effective courses for secondary students using unit standards. If these were converted to skills standards and micro-credentials they could continue from 2029.

The second opportunity is that the NZQA Foundation and Bridging qualifications, the New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills Level 2 and the New Zealand Certificate in Study and Employment Pathways Level 3 are qualifications which are used in both secondary and tertiary. They have a degree of flexibility, requiring at each level that four Graduate Profile Outcomes are met. There is an opportunity for a 'practical subject' micro-credential to contribute to the 60-credit Level 2 certificate. The same type of process could be created for Level 3.

As explained earlier, the New Zealand Certificates in Foundation Skills Level 1 and Level 2 and the New Zealand Certificate in Study and Employment Pathways Level 3 are qualifications that are available to Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools. The Network of Expertise AFSAPA supports schools to apply to NZQA for programme approval and provider accreditation, implement the programme as courses in school timetables, and continues to develop a range of resources and assessments.

These qualifications are already being used in secondary schools to support students with diverse learning needs to progress and have a pathway through secondary education. Having a micro-credential opportunity at Level 2 or Level 3 would be appropriate to further guide these learners in post-secondary decisions.

ISBs should also be aware that pathways/careers education is 'done differently' in different schools. A combined effort by ISBs could see pathways/careers education better supported in school from Year 9, so that by Year 11 students have a better understanding of their options in Year 12 and Year 13. A semi-structured programme would also allow teachers to better support students in selecting appropriate subjects for their pathway intentions.

Parity of esteem

Parity of esteem is the principle that academic, vocational, technical and other legitimate pathways should not be constructed or treated as inherently high-

er- or lower-status. Alongside this there are benefits to developing student understanding of what these pathways are and engaging them in decision-making where they choose their future area.

One important area of discussion in the OECD is Career Pathways. In 2024 the OECD issued a paper explaining that "to optimise the likely long-term success of new visions for secondary education, Career Pathways initiatives can benefit considerably from actively engaging the full range of stakeholders from secondary and tertiary education, the employer community including professional bodies, as well as parents, students and the broader community, in programme development and delivery. Such engagement requires investment of time and resources" (Herdman et al, 2024, p.65) To effectively develop this across all Aotearoa New Zealand secondary schools, capturing the benefits of the new industry-led subjects, a major project is needed.

Implications

With the introduction of the qualification reforms, secondary education in Aotearoa New Zealand will continue to generate many of the same negative outcomes, and in other ways will change substantially.

Equity is missing

The qualification reforms do not attempt to address equity issues, especially as described in *'Equity? Where is it?'*

"Addressing inequity in Aotearoa requires redistribution of resources and critique of all policies (for school transport, meaningful support of whanau) to address the specific needs of Māori learners, teachers, leaders and communities. The report indicates that simply applying one-size-fits-all policies will not achieve equity. Instead, school leaders must provide targeted resources, support systems, and interventions that take into account the distinct challenges faced by Māori, including those that stem from socio-economic disparities caused by colonisation" (Huia Kaimanawa, 2025, p. 53).

Ākonga Māori have continued to achieve below the general secondary student population and there is no plan to address this.

Equity index funding, even when applied, still allowed in 2025 nearly 80% of students in schools with low SES barriers to achieve University Entrance, while 12%

of students in schools with high SES barriers did so. This is a structural inequity that has remained consistent for more than 40 years. This level of inequity is not mentioned in the qualification reforms.

Because of the one-size-fits-all system architecture it is very likely that the levels of inequity will increase.

That 19% of students left school in 2025 with no qualifications, is a scenario that could possibly be the same in the future. There is no plan in the qualification reforms to support senior students with diverse learning needs, which is the key reason for students not gaining qualifications, to achieve.

There are possible progression gaps caused by delivery constraints in Years 12–13 and higher levels of literacy and numeracy

Many students who are currently able to achieve in NCEA and progress through Year 12 and Year 13 could be faced with a progression gap in the qualification reforms caused by greater constraints and less flexibility, and by higher expected levels of literacy and numeracy.

Opportunities to gain meaningful learning through Gateway experiences providing unit standards credits, school courses purchased from TEOs providing unit standards credits and Trades academies providing unit standards credits, all of which contribute to NCA, might be gone.

Secondary schools who support learners through the flexibility of when, where and how the secondary curriculum is delivered and assessed, might no longer be able to provide this level of commitment to ākonga.

One example of a key delivery constraint is that students attending Trades Academies or Gateway opportunities as offered now, often one or two days per week – if still available in the qualification reforms – would be seriously compromised in missing learning in their five mandatory year-long subjects on those days. This is creating anxiety in the sector.

Many students are currently able to achieve literacy and numeracy benchmarked at Years 8–9. With the qualification reforms the benchmark for literacy and numeracy for the Foundational Award is Year 11. There is clear signalling that Years 12–13 would expect this level of literacy and numeracy for students to be able to access learning and thrive.

For students with literacy and numeracy levels at Years 7–8–9–10 there is a clear message that learning in senior secondary at Years 12–13 might not be accessible for them.

Some students could see greater constraints in curriculum and assessment in Year 12 and Year 13 and faced with this, and the literacy and numeracy levels, could be likely to leave at the age of 16 or apply for an early leaving exemption in Year 11.

Industry could benefit from better pathways to diploma level learning

If schools are well supported with staffing and resources to offer the new Industry-led subjects, industry could benefit from graduates who are better informed and prepared to enter tertiary education and employment in those technical and specialist areas of the eight Industry Skills Boards.

There are currently many unknowns

Despite the tight timeline for implementation, there are still many unknowns about the qualification reforms.

The nature and future of Gateway, Trades Academies and STAR funding is uncertain and this is creating great concern in the sector.

How students with diverse learning needs will be supported in Year 11 – supposedly tagged as an important foundational learning year – is completely unknown. Learning support funding finishes at Year 10.

Special Assessment Conditions – if they continue to be available – might only be available for assessments for school qualifications in Year 12–13, and possibly the Foundational Award. This is unknown.

How careers staff can prepare students in Year 11 to make informed choices in selecting the subjects in Year 12 and Year 13 is creating concern.

How schools can find and employ staff for the new Ministry-led and Industry-led subjects is creating concern.

Recommendations

1. Co-design with Māori to meet Te Tiriti obligations

That differentiated approaches in the qualification reforms be co-designed with Māori to meet Te Tiriti obligations. That Māori are active partners in planning, governance, delivery and management from the start, leading to sustainable and equitable outcomes that close systemic achievement gaps and validate mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) at national, regional and local levels.

2. Create a clear, connected and understandable pathway system

That there be shared terminology for at least seven Multiple Pathways that support students through senior secondary learning and into tertiary education, employment and other pathways; for example degree, diploma, certificate, foundation (including Youth Guarantee funded), supported learning and employment, employment (including apprenticeships), social, cultural and civic participation—including community engagement, iwi involvement, volunteering or a combination of these.

That Parity of Esteem be given to each of these seven Multiple Pathways in a unified ecosystem of equal value.

That a careers module be mandatory at Year 11 so that students are able to make informed choices about Year 12 and Year 13 Ministry subjects and Industry-led subjects. This would then ensure that they are able to prepare for their chosen pathway, whether narrow to support their specific plans, or broad to enable continued choice and options post-school. This module would be developed by the CATE (Careers and Transition Education Association NZ) Network of Expertise.

That 10 regional school support hubs are created – each region being asked to manage no more than 7,500 estimated leavers - to link school pathways/careers advisers to learning experiences in local industries and community, and the full range of tertiary education providers and employers encompassing the seven Multiple Pathways, to use in their advice and guidance roles with ākonga.

That Careers Advice and Guidance is ring-fenced, mandatory and part of a national system (developed as rigorously as the recent reforms have been for attendance monitoring and action taking).

That Youth Guarantee, as a specific post-school pathway to YG funded - fees free - Level 1, 2 and 3 tertiary programmes with YG funded support, including transport; is activated for and connected to every secondary student leaving without qualifications, through a national framework such as the Education to Employment brokers, utilising learner data from NZQA.

3. Support the successful design and implementation of Industry-led subjects

That the Industry-led subjects are structured on a template, to include minimum practical components, and work experience and/or simulated environments (which could be school-based). This template would be developed by the Industry Skills Boards in conjunction with the NEX-led PaTNA (Pathways and Transitions Network Aotearoa).

That some form of work experience be strongly recommended for each Industry-led subject, which should be supported by specific funding. The Eastern Bay of Plenty Economic Development Agency has a high-quality resource with a foreword by Dr Anthony Mann, OECD (Turner, 2020).

4. Create skills-rich micro-credentials for ISB-supported Vocational Pathways for Year 11, Year 12 and Year 13.

That the current six Vocational Pathways, with support from the ISBs they align to, Construction and Infrastructure (Construction and Specialist Trades ISB) (Energy and Infrastructure ISB), Creative Industries (Electrotechnology, Information Technology and Creative ISB), Manufacturing and Technology (Manufacturing and Engineering ISB), Primary Industries (Food and Fibre ISB), Service Industries (Services ISB), Social and Community Services (Education, Health and Community ISB), be expanded to become nine Vocational Pathways supported by each ISB, including the Transport ISB.

That the Vocational Pathways Award is replaced by micro-credential subjects made up of skill standards – including work experience.

That students with the profile of those currently gaining the majority of their credits from unit standards whether in timetabled courses, Trades Academies, Gateway, or STAR-funded opportunities, and who want to choose access to practical learning at senior secondary level, be provided the pathway to study one or more micro-credential subjects made up of skill standards – including work experience. These micro-credential subjects would be developed by the Industry Skills Boards in conjunction with the NEX-led PaTNA (Pathways and Transitions Network Aotearoa).

That a pathways subject be developed by the CATE (Careers and Transition Education Association NZ) Network of Expertise made up of core skills for tertiary and employment success, to be mandatory for all students studying a Vocational Pathway micro-credential subject.

5. Provide a clear school pathway for students with diverse learning needs who are not able to access learning at Year 11.

That students with diverse learning needs, who are not able to access Year 11 learning for whatever reason, be provided the pathway to study the New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills Level One, the New Zealand Certificate in Foundation Skills Level Two, and, in the future, the Level Three certificate that is part of this group of qualifications. This would be supported by the AFSAPA (Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association) Network of Expertise. Any of these qualifications could bridge into the Foundational Award, the New Zealand Certificate of Education, and/or the New Zealand Certificate of Advanced Education, or on to further education, training and/or employment.

6. Reduce the planned level of literacy and numeracy for the Foundational Award to avoid the possibility of a progression gap

That the level of literacy and numeracy for the Foundational Award is reduced to Year 8-9 literacy and numeracy as it has been in the past.

That an accelerated programme for literacy and numeracy learning in schools with greater socioeconomic barriers to achievement, is funded to ensure the greatest number of ākonga possible attain this important milestone.

7. Provide funding for support mechanisms and a range of pathways equitably for all ākonga in Year 11, 12 and 13

That support mechanisms has a shared language that is accepted and embedded into senior secondary education, that reflects an agreed range available to all students. This would include accepting or rejecting current terminology that may or may not be of value leading into the 2028-2030 changes.

That funding for an agreed range of support mechanisms available to all students is ring-fenced and schools are held accountable for its appropriate use.

That a range of pathways as per number two above, has a shared language that is accepted and embedded into senior secondary education, that reflects an agreed range available to all students. This would include accepting or rejecting current terminology that may or may not be of value leading into the 2028-2030 changes.

That funding to support the agreed range of pathways available to all students is ring-fenced and schools are held accountable for its appropriate use.

Conclusion

The needs of society and learners change, and education policy endeavours to respond to these needs. Historically, however, these responses have been contested due to political motives and ideological conflict – particularly regarding whether Vocational education and training (VET) constitutes a worthy and equally respected pathway for ākonga.

The definition of meaningful learning will change with the qualification reforms and its impact will be substantial. It appears as of August 2026 that the emphasis will be on degree and possibly diploma level pathways post-school, and that what used to be included as meaningful learning leading to certificate, foundation, supported learning and employment and social, cultural and civic participation pathways post-school will no longer be present in the senior secondary curriculum.

The learner pathways that are currently provided for will be severely restricted with the qualification reforms.

As was so well stated by Wood & Hughson in 2024, “the natural inclination at this point might be a radical policy swing away from the past 20 years. But it would be better to avoid the deep-seated tendency in education to address complex issues with polarising pivots.

Instead, a delicate balance is needed between the binaries that tend to shape educational policy shifts: knowledge versus skills, teacher-led versus student-led learning, national versus local curriculum.

New Zealand needs a broad bipartisan course – not an ideological one – providing students with greater opportunities to access learning that takes them further and reduces inequalities.

The scope of possible reform is vast. The top predictor of student outcomes remains poverty, so this must be a priority.” (Wood & Hughson, 2024)

The pattern of Māori achievement is reprehensibly consistent historically through to the 2025 school leaver data. If what used to be seen as meaningful learning is no longer present in senior secondary, and if learner pathways are severely restricted, then what will not change is the subjugation of Māori achievement, where systemic, historical, and institutional processes have limited Māori success, knowledge, and socioeconomic advancements across the generations in Aotearoa New Zealand. The obligations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi will have been reduced and compromised

Therefore, co-designing with Māori to meet Te Tiriti obligations, providing multiple pathways in a unified ecosystem of equal value, and providing equitable support for students with diverse learning needs, will provide a framework to take us forward. Multiple pathways, accessed through a range of subject offerings and different learning experiences, and active, ongoing mentoring that uncovers a learner’s specific mana and strengths will be positive and sustainable, allowing all ākonga to use their talents, abilities and preferred areas of study, to make informed choices post-school that enable them to create a meaningful and happy life.

References

- Abbott, M., & Doucouliagos, C. (2004). The development of vocational education and training in New Zealand and Australia. Central Queensland University Press.
- Aotearoa Foundation Skills and Pathways Association. (n.d.). *Our story*. <https://www.afsapa.co.nz/new-page-1-1>
- Boyd, S., & McDowall, S. (2003). Innovative pathways from secondary school: Gaining a sense of direction [Paper presentation]. 24th New Zealand Association for Research in Education (NZARE) Conference, Palmerston North, New Zealand. nzcer.org.nz
- Bullying-Free NZ. (n.d.). *Bullying in New Zealand schools*. <https://bullyingfree.nz/about-bullying/bullying-in-new-zealand-schools/>
- Calman, R. (2012, June 20). Māori education – mātauranga. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/maori-education-matauranga>
- Campbell, A. E. (1941). Educating New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs.
- Child Poverty Action Group. (2022, June 28). *Progress towards child poverty targets*. <https://www.cpag.org.nz/statistics/progress-towards-child-poverty-targets>
- Commission on Education in New Zealand. (1962). Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand (Currie Report). Government Printer.
- Deerness, S. (2025, August 7). *The Cambridge factor: How influential NZ schools hastened the demise of NCEA*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/the-cambridge-factor-how-influential-nz-schools-hastened-the-demise-of-ncea-262617>
- Department of Education. (1969). Education statistics of New Zealand: Part II. Government Printer.
- Department of Education. (1977). Report of the Department of Education for the period ended 31 March 1977. E. C. Keating, Government Printer. https://www.abuseincare.org.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/27747/department-of-education-report-of-the-department-of-education-for-the-period-ended-31-march-1977-1977-1.pdf
- Department of Education. (1979). Education statistics of New Zealand: Part II. Government Printer.
- Department of Education. (1988). Tomorrow's schools: The reform of education administration in New Zealand. Government Printer
- du Plessis-Allan, H. (Host). (2026, July 30). Steve McCracken: Secondary Principals' Council Chair on the increase in students leaving school without qualifications [Audio podcast episode]. In *Heather du Plessis-Allan Drive*. iHeartRadio. <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/211-heather-du-plessis-allan-d-24837940/episode/steve-mccracken-secondary-principals-council-chair-339899425/>
- Education (Post-primary Instruction) Regulations 1945, SR 1945/143.
- Education (Post-primary Instruction) Regulations 1945 (Reprinted 1949), SR 1945/143 (New Zealand). Government Printer.
- Education Review Office. (2026, June 23). *Bridging the gap: How well do we support students learning in alternative settings? Summary*. New Zealand Government. <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/bridging-the-gap-how-well-do-we-support-students-learning-in-alternative-settings-summary/>
- Ewing, J. L. (1970). The development of the New Zealand primary school curriculum 1877–1970. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Fraser, P. (1939) 'Report of the Minister of Education for the year ended 31st December 1938', Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives, session 1, E-01
- Gerritsen, J. (2025, November 18). *Sending teens to polytech for the day a central part of government's secondary school overhaul*. RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/education/579249/sending-teens-to-polytech-for-the-day-a-central-part-of-government-s-secondary-school-overhaul>
- Gerritsen, J. (2026a, August 2). *More school leavers with no qualifications 'new normal': Advocates*. 1News. <https://www.1news.co.nz/2026/08/02/more-school-leavers-with-no-qualifications-new-normal-advocates/>
- Gerritsen, J. (2026b, August 11). *Number of teens with no qualifications higher than reported*. RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/education/956853/number-of-teens-with-no-qualifications-higher-than-reported>
- Gerritsen, J. (2026c, August 25). *Schools adopt NCEA alternative as number of unqualified school leavers soars*. RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/education/1110271/schools-adopt-ncea-alternative-as-number-of-unqualified-school-leavers-soars>

- Graham, J. (1990, March). What's wrong with secondary education? *Metro*, (105), 120–121.
- Haque, B. (2014). *Changing Our Secondary Schools*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Harrison, N. (1970). Technical and technological education. In R. J. Bates (Ed.), *Prospects in New Zealand education* (pp. 144–161). Hodder and Stoughton.
- Herdman, P., Mann, A., Burke, A., & Signoret, P. (2024). Innovation in career pathways across five countries (OECD Education Working Papers No. 320). OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/innovation-in-career-pathways-across-five-countries_742bcd05-en.html
- Hood, D. (1998). *Our Secondary Schools Don't Work Anymore*. Auckland: Profile Books
- Hood, D. (2015). *The Rhetoric and The Reality: New Zealand Schools and Schooling in the 21st Century*. Masterton: Fraser Books.
- Huia Kaimanawa. (2025). Equity, where is it? Ministry of Education. teakatea.co.nz.
- Hunn, J. K. (1961). Report on Department of Māori Affairs: With statistical supplement. Government Printer.
- Jenkins, K., & Matthews, K. (1998). Knowing their place: the political socialisation of Maori women in New Zealand through schooling policy and practice, 1867–1969. *Women's History Review*, 7(1), 85–105. doi.org
- Lee, G., & Lee, H. (2016, February 9). *Thomas Report, and William Thomas (1879–1945)*. Dictionary of Educational History in Australia and New Zealand (DEHANZ). <https://dehanz.net.au/entries/thomas-report-and-william-thomas-1879-1945/>
- O'Neill, J. (2023). The Beeby-Fraser ideal: Is it time to abandon it? *Policy Quarterly*, 19(3), 6–10. <https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/pq/article/view/8306>
- Maharey, S. (2003) 'The Beeby vision today', 13 July, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/beeby-vision-today>
- Maurice-Takerei, L. (2025, August 26). *NCEA reform: How will schools decide who takes an academic or vocational path?* The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/ncea-reform-how-will-schools-decide-who-takes-an-academic-or-vocational-path-262797>
- McCulloch, G. (1998), *Failing the Ordinary Child? The Theory and Practice of Working-Class Secondary Education*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- McGuinness Institute. (2016). History of education in New Zealand (Working Paper No. 2016/03). McGuinness Institute. <https://www.mcguinnessinstitute.org/publications/working-papers/>
- McQueen, H. C., Laurenson, K. H., & Woods, N. S. (1941). *The background of guidance*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research.
- Meredith, P. (2015, February 17). *Urban Māori*. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/urban-maori>.
- Mhuru, M. (2021). *He whakaaro: What do we know about bullying behaviours in New Zealand?* Ministry of Education. educationcounts.govt.nz
- Ministerial Consultative Group on Funding Growth in Tertiary Education. (1994). *Funding growth in tertiary education* (Todd Task Force Report). Ministry of Education.
- Ministry of Education. (n.d.). Vocational Pathways assessment standards. Youth Guarantee. <https://youthguarantee.education.govt.nz/tools/standards-and-qualifications/?Level%5B2%5D=2&Pathways=2&Standards=SectorRelated&Query=>
- Ministry of Education. (1991). *Education policy: Investing in people, our greatest asset*. Government Printer.
- Ministry of Education. (1993). *The New Zealand curriculum framework: Te anga marautanga o Aotearoa*. Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum*. Learning Media.
- Ministry of Education. (2008). *Ka hikitia – managing for success: The Māori education strategy 2008–2012*. Group Māori Education.
- Ministry of Education. (2010a). *Review of special education 2010: Discussion document*.
- Ministry of Education. (2010b). *Success for all – every school, every child: Building an inclusive education system*.
- Ministry of Education. (2013). *Ka hikitia – accelerating success 2013–2017: The Māori education strategy*.

Ministry of Education. (2018). *What do we know about system performance?* (Appendix D). https://web-assets.education.govt.nz/s3fs-public/2024-12/1280154-Appendix-D-all-docs.pdf?VersionId=5f0gjcMQQmySRvV4ILNj_wUH_OnthUjR

Ministry of Education. (2023). Literacy - Learning. NCEA. <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/literacy-and-numeracy/literacy/learning>

Ministry of Education. (2024, August 20). Secondary-tertiary alignment resource funding. New Zealand Government. <https://www.education.govt.nz/education-professionals/schools-year-0-13/funding-and-financials/operational-funding/secondary-tertiary-alignment-resource-funding>

Ministry of Education. (2026, March 25). *Reinvestment*. New Zealand Government. <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/publications/corporate-documents/budget-2025/reinvestment>

Ministry of Education. (2026b). *Indicator: School leavers with NCEA Level 3 or above (2025)*. Education Counts. https://www.education-counts.govt.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/208072/Indicator-NCEA-Level-3-2025.pdf

Ministry of Justice. (2026). Youth victimisation and harm report. New Zealand Government. <https://www.justice.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Publications/Youth-Victimisation-and-Harm-Report-2025.pdf>

Morris Matthews, K. (2008). *In their own right: Women and higher education in New Zealand before 1945*. NZCER Press.

Multiple Choice (ROCO Films) Uploaded on Aug 26, 2025 <https://vimeo.com/1113043827>

New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO. (1972). *Compulsory education in New Zealand* (2nd rev. ed.). UNESCO.

New Zealand. Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in Forms 5 to 7. (1985). *First report of the Committee of Inquiry.... Implications of the removal of the University Entrance examination from Form 6*. Department of Education.

New Zealand. Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in Forms 5 to 7. (1986). *Learning and achieving: Second report of the Committee of Inquiry....* Department of Education

New Zealand Department of Education. (1929). *Syllabus of instruction for public schools*. Government Printer.

New Zealand Department of Education. (1944). *The post-primary school curriculum: Report of the Committee appointed by the Minister of Education in November, 1942 (The Thomas Report)*. Government Printer.

New Zealand Department of Education. (1959). *The post-primary school curriculum: Report of the committee appointed by the Minister of Education in November, 1942*. Government Printer.

New Zealand Government. (2026, May 16). *Details of NCEA replacement confirmed* [Press release]. Beehive.govt.nz. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/details-ncea-replacement-confirmed>

New Zealand Government. (2026a, August 6). *New subjects bring industry and the classroom closer together* [Press release]. Beehive.govt.nz. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/new-subjects-bring-industry-and-classroom-closer-together>

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2001). *The New Zealand register of quality assured qualifications*.

New Zealand Treasury. (1987). *Government management: Brief to the incoming government 1987*.

New Zealand Working Group on Post Compulsory Education and Training. (1988). *Report of the Working Group on Post Compulsory Education and Training* (Hawke Report). Cabinet Social Equity Committee.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2022, September 30). *NCEA data 2021* (Report No. CR24663). <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-us/Official-releases/Archive-releases/OIA-2022/NCEA-data-2021CR24663.pdf>

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2024, September 25). *New Zealand Certificates for secondary schools*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/ncea-for-teachers-and-schools/managing-national-assessment-in-schools/nz-certificates-for-secondary-schools/>

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2026, June 10). *Foundation and Bridging qualifications, reviews and developments*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications-and-standards/changes-to-qualifications-and-standards/qualification-reviews-and-developments/foundation-bridging/>

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2026a, June 11). *Insights paper: NCEA co-requisite assessments*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/publications/insights-papers/co-requisite-insights>

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2017). *Education at a glance 2017: OECD indicators*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>
- OECD (2023), *Adolescent Education and Pre-Employment Interventions in Australia: Keeping Young People in Education, Employment and Training*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7bf19171-en>.
- OECD (2025), *OECD Skills Outlook 2025: Building the Skills of the 21st Century for All*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/26163cd3-en>.
- OECD (2026), *A Skills-First Labour Market, Getting Skills Right*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/2e1b85f0-en>.
- Openshaw, R., Lee, G., & Lee, H. (1993). *Challenging the Myths: Rethinking New Zealand's Educational History*. Dunmore Press.
- Openshaw, R. (1995). *Unresolved struggle: Consensus and conflict in New Zealand state post-primary education*. Dunmore Press.
- RNZ. (2026, August 6). No hope and no prospects for thousands of Kiwi teens. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/education/900341/no-hope-and-no-prospects-for-thousands-of-kiwi-teens>
- Russell, A. (2026, May 14). *How can we catch the lost students?* RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/politics/595133/how-can-we-catch-the-lost-students>
- Scott, D. (2025, April 15). *Recent trends in school leavers going overseas*. Education Counts. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/tertiary_education/beyond-study/destinations/recent-trends-in-school-leavers-going-overseas
- Smith, P. (2026, May 17). *Auckland Grammar School welcomes government's proposed NCEA replacement*. RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/education/595470/auckland-grammar-school-welcomes-government-s-proposed-ncea-replacement>
- Smyth, R. (n.d.). *Education for young people at risk*. Strategy, Policy, Analysis. <https://rogersmyth.com/education-for-young-people-at-risk/>
- Social Security (Jobseeker Support and Accommodation Supplement) Amendment Bill 2026 (306–2). <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/government/2026/306/en/latest/>
- Stanford, E. [@ericastanfordecb]. (2025, August 10). *We are proposing to replace NCEA with new national qualifications that ensure young people have the knowledge and skills they need to succeed* [Video]. Instagram. [instagram.com](https://www.instagram.com/ericastanfordecb/)
- Stats NZ. (2021, February 23). *Child poverty statistics: Year ended June 2020 – corrected*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20210226164426/https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/child-poverty-statistics-year-ended-june-2020>
- Swarbrick, N. (2012, May 29). *Primary and secondary education*. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. <https://teara.govt.nz/en/primary-and-secondary-education>
- Taskforce to Review Education Administration. (1988). *Administering for excellence: Effective administration in education*. Government Printer.
- TEC (Tertiary Education Commission) (2020), *Event backgrounder: Material to support the Minister of Education's meeting with Dr Stuart Middleton*, Reference: E-20-00107. https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Ministerial-papers/E-20-00107-Ministers-meeting-with-Stuart-Middleton-Response_Redacted.pdf
- Tertiary Education Commission. (2026a, April 22). *Youth Guarantee Fund*. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/fund-finder/youth-guarantee>
- Tertiary Education Commission. (2026b, April 22). *Gateway*. New Zealand Government. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/fund-finder/gateway>
- Tertiary Education Commission. (2026c, April 22). *Trades Academy funding*. <https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/fund-finder/trades-academies>
- Tertiary Education Commission. (2026, August 6). *New action plan strengthens career support for tertiary pathways*. Tertiary Education Commission https://www.tec.govt.nz/about-us/news-and-consultations/news-and-consultations/new-action-plan-strengthens-career-support-for-tertiary-pathways?utm_source=aweber&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=feed-entry-title
- The Learning Place. (n.d.). *School bookings*. <https://www.thelearningplace.co.nz/school-bookings>
- Trading Economics. (n.d.). *New Zealand youth unemployment rate*. Retrieved August 23, 2026, from <https://tradingeconomics.com/new-zealand/youth-unemployment-rate>

Turner, D. (2020). *The WE3 continuum and activities*. Toi EDA (Eastern Bay of Plenty Economic Development Agency). squarespace.com

Unitec. (2026, June 24). *Personalised approach to learner support powers Youth Guarantee Success*. <https://www.unitec.ac.nz/personalised-approach-to-learner-support-powers-youth-guarantee-success/>

Wellington, M. (1985). *New Zealand education in crisis*. Endeavour Press

Willis, N., & Stanford, E. (2026, June 2). *More trades academy places for young people*. Beehive.govt.nz. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/more-trades-academy-places-young-people>

Wood, B. E., & Hughson, T. (2024, April 17). *NZ education scores must improve – but another polarising ideological pivot isn't the answer*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/nz-education-scores-must-improve-but-another-polarising-ideological-pivot-isnt-the-answer-227661>

Vaughan, K., & Kenneally, N. (2003). *A constellation of prospects: A review of the secondary-tertiary alignment resource (STAR)*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research / Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/a_constellation_of_prospects_a_review_of_star_the_secondary-tertiary_alignment_resource

Wylie, C. (2012). *Vital connections: Why we need more than self-managing schools*. NZCER Press.

Youth Development and Education Network Aotearoa. (2026). *Re-engaging young people in learning: "Just don't give up on us"* [Whitepaper]. rocketspark.co.nz https://ydena.rocketspark.co.nz/site_files/50720/upload_files/YDENAWhitepaper.pdf?dl=1

Appendix 1 Literature – Senior secondary, pathways and transitions

What New Zealand and international literature has reported on the connection between curriculum and qualifications, and pathways and transitions?

1995 Unresolved struggle: Consensus and conflict in New Zealand state post-primary education – Roger Openshaw

This book provides a historical and political analysis of the shifting policy landscape in New Zealand's secondary education system, demonstrating how post-primary schooling has been a continuous site of ideological tension. It critiques the fragile policy "consensus" constructed around post-WWII progressive curricula—such as the landmark 1944 Thomas Report—to show how underlying conflicts between academic traditionalists, democratic reformers, and market-driven interest groups consistently destabilized national schooling goals.

1998 Failing the Ordinary Child? The Theory and Practice of Working-Class Secondary Education – Gary McCulloch

This book by Gary McCulloch examines the century-long history of working-class secondary education in England and Wales, focusing on how systemic initiatives failed to effectively provide for the mass of the population, or the "ordinary child". It provides a detailed critique of the rise and ultimate collapse of the mid-20th-century Secondary Modern school experiment, demonstrating how entrenched social distinctions and educational differentiation continued to marginalize working-class youth despite the spread of comprehensive schooling.

1998 Our Secondary Schools Don't Work Anymore – David Hood

This seminal 1998 book by David Hood delivers a provocative critique of the New Zealand secondary education system, arguing that industrial-age school structures are fundamentally obsolete for the demands of a modern knowledge society. Drawing on cognitive sci-

ence and intelligence research, Hood asserts that traditional high schools generate a high rate of artificial student failure and must be replaced by flexible, customized learning environments that recognize diverse styles and speeds.

2014 Changing Our Secondary Schools – Bali Haque

This book provides a powerful critique of two decades of structural educational reform in New Zealand, analyzing major initiatives since 1989 including Tomorrow's Schools and the NCEA. Drawing on his experience as a high school principal and senior public servant, Haque details how intense competition between schools has undermined system collaboration and highlights the limitations of expecting schools alone to resolve entrenched socioeconomic inequalities.

2015 The Rhetoric and The Reality: New Zealand schools and schooling in the 21st century – David Hood

This book critiques New Zealand's secondary school system, exposing how its rigid, century-old structure fails to align with the contemporary realities and diverse needs of modern learners. It advocates for a fundamental paradigm shift away from a uniform, university-bound model toward a flexible, student-centered framework that treats diverse learning pathways and individual student trajectories with equal validity.

1992 Curriculum 1991 – Phillip Capper

<https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/nzaroe/article/view/819>

This article analyzes the initial operational shake-down period of New Zealand's decentralized curriculum structures following the sweeping



educational reforms of 1989. It examines the dismantling of the historical, centralized Department of Education Curriculum Division and explores the resulting systemic uncertainties regarding national-level curriculum development and emerging institutional power dynamics.

2013 Cultural and Social Diversity and the Transition from Education to Work, Edited by Guy Tchibozo

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-94-007-5107-1>

This volume explores the critical impacts of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity on school-to-work transitions, demonstrating how systemic disparities shape early career entries across different national contexts. It provides a multi-disciplinary critique of how standard transition policies often fail minority and immigrant youth, advocating for culturally responsive institutional designs that transform institutional selection processes and enhance workplace equity.

2015 Facing Trajectories from School to Work - Towards a Capability-Friendly Youth Policy in Europe, Edited by Hans-Uwe Otto

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-11436-1>

This volume applies Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capability approach to critically evaluate European school-to-work transition policies, arguing that current frameworks focus too heavily on market-driven employability rather than a young person's actual freedom to choose a life they value. It delivers a multi-disciplinary framework to advocate for "capability-friendly" youth policies that actively dismantle structural inequalities, secure social justice, and enhance youth agency during turbulent economic transitions.

2015 The Youth Experience Gap Explaining National Differences in the School-to-Work Transition – Francesco Pastore

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-10196-5>

This book introduces and develops the concept of the "youth experience gap" to explain the distinct structural differences in school-to-work transitions and youth unemployment rates across European and OECD countries. It provides a comparative analysis of different educational and transition regimes—such as the German dual system, the Anglo-Saxon market model, and the sequential systems of Southern Europe—to demonstrate how integrated workplace training and institutional design are critical to minimizing human capital friction for young school leavers.

2017 Interactional Competences in Institutional Settings - From School to the Workplace, Edited by Simona Pekarek Doehler • Adrian Bangerter • Geneviève de Weck • Laurent Filliettaz • Esther González-Martínez • Cécile Petitjean

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-46867-9>

This volume provides a micro-analytical, conversation-analytic examination of how interactional competence is structurally organized and deployed by participants as they navigate the transition from classroom environments to various workplace settings. It details the specific interactional methodologies and linguistic resources required to accomplish professional tasks, highlighting how institutional norms and professional identities are sequentially co-constructed through authentic everyday talk.

2018 Rethinking School-to-Work Transitions in Australia: Young People Have Something to Say – Barry Down, John Smyth, and Janean Robinson

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-319-72269-6>

This book uses the critical ethnographic stories of thirty-two young Australians to expose the systemic socioeconomic barriers and labour market precarity they navigate when transitioning from school to employment. It rejects deficit narratives regarding marginalized youth to advocate for an alternative, socially just model of education centred on deep relational curriculum, student-centred pedagogies, and democratic youth agency.

2000 The Development of Vocational Education and Training in New Zealand – Malcolm Abbott

https://erpjournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/ERPv27-1_Abbott-M.-2000.-The-development-of-vocational-education-and-training-in-New-Zealand.pdf

The paper outlines the historical evolution of New Zealand's vocational education and training (VET) system, tracing how the state historically assumed the dominant role in establishing secondary and tertiary pathways due to a lack of coordinated employer interest. It highlights how late-20th-century market-oriented reforms introduced greater competition, structural fragmentation, and a mix of public and private training options designed to make school-to-work transitions more flexible.

2003 Innovative Pathways from Secondary School: Gaining a Sense of Direction – Sally Boyd and Sue McDowall

<https://www.nzcer.org.nz/sites/default/files/downloads/12744.pdf>

This paper evaluates non-conventional, vocational secondary school pathways designed to support at-risk students in low-decile New Zealand schools. It shows that combining hands-on work experience and tertiary partnerships within the curriculum significantly improves students' work readiness and career decision-making.

2003 A constellation of prospects: A review of STAR (Secondary-Tertiary Alignment Resource) - Karen Vaughan and Natasha Kenneally, New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0016/7027/star.pdf

This report provides a comprehensive evaluation of New Zealand's Secondary-Tertiary Alignment Resource (STAR) programme, highlighting its success in facilitating smoother transitions from school to work or higher education. It demonstrates that STAR courses highly motivate students by offering practical, hands-on learning environments where they are treated as adults and can safely explore diverse career pathways.

2004 Aspirations of rurally disadvantaged Māori youth for their transition from secondary school to further education or training and work – Sally Steedman

<https://thehub.sia.govt.nz/assets/documents/Aspirations%20of%20rurally%20disadvantaged%20Maori%20youth.pdf>

This research paper explores the career and tertiary education aspirations of rurally isolated Māori youth in the Thames-Coromandel region as they prepare to transition out of secondary school. It reveals that while these students are highly motivated to pursue higher education or trades, they face critical systemic barriers due to a total lack of local training providers and restrictive government funding regulations for individuals under 18.

2006 Innovative pathways from school: Taking the first step: Final report – Sally Boyd, Sue McDowall & Hilary Ferral

<https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/innovative-pathways-school-taking-first-step-final-report>

This final report details a longitudinal study that tracked at-risk students from low-decile New Zealand secondary schools to determine what helps disenchanted youth re-engage and achieve. It highlights seven key program aspects—including student-centred pedagogies, practical workplace learning, and bridges to tertiary environments—that successfully foster retention and prepare young people for life after school.

2013 Secondary Schools: Pathways for future education, training and employment

<https://thehub.sia.govt.nz/resources/secondary-schools-pathways-for-future-education-training-and-employment>

This national report summary by the Education Review Office evaluates how effectively 74 New Zealand secondary schools prepare all senior students for future education, training, and employment. The evaluation focuses on six core areas—including curriculum structures, leadership, and external partnerships—to identify key systemic strengths and barriers across diverse school types.

2016 A Whakapapa of Technical, Trade and Vocational Education in Aotearoa, New Zealand: Origins of a hybrid VET System – Lisa Marucie-Takerei

<https://www.unitec.ac.nz/epress/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/A-Whakapapa-of-Technical-Trade-and-Vocational-Education-in-Aotearoa-New-Zealand-Origins-of-a-Hybrid-VET-System-by-Lisa-Maurice-Takerei.pdf>

This monograph traces the historical genealogy of New Zealand's vocational education, showing how technical high schools originally emerged to provide a practical curriculum rejected by traditional academic grammar schools. It explains how subsequent neo-liberal reforms dismantled these structures, shifting secondary vocational pathways onto the margins through market-driven arrangements like modern trade academies.

2020 Scaffolding vocational education and successful youth transitions through Work Exposure, Work Exploration and Work Experience – Dave Turner with a foreword by Dr Anthony Mann, OECD

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61414dd5b6902366bcd39cd3/t/629e7567e953152063f48c5b/1654551913601/The-WE3-Continuum-and-Activities-August-2020.pdf>

This publication outlines the WE3 continuum to scaffold youth vocational education through sequential stages of work exposure,

exploration, and experience. It delivers a practical framework of collaborative activities designed to expand student career agency, build soft skills, and strengthen employer-school partnerships.

2022 Transitions from Secondary School – Tertiary Education Commission Te Amorangi Mātauranag Matua

<https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Publications-and-others/Transitions-from-Secondary-School.pdf>

This comprehensive Tertiary Education Commission report analyzes data from over 60,000 New Zealand school leavers to explore how youth navigate transition decisions into further study, training, or employment. It highlights that while students heavily prioritize happiness and personal enjoyment, systemic barriers like cost of living, lack of industry networks, and confidence deficits heavily distort their final career pathways.

2023 Reshaping Vocational Education and Training in Aotearoa NZ – Selena Chan & Nyk Huntington

<https://www.indigo.ca/products/reshaping-vocational-education-and-training-in-aotearoa-new-zealand-1>

This book chronicles how New Zealand's modern vocational education system adapts to shifting socio-economic demands through flexible, practice-based learning frameworks. It showcases targeted initiatives supporting women, Māori, and Pasifika learners alongside advanced training methodologies that bridge classroom theory with evolving workplace technologies.

2023 Adolescent Education and Pre-Employment Interventions in Australia: Keeping Young People in Education, Employment and Training – OECD

https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/adolescent-education-and-pre-employment-interventions-in-australia_7bf19171-en.html

This OECD report explores how targeted, preventative policies for adolescents in their early- to mid-teens can significantly reduce the risk of young Australians falling into NEET status. It delivers a comparative analysis of international best practices to argue for integrated career guidance, structured employer engagement, and elevated perceptions of the vocational education and training (VET) system to protect vulnerable groups—including Indigenous youth, early school leavers, and those with health limitations.

2024 Secondary School Transitions and Pathways to Vocational Education and Training and Employment Project – Josh Williams & Arthur Graves

https://foodandfibrecove.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Secondary-School-Transitions-and-Pathways-Interim-Data-Enquiry-Report_FINAL-1.pdf

This interim report by the Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence evaluates the “ecosystem” connecting secondary schools with New Zealand's primary sectors. It reveals that while secondary-tertiary interface initiatives like Trades Academies are highly effective at boosting student retention and subsequent earnings, a lack of strategic coherence across fragmented local schemes leaves entry pathways into the food and fibre workforce heavily underutilized.

2024 Secondary School Pathways and Transitions to VET and Employment – Josh Williams and Arthur Graves

<https://foodandfibrecove.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Secondary-School-Transitions-and-Pathways-Policy-Analysis-Report-2024-1.pdf>

This final policy analysis report acts as an environmental scan to examine the broader structural, policy, and funding conditions shaping the school-to-work pipeline in New Zealand's food and fibre sector. It transitions from the previous report's data baseline to argue for an integrated, system-wide policy overhaul, identifying that conflicting school performance metrics and siloed ministerial funding models actively prevent localized vocational success stories from scaling nationally.

2024 A new approach to learner pathways – Research project final report March 2024 – Kathryn Koopmanschap and Dr Nicky Murray

<https://foodandfibrecove.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/New-Approach-to-Learner-Pathways-Final-Report-2024.pdf>

This final research report, co-funded by Muka Tangata and the Food and Fibre CoVE, delivers a skills-first framework to radically simplify and streamline the traditionally rigid vocational qualification structure in New Zealand's primary sector. It establishes a unified "Food and Fibre Skills Framework" that prioritizes core transferable skills and embeds Te Ao Māori perspectives, ensuring greater learning flexibility for ākonga and seamless skill transferability for employers.

2025 Trade Routes – Charting New Pathways from Secondary School to Industry Training – Michael Johnston

<https://www.nzinitiative.org.nz/reports-and-media/reports/trade-routes-charting-new-pathways-from-secondary-school-to-industry-training/>

This research report by The New Zealand Initiative highlights that nearly twice as many school leavers drop into unemployment compared to those entering workplace learning, exposing a critical systemic bias toward university-track education. It critiques existing programs like Trades Academies and Gateway as fragmented "add-ons," recommending a unified alternative vocational pathway and independent industry-elected Workforce Development Councils to directly shape high school trades curricula.

2026 Multiple Pathways to Success – Skills Group

<https://skills-group.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Multiple-Pathways-to-Success-April-2026.pdf>

This white paper by Skills Group argues that New Zealand's secondary school system disproportionately prioritizes university-bound tracks, leaving the remaining 70 percent of school leavers to navigate a fragmented and under-resourced vocational landscape. It proposes a comprehensive system redesign that transforms vocational training into a universal "dual enrolment" entitlement, reforms restrictive school funding models, and seats Industry Skills Boards as equal partners at the secondary curriculum design table.

2.3 The Rural Schooling Experience

by Andrew Basher

Executive Summary

This study explores how six rural New Zealand schools perceive the proposed replacement of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Whilst both learners and principals acknowledge concerns with the current system, they consistently value its flexibility, accessibility, and the ability to support diverse pathways. Participants expressed concern that the proposed qualification may increase rigidity, widen existing equity gaps and reduce opportunities for vocational and culturally responsive learning. The findings suggest that successful implementation will require significant investment in teacher support, stakeholder engagement and careful consideration of equity aspects.



Background

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) commissioned a report “Te Tiro Hou” in 1997 to explore what good assessment looked like, in a time where scaling of external exams was expected and a pass/fail mentality for assessment used universally. The final report was instrumental in the development of the qualifications framework which we have today. One of the key components of this work was to identify what ‘valid’ assessment looked like as the country investigated a change to the norm referenced testing and scaling that had been in place for many years.

The **Te Tiro Hou (1997)** report identified a number of factors that they believed must be considered when developing a valid qualification system. These were:

- fair
- inclusive
- cumulative
- clear
- motivating
- coherent
- constructive
- manageable

Whilst the report did not weight one criterion above others, it did stress the need to actively consider each in the development of any new system. The Minister of Education, The Honourable Erica Stanford has recently announced a new qualification system to be introduced for our current year nine cohort from 2028. How this new proposal meets the above criteria is unclear. The rationale for change has instead focussed on the perceived ‘short comings’ of NCEA, a system in place for 24 years, as the reason to instigate this major upheaval for our teachers, learners and schools.



Introduction

New Zealand has one national qualification, the NCEA. This was introduced progressively from 2002. This qualification, through its flexible approach to course design and assessment, has allowed innovation and creativity to provide courses and assessment approaches appropriate to the environment. This concept of “contextual equity” meant that this one-size-fits-all qualification could be experienced differently from one school or one community to the next without compromising the qualification.

The 2024 OECD report “Curriculum Flexibility and Autonomy: Promoting a Thriving learning Environment” draws on international examples illustrating how flexible curricula, enhance teacher effectiveness and inclusivity. However, the Educational Review Office (ERO) report “Set to Succeed” also from 2024 made a number of recommendations, one of which was to reduce flexibility to provide a more consistent learning experience across subjects.

Aspects of NCEA have been reviewed and refined over this time. This has included:

- 2007-Course and level endorsements (Merit and Excellence) introduced to recognise high performance. This was a key recommendation of the Te Tiro Hou 1997 report.
- 2013-The Vocational Pathways framework was launched with five pathways to validate and promote vocations as an equitable pathway for the 75% of learners that do not pursue a university education.
- 2022-Strengthening Numeracy and Literacy requirements with the introduction of the Common Assessment Activities (CAA's).
- 2024- NCEA Level 1 Achievement standards revised to be fewer in number and greater credit value. Level 2 and 3 were to follow. New Achievement Standards created greater coherence in content coverage and included learners having experience in external examinations. Level 1 remained voluntary with an increasing number of schools opting out. In 2023 approximately 75% of schools participated in a full Level 1 programme. By 2024, this had dropped to 64% The 2024 ERO report “Set up to Succeed” and its recommendations were a key driver in this review.

Two key vocational programmes shaped the education landscape in parallel with NCEA. The Gateway programme introduced in 2001 and Trades Academies in 2010. These complementary programmes supported vocational education and provided a trades pathway beyond school. The vocational awards provided schools with the ability to recognise the achievement of learners involved in these programmes. The Prime Minister's Vocational Excellence Award, introduced in 2019 was

a further initiative to enhance the status of vocational pathways. This was discontinued in 2024.

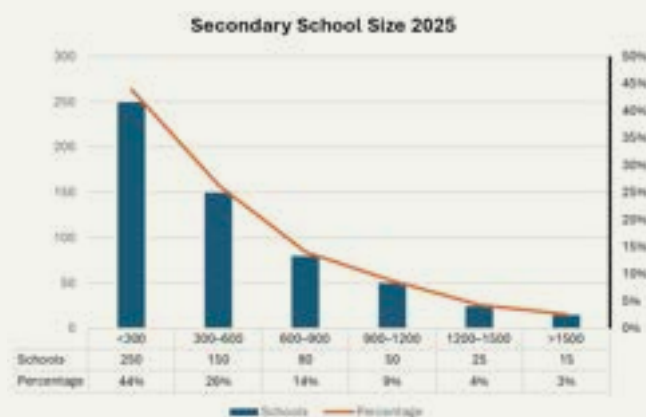
A monitoring report was completed by the Ministry of Education in 2025 - <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/80898/monitoring-gateway-and-trades-academies-2025>

This chapter focuses on the localized real-time impact of the NCEA change proposal from a rural perspective.

Methodology

For this study I focussed on six rural schools, two of these schools being Area schools. These interviews took place over May and June 2025. The interviews took place face to face where possible. The schools included in this study have an average Māori student roll of 22%. Rural schools make up the vast majority of the New Zealand secondary school landscape and generally, these are smaller in size. As can be seen below, smaller schools are a significant factor in New Zealand's secondary school market with almost all in rural communities.

Figure 1. Approximate Size Bands of NZ Secondary Schools (Rounded to Nearest 100)



Education Counts – 2025 July 1st data Caveat

This study is not a literature research. It is a collection of the voices of a small subset of rural schools. Schools were invited to contribute to this study with the Principal, (or representative) and learners (Level 2 and 3 NCEA candidates) invited to answer a number of questions and provide their views regarding both NCEA and the new qualification proposed by the Honourable Erica Stanford, Minister of Education.



Topic One – Our national qualification – NCEA

The Education Minister has stated that NCEA is “broken” and unable to be fixed through any minor tweaks. The problems she identified included:

- Gaming the system
- Credit counting
- Lack of clarity
- Declining standards, primarily focussed around Numeracy and Literacy.
- Qualifications that do not lead on to further learning (just a collection of credits).

From the student desk

All of the participant learners spoken to were able to verbalise their progress towards an NCEA goal and their next steps. Student led ownership of their qualification featured in student participant responses.

The positives of the current system according to the learners included:

- Multiple pathways, academic and vocational
- Transparency
- The ability to earn and build credits in a number of ways over time and years
- Flexible and personalised qualifications according to student interest and ability

“You know what you have achieved”

“It’s quite straightforward and easy to understand”

“I like how many opportunities there are to get credits”

Learners identified a number of issues with NCEA:

- A credit chasing culture by some
- Loss of motivation if you pass early (NCEA levels)
- Unequal credit value (primarily around vocational compared with school 'academic' based subjects). This was perceived as unfairness between subjects
- Trades and vocational courses were viewed as for learners that couldn't succeed academically and perceived as easier standards to achieve.

"It becomes more about the credits rather than the learning"

*You memorise a formula for a week
...and then forget it"*

"Trades – they're easy credits"

From the Principal's Chair

Principals had a range of views regarding NCEA, its effectiveness and areas of concern. Only one Principal saw a new qualification as the only and best solution to these concerns.

Principals could see and identify strengths of the current NCEA system for learners in the rural environment. A summary of participant principals' views of NCEA's strengths included:

Flexibility

- NCEA allows for multiple pathways (academic, vocational unit/achievement standards) and the combination of these to develop personalised programmes for learners. This flexibility has reduced the barriers to achievement for learners
- Learners can achieve at their own pace: This also removes a barrier to achievement for some learners.

Opportunities for resubmissions and reassessments:

- This has supported student learning and achievement and provided a backstop for learners striving for high achievement grades.

NCEA is well understood:

- NCEA has been around since 2002 and the parents of our learners understand the qualification. Learn-

ers can track their progress and are aware of what is required to achieve the qualification.

Concerns

There were concerns regarding some aspects of NCEA identified across the Principals group. These included:

- High assessment workload for teachers, leading to stress
- The ability for learners to gain a qualification through disconnected credits in some cases without meaningful learning pathway
- Learners choosing to sit or not to sit standards with awareness of their credit totals, leading to some disengagement
- Equity gaps that have persisted relating to Equity Index gender and ethnicity
- Variability over both assessment and moderation practices between schools

What about the new proposed qualification?

A common theme was the lack of information and detail regarding this new system to date. Most relied on their professional networks to keep up to date as new announcements and information was shared. However, there was the pragmatic understanding and belief that there was going to be a change and they would need to lead it as with any other significant change.

Principals saw this change as a refocussing on academic pathways. There was some agreement about the need to ensure learners are learning 'whole' subjects rather than the potential for piecemeal learning that is possible under NCEA.

Only one Principal felt fully informed and prepared for the changes. Others identified key concerns that need to be addressed including:

- Lack of detail regarding the specifics of the new qualification
- Likely widening of equity gaps especially for diverse and vocational learners
- Reduced flexibility to develop courses and programmes for diverse learners
- Initially there will be higher failure rates and numbers leaving without qualifications at sixteen with the introduction of the Foundation Certificate was based on the current CAA pass rates

- Potential for inconsistency in Treaty commitments
- Speed of implementation and the capacity of schools and teachers to prepare adequately without significant ministry support.

There was discussion regarding the possible benefits of change, against a backdrop that all believed that the decision had been made. Discussion focused on the rigour and potential opportunities presented with the new qualification. These included:

- Greater consistency between schools
- Reduced assessment variability
- Improved comparability for employers and tertiary providers
- More standardisation between subjects and schools

- Coherent programmes, especially for academic learners
- Reduced focus on credit counting

“A more coherent, sequenced academic pathway”

Overall, the Principals primary concerns were about the loss of flexibility and the ability to personalise programmes on an individual basis. This is and has always been a key strength of the NCEA.

Topic Two – Our Te Tiriti obligations

Two factors were identified as are key points, through Te Tiro Hou for a valid qualification system:

- Fairness
- Inclusivity

From the student desk

The student perspective almost universally, was that NCEA in its current form was equitable and that each student could achieve given the flexible and varied opportunities in the qualification. Learners identified that the curriculum could be delivered in te reo and that the curriculum currently included specific Māori context. One student also spoke of the improvement in teacher use and understanding of te reo and tikanga in the school environment.

Participants said they were not in a position to comment on the new proposal other than comments relating to the Literacy and Numeracy components.

The flexible pathways available under the NCEA umbrella were seen as the key to providing equitable opportunities for all learners to achieve.

From the Principal’s Chair

Principals acknowledged that the current system still needed work to ensure all student groups had equitable, barrier free access but felt that progress had been made and achievement gaps were narrowing. They spoke of the range of learning programmes available and the ability to adapt programmes to student need as a positive characteristic of the NCEA system.

Level One data over the last five years shows the gap in achievement of Māori compared with the whole cohort at Level One has increased from 12.7% in 2020 to 14.3% in 2024. (See table below).

Figure 2. NCEA Level 1 or Above – Māori vs All New Zealand School Leavers

Year	Māori (%)	All NZ School Leavers (%)	Gap (%)
2020	79.3%	92.0%*	-12.7
2021	77.1%	90.5%*	-13.4
2022	74.1%	88.0%*	-13.9
2023	72.6%	86.8%*	-14.2
2024	71.5%	85.8%*	-14.3

*Māori and overall New Zealand rates are from the Ministry of Education School Leavers Data (www.nzqa.govt.nz)

Note: 2024 Level data was impacted by the introduction of the CAA’s as a Literacy/Numeracy measure. The impact was minimised somewhat by the transition arrangements introduced by the government, which are still in place.

The data tells only part of the story. Increasingly, there are a number of schools choosing not to complete a full Level 1 programme (25% in 2023, 36% in 2024).

This is an important caveat, especially when comparing Māori achievement rates between 2023 and 2024:

1. Most of the schools opting out of Level 1 are high-performing, low-equity-index (high decile) schools.
2. Schools with high Māori learner enrolments were more likely to remain in the Level 1 system. Many of these schools are in rural areas.
3. NZQA explicitly identified changing participation patterns as one of the two major drivers of the 2024 attainment shift, alongside the new literacy and numeracy co-requisite.
4. Part of the apparent decline in national Level 1 attainment reflects a **change in who was participating**, not solely a decline in student achievement.

What about the new proposal?

There was general concern about the impact of recent legislation and the new subject based, more rigid qualification, and how it could lead to inconsistent application of our treaty obligations. Specific concerns included:

Misalignment with Treaty Obligations

- The new curriculum reduces explicit Treaty obligations
- Some schools may opt out

“Some schools will go, No, we’re not going to do it”

- Strongly believe Treaty content should remain compulsory

- There will be uneven delivery across the country

“It feels like an erosion of our bicultural commitments “

“Reduced support for Māori learners. This will increase rather than reduce equity gaps”

- Lack of bicultural pathways
- Inconsistent inclusion of Māori authors and knowledge - English
- A system that doesn’t reflect diverse cultural needs

“This is a strategic and reputational risk for the Ministry.”

There was a common concern that if the new Literacy and Numeracy qualifications (Foundation Certificate) were delivered at a ‘phase 5’ level then it would mean an increased number of learners leaving at 16 and lower achievement rates overall, especially for groups already at risk, Māori, Pacific peoples, Neurodiverse and those with disabilities. Principals based their view on the difficulty many learners had in achieving the CAA’s currently.

Māori achievement rates for the CAA’s in 2025 were improving as were the cohort in general. This is to be expected as schools begin to understand more of what is required and resources are developed to support achievement. However, there is still a significant gap.

Figure 3. NCEA Literacy and Numeracy Co-requisite (CAA’s) - 2025

Subject	Māori Achievement	Overall Cohort Achievement	Gap %
Reading	61.4%	71.8%	-10.4
Writing	55.9%	68.0%	-12.1
Numeracy	47.8%	63.0%	-15.2
Overall Average	55.0%	67.6%	-12.6

Changing the benchmark for 2028 has created real concerns for Principals working hard to address this current gap under the CAA umbrella.

Overall, there was a fear that the new rigid structure leaves little room for culturally responsive ways of demonstrating knowledge. Flexible pathways are often more culturally aligned than strictly academic routes and this will be a real challenge with the proposed system from 2028.

“The people traditionally disadvantaged will continue to be disadvantaged”

Topic Three – Flexibility for learners

Flexibility was seen by both learners and principals as one of the key attributes and benefits of the NCEA qualification system. Flexibility, or ‘over flexibility’ was also seen a key rationale for change.

From the student desk

Learners universally endorsed flexibility as a key strength of the NCEA qualification. Flexibility was seen in a number of different ways by the learners interviewed reflecting the diverse number of ways an NCEA programme can be developed currently. Examples included:

- Part-time school and part-time trades programmes
- Student led decisions around internal and external assessments
- Flexible timeframes for work completion including resubmissions and reassessments
- Completing qualifications over more than one year was seen as a key benefit of this system
- Collecting credits for other out of school activities learners interviewed saw as validating their out of school learning and achievement.
- Changing programmes through the year as interests change.

Learners did not see flexibility as an issue that needed to be addressed. The key issues for them were inequities between subjects and the status of vocational pathways.

From the Principals Chair

Principals noted examples of where flexibility could be seen as increasing inequity. In this example, the flexibility allowed for teachers to design and run assessment activities that could and would unwittingly impact on student achievement.

Teachers undertook the assessment of a Level 2 Maths Internal Achievement Standard and specified the assessment conditions for their class as all teachers do. Teachers spoke with colleagues at other schools who were all undertaking the same standard. The conditions in these schools for the same assessment were different:

- 1 hour closed book exam with technology
- 2 hour open book exam with technology
- 2 hour closed book with a cheat sheet and technology
- 2 hour closed book with only a graphics calculator

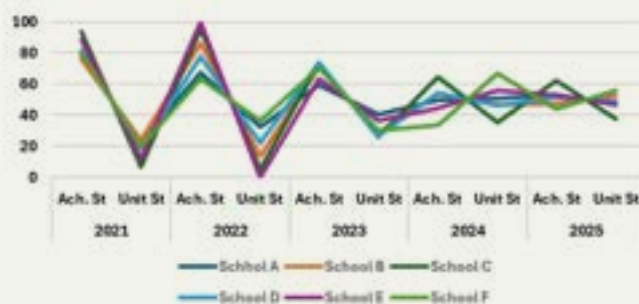
The 1989 Tomorrows Schools Report asked the question: “What is too much flexibility?”

Assessment conditions have long been one area that has led to inconsistency in the learners’ experience. This is an area that most Principals agreed could and should have been reviewed to improve NCEA as a qualification. Principals were looking for sufficient clarity within the new qualification structure to address these concerns, but this detail is not available yet.

Vocational Pathways

Vocational pathway learning programmes have allowed much flexibility to occur. Learners have been able to mix ‘academic’ courses with both Trades courses and Gateway programmes. Over the last five years, the uptake of unit standards, the staple assessment tool for trades and vocational programmes has steadily increased. In 2025, roughly 50% of all assessment completed in the 6 schools was unit standard based. This shift in assessment has been driven by the increasing number of vocational opportunities being made available to learners, not only through Trades and Gateway, but also a wide variety of wider learning opportunities outside the traditional classroom.

Figure 4. Achievement vs. Unit Standards, Rural Schools



Source: NZQA Website

The main concern for Principals around flexibility is the perception that the proposed subject based, more rigid structure will:

- Initially lead to a greater number not achieving as the ability to provide personalised programmes will not be available
- Increase the anxiety level for some student groups with the requirement to have an external assessment in every subject
- Impact negatively on those focused on a vocational pathway
- Widen the equity gaps already in place and not cater for diverse learners

Principals noted flexibility has long been touted as the panacea for schools wanting to meet the needs of both gifted and talented learners and at the same time provide meaningful learning programmes for those at risk of not achieving.

Principals questioned ‘What is the future of course design with the introduction of this new qualification?’

“We need to ensure that all learner groups have the opportunity to have a programme design that provides a meaningful education for all.”

Topic 4 – What about the teachers?

Principals were asked about their preparedness for a new qualification system looming in 2028 and if this system was introduced what could be done to support teachers and learners to ensure implementation was effective.

Recent teacher surveys from both the PPTA and NZEI have clearly shown that the majority of teachers are feeling overwhelmed with the rapid, sweeping changes and curriculum shifts. Teachers already report working well above 40 hours just to comply with the needs of their learners and the school. Any further change needs to offer real support and value to ensure that teachers can do the best in their roles for their learners

Supporting the workforce in the implementation phase was a key focus for all. Suggestions regarding how this could be done included:

- Provide time for schools and teachers to develop plans and resources before implementation
- Increase the number of subject advisors available to support schools, noting that this comes at a cost as these advisors are generally sourced out of an already stretched teacher workforce
- Fund adequately the professional learning opportunities for teachers in rural areas to ensure they get the same development at the same time as their urban colleagues. The Secondary Principals Association of New Zealand (SPANZ) in their latest bulletin (20 August 2026) noted the same concerns regarding resourcing and accessing professional development in rural schools.
- Provide further incentives for learners wanting to be teachers to reduce the shortages (710 in 2025) and reliance on overseas trained teaching staff. This is a long-term aim but an essential action to address the current expertise shortages. Principals spoke of the time and energy required to ‘acclimatise’ new teachers into New Zealand school culture, before addressing the curriculum and assessment requirements in our schools.

Ultimately, it will be teachers in the classroom that determine the success or not of this new qualification and its delivery. It is essential that implementation is well managed and fully resourced. That will be the challenge for any government.

Summary

Through this work, one question kept coming to the fore.

“What is the purpose of qualifications?”

One answer is to prepare learners to go to university or further study, but a number of learners get qualifications that may appear to be just a collection of skills from far and wide without a central focus. However, these learners have demonstrated they can work towards and achieve a national qualification. Their record of achievement lists a number of skills they have mastered through the completion of the certificate. These learners will go on to successful adult lives as they have a work ethic and an elevated self-esteem through this success.

We need to continue valuing achievement in all its forms in the school environment. We also need to provide achievement goals that are accessible to all, easy to understand and provide an incentive to achieve. All learners will grow into adults. Our challenge and obligation is to provide them with an all-round education not just qualifications, so learners leave our school gates prepared to make a meaningful contribution to our community no matter what they choose to do or where they choose to live.

Key findings

Theme	Student view	Principal view
NCEA Flexibility	Strongly positive	Strongly positive
Vocational Pathways	Strongly valued	Strongly valued
Equity impact	Mostly positive about NCEA	Positive about NCEA but uncertain about the new qualification
New Qualification	Uncertain	Significant concerns by most
Implementation readiness	N/A	Low confidence

Conclusion

The rural schools broadly value the flexibility of NCEA. Learners and principals recognise the weaknesses within the current qualification system and there is support for improvement, but not necessarily to the extent of replacing NCEA. Significant concerns remain around implementation, equity and vocational pathways. Concerns remain about the likelihood of an increased ‘failure’ rate in the early years of implementation. Successful and effective implementation will depend on communication, resourcing and stakeholder confidence.

Final Recommendations

- There was a collective view from the principals interviewed that change was coming, and their thoughts were already turning to how as leaders they will navigate changes with their staff. Principals recognised the need to develop an effective plan and timeline to ensure a successful implementation. To support them to do this they suggested the following recommendations:

Policy

- All political parties align as to what the future of education looks like. There is a general nervousness looking ahead towards the general election. Education needs to remain unaffected by political affiliation.
- Publish the new qualifications, exemplars and transition arrangements early to support training of teachers and understanding from parents. This is imperative for the year nine cohort.

Implementation

- Time be provided for teachers and leadership teams to learn about, develop and implement changes to qualifications. This requires the Ministry of Education to develop relevant and effective online and in person tools to assist with the implementation.
- Ensure the new industry based subjects are well resourced in their development and:
 - Audit schools' capability in providing these new courses
 - Resource training for teachers in this area
 - Clarify the career pathways that align with new industry based courses
- Ongoing funding provided as part of the Operations Grant to support development, a budget priority. Recognition that rural schools have different needs than their urban colleagues, must also be considered. This has not been the case in previous implementations; the CAA introduction is an example of this.
- Review the proposed qualification to ensure 'barrier free' access remains the cornerstone of its development and implementation. This needs to involve further discussion with key groups such as iwi, vocational training and learning support organisations.
- Ensure some flexibility in senior school subject pathways remains
- Expand subject advisor networks to support changes. Work with and resource subject associations in a proactive way so that they are best placed to provide effective guidance to schools.

Communication

- A concerted effort must be made to ensure that parents and employers fully understand the changes to qualifications and implications for the learners and leavers before it is introduced. Year nine learners and families must be provided clear advice as to how qualification changes will affect them and their school future.
- Develop resources to support year nine student and parent understanding of the proposed change and its impact on them.

References

Education Review Office. (2024). *Set up to succeed: How well is NCEA Level 1 working for our schools and students?* Education Review Office. <https://www.evidence.ero.govt.nz/documents/set-up-to-succeed-how-well-is-ncea-level-1-working-for-our-schools-and-students>

Earle, D. (2025). *Monitoring Gateway and Trades Academies, 2025*. Ministry of Education. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/tertiary_education_all/monitoring-gateway-and-trades-academies-2025

Ministry of Education. (1988). *Tomorrow's schools: The reform of education administration in New Zealand*. (White paper)

New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association. (1997). *Te Tiro Hou: Report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry*. NZPPTA. <https://www.ppta.org.nz/about-ppta/publication-library/document/134>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). *Curriculum flexibility and autonomy: Promoting a thriving learning environment*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/eccbbac2-en> [oecd.org], [eric.ed.gov]

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2025). *School leaver attainment and qualification statistics*. NZQA. <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/>

Education Counts. (2025). *Secondary school roll and size data (1 July 2025)*. Ministry of Education. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/>

Garner, D. (Host). (2026, March 26). *Compulsory Science? Minister Erica Stanford On Massive Structural Changes Coming To NZ High Schools* [Audio/Video podcast episode]. In *Duncan Garner – Editor-In-Chief*. Rova / YouTube.

Ministry of Education. (2026, March 13). *Teacher demand and supply 2025 report released*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/news/teacher-demand-and-supply-2025-report-released>

2.4 Pacific... without losing identity.

Pacific Learners and NCEA Qualification Reform

by Natalie Faitala and Melissa Denzler

Executive Summary

This chapter examines the implications of the NCEA secondary qualification reforms for Pacific learners, educators, families and communities. By drawing on Pacific education research, existing Pacific education policy commitments, and Pacific voices, it considers whether the reforms support equity, belonging, meaningful pathways and Pacific understandings of learner success.

Pacific success is understood to be both academic and holistic. Identity, language, culture, wellbeing, belonging, relationships, family and community connections, and access to meaningful future pathways are not separate from educational achievement. They are conditions that help enable it.

The reforms align strongly with structural objectives, particularly clearer qualification pathways, vocational opportunities, and transitions beyond school. Alignment is considerably weaker with established Pacific education policy commitments that relate to identity, language and culture, holistic success, genuine partnership, equity and culturally sustaining practice.

Pacific educators and education leaders raised concerns about increased external assessment, limited Pacific representation within curriculum and qualification design, insufficient consultation, implementation pressures, and the additional cultural burden likely to fall on Pacific educators.

For the reforms to support Pacific learner success, Pacific identities, languages, cultures and ways of knowing need to be deliberately reflected in qualification design and assessment. This requires sustained partnership with Pacific communities, monitoring of equity outcomes, culturally sustaining implementation support, and clear system-level responsibility for Pacific learner success. The measure of success is whether Pacific learners can achieve as Pacific, without losing identity.

Introduction

Qualification reform shapes more than the structure of a qualification. It influences what knowledge is valued, how success is recognised, which pathways are available, and whether learners can see their identities, languages, and aspirations reflected within education.

Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the largest Pacific populations in the world, and this population is both young and growing (Ministry of Education, 2020). Pacific peoples comprise diverse nations, languages, identities, histories, migration journeys and lived experiences, and should not be understood as a single or homogeneous group (Samu, 2015, 2020). At the same time, Pacific education research identifies several consistent conditions that support learner success. These include culturally affirming learning experiences, strong relationships and belonging, family and community engagement, strengths-based teaching, and equitable access to meaningful educational opportunities (Alansari et al., 2022; Chu-Fuluifaga & Reynolds, 2024; Hunter et al., 2024; Tuifagalele et al., 2024).

Pacific understandings of success extend beyond qualification attainment. Research highlights the importance of identity, culture, language, wellbeing, relationships and collective forms of support in shaping how Pacific learners experience education and understand success (Alansari et al., 2022; Tuifagalele et al., 2024; Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2024). Pacific learners and families bring strong aspirations, cultural knowledge, multilingual strengths and relational ways of knowing that should be recognised as educational assets rather than treated as an add-on to academic achievement.

This chapter considers whether the secondary qualification reforms create conditions where the strengths and aspirations of Pacific learners and their families can flourish. The reforms seek to improve consistency, qualification coherence, credibility, and transitions beyond school. These are important, but clearer structures and pathways do not guarantee equitable outcomes in themselves. Assessment design, curriculum expectations, access to pathways, implementation conditions and the relationships between schools and communities all shape how qualification reform is experienced in practice.

In this chapter we examine Pacific education research, existing Pacific education policy frameworks and action plans and the perspectives of Pacific educators and education leaders. Pacific voices are positioned as authoritative evidence for understanding how qualification systems operate in practice and for assessing whether reform supports equity, belonging, culturally sustaining education and meaningful future pathways.



Qualification reform takes place within the wider constitutional context established by Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The rights and obligations arising from Te Tiriti are specific to the relationship between Māori and the Crown. At the same time, Te Tiriti shapes the ethical and institutional context within which public education systems are designed and implemented, including expectations relating to equity, cultural responsiveness, partnership and accountability (Came et al., 2024).

The central question for this chapter is not only whether the reforms create a clearer qualification system, but whether they strengthen the conditions that enable Pacific learners to succeed academically, culturally and collectively.



SECTION 2 – Literature Scan

Introduction

Across Pacific education research, success is largely viewed not solely as an individual outcome, but as something fostered through connections between learners, families, communities, schools, and wider cultural worlds. Guided by a strengths-based and relational perspective, this scan examines key themes in the literature relating to Pacific learner experiences of schooling, assessment, wellbeing and educational success in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, sector research reports, and Pacific education policy frameworks relevant to Pacific learner experiences in secondary schooling and assessment in Aotearoa New Zealand are drawn on. Sources were selected for relevance to one or more of the following areas: Pacific learner achievement and wellbeing, culturally sustaining pedagogies, assessment and qualification systems, family and community engagement, leadership and school practices, and Pacific education policy. Literature published within the Aotearoa New Zealand context was prioritised and sources directly relevant to secondary education NCEA reform, and, where possible, to research led or co-authored by Pacific scholars, researchers, and practitioners.

Hau'ofa's (1994) concept of Oceania as “our sea of islands” underpins the literature scan. Hau'ofa's concept challenges the deficit views of Pacific peoples as small, isolated, or dependent. He presents the Pacific as a vast relational space, shaped by lasting relationships among peoples, places, histories, and ways of knowing and being. Within this perspective, identity, knowledge, and wellbeing are understood as emerging through connections characterised by reciprocity, mobility, and collective responsibility. This relational lens has become central to Pacific research and offers an important foundation for examining what enables Pacific learner success.

Understanding Diversity Within Pacific communities

A central challenge in understanding Pacific learners' experiences in New Zealand schooling is recognising the significant diversity masked by the umbrella term “Pasifika.” Samu (2015) argues that educators must deepen their understanding of the diverse realities within Pacific communities rather than treating Pacific-heritage learners as a homogeneous group. This diversity encompasses different island nations, languages, cultural practices, and migration histories, but education policies and practices often fail to account for these distinctions. Samu (2020) further notes that Pacific education has been an explicit strategic priority in Aotearoa New Zealand for more than two decades; however, the provision of educational opportunities and experiences vary across communities and regions.

The term “Pasifika” encompasses students from diverse Pacific Island nations; Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Tokelau, Niue, and others, each with distinct languages, cultural practices, and educational experiences (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.-b). The Tapasā framework acknowledges this diversity by incorporating multiple cultural perspectives. Secondary schools still often treat Pacific learners as a homogeneous group and this homogenisation risks oversimplifying the unique strengths, learning preferences, and aspirations that characterise individual students and communities (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.-b).

It is also important to understand that Pacific communities have distinct historical and constitutional relationships with Aotearoa New Zealand. The Cook Islands and Niue are self-governing in free association with New Zealand, while Tokelau remains part of the Realm of New Zealand. These different relationships have influenced migration patterns, citizenship arrangements, language maintenance, and educational experiences, further highlighting the limitations of treating Pacific learners as a single educational group (Samu, 2015, 2020).

The complexity of Pacific experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand schools extends beyond cultural diversity to include experiences of systemic inequity. Samu (2013) argues that Pacific education has become entrenched in policy and practice without robust interrogation of the assumptions that underpin it. Without that focus, the term can mask important differences within and across Pacific communities and shape decision-making in ways that reinforce existing inequities.

Acknowledging the diversity within Pacific communities does not prevent the identification of shared conditions that support success. Instead, it requires careful attention to distinguish relational and systemic patterns from the specific ways those conditions are understood and enacted across Pacific communities. The themes that follow should be read as interconnected conditions, rather than a single or universal model of Pacific educational experiences.

Pacific Understandings of Success

Wellbeing

Learner success cannot be separated from wellbeing. Pacific-specific research frames wellbeing as being inseparable from relationships, identity, family, culture, and belonging. The COMPASS study identifies culturally affirming learning experiences, strong support networks, home-school partnerships based on mutual care and respect, and strength-based teaching practices as key conditions for Pacific learners' success (Alansari et al., 2022). The Whānau Pasifika COMPASS report also highlights that Pacific families understand success through values that guide how learners navigate schooling, highlighting that wellbeing is relational, collective, and culturally grounded rather than just individual or academic (Tuifagalele et al., 2024). Recent Youth19 findings further show that Pacific secondary students' wellbeing is shaped by identity, family, faith, education, friendships, community connections, health, housing, and wider socioeconomic conditions (Veukiso-Ulugia et al., 2024).

Cultural Identity, Indigenous Knowledge Integration, and Strength-Based Approaches

Across the research there is a consistent message: Pacific learners are most likely to thrive when schools value, rather than marginalise, their cultural identities and knowledge systems. Hunter and Hunter (2024) show this in mathematics education. Although Matapo and Baice's (2020) work is developed in the context of higher education, their conceptualisation of Pacific success through the metaphor of traditional wayfinding offers a valuable perspective for understanding Pacific success more broadly. They present learners as active navigators throughout their education, rather than passive recipients of educational interventions.

Learner Values, Motivations, and Voice

Understanding what learners themselves value is fundamental to supporting their success. Research (Hill et al., 2019) shows that many Pacific learners value usefulness, peer collaboration and group work, effort and practice, and family support in mathematics learning.

The importance of learner voice extends to understanding the factors learners identify as central to their academic success. McDonald and Lipine (2012) found that Samoan secondary students highlighted passion to achieve, a holistic orientation to learning, resilience in the face of inconsistency, and strong family support as important to success on the road to tertiary education.

Educational values of Pacific learners reveal the intersection between cultural and educational values (Hunter, 2021). This study found that learners frequently prioritised practice, family, respect, and persistence, showing how cultural values shape educational preferences and classroom participation.



Relational Conditions that Support Pacific Success

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the “Know Me, Teach Me” Principle

Effective teaching for Pacific learners begins with knowing them, understanding their identities, languages, cultures, values, and aspirations. Sili-loto’s (2022) “know me, teach me” framing captures the expectation that teachers engage in genuine knowing before they can teach effectively. Pedagogical approaches grounded in Pacific cultural frameworks also offer strong tools for secondary teachers. Taleni and Surtees (2024) propose a Samoan pedagogy of the heart, underpinned by values like alofa and reciprocity, and argue that these values can act as levers for learning. These culturally sustaining approaches require support at both classroom and school-wide levels if they are to be implemented consistently.

Leadership and Culturally Responsive School Environments

School leadership also plays a crucial role in creating conditions where Pacific secondary learners can succeed. Effective leadership can transform school contexts through intentional supports that raise engagement, achievement, and wellbeing for Pacific learners (Taleni, 2017). Beyond leadership and organisational structures, the day-to-day relationships learners experience with teachers remain central to engagement and achievement.

Teacher-Learner Relationships and Relational Pedagogy

The quality of relationships between teachers and Pacific learners emerges as a key factor in supporting success. Learners value teachers who ‘always have my back’, highlighting the importance of relational trust, solidarity, and strength-based support (Reynolds, 2018).

Pedagogical leadership is essential for creating environments where Pacific learners can thrive. This leadership is described as the purposeful, collaborative, and creative action taken by principals to enhance engagement and achievement for minority-culture students (Mugisha, 2013).

What becomes clear is that learner success is shaped not only by what occurs within schools but also by the relationships schools build with families and communities.

Family Involvement and Community Engagement

Family involvement is not an add-on to schooling, but a relational and cultural foundation for Pacific learner success. The Whānau Pasifika COMPASS report highlights the role of families in shaping learners’ values, aspirations, identity, and navigation of schooling (Tuifagalele et al., 2024). Pacific family support is connected to intergenerational stories of success, where achievement is understood within wider family histories and futures (Cunningham et al., 2022). Recent research (Chu-Fuluifaga & Reynolds, 2024; Sharp et al., 2021) further argues that Pacific parents and communities have much to contribute to teacher learning and to the education of Pacific learners. These findings suggest that schools must treat Pacific families as knowledge holders and partners in learning, rather than being positioned as passive participants.

System Conditions that Enable or Limit Success

Literature points to many conditions that enable Pacific learner success, and identifies persistent systemic barriers that continue to limit equitable educational opportunities. Rather than positioning these barriers within Pacific learners themselves, research consistently points to features of the education system, policies, and institutional practices that limit success. Inequities in assessment design, structural racism, uneven implementation of culturally sustaining practice, and school structures continue to restrict pathways for Pacific learners.

Achievement Patterns and System Conditions

Pacific learners' academic experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand schools have been a longstanding focus. Achievement patterns reflect complex systemic influences and are unlikely to be addressed through any single intervention (Edwards & Krishnan, 2016). Chapman and Tunmer (2019) identify persistent disparities, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy achievement. These studies suggest that improving outcomes for Pacific learners requires sustained, ongoing, system-wide action rather than isolated initiatives and shifting focus from learner deficits to the educational conditions that enable equitable success.

Pacific learners' engagement with mathematics education presents another area where disparities are evident. Pacific learners value utility, peer collaboration and group work, effort and practice, and family support in mathematics learning (Hill et al., 2019). These findings reinforce that effective teaching is not just about instructional techniques, but also about recognising the cultural value, relationships and ways of learning that Pacific learners bring with them.

Assessment

Assessment design and implementation present particular challenges for Pacific learners in Aotearoa New Zealand. The design of national literacy and numeracy assessments includes process and design issues that may undermine fairness and disproportionately disadvantage Pacific learners and other minoritised groups (Franken, 2023). Although transition arrangements for the NCEA co-requisite have been extended to the end of 2027 (Ministry of Education, n.d.-a), with learners still able to use approved literacy and numeracy-rich standards during the transition period, these concerns remain relevant because the dedicated literacy and numeracy assessments continue to play a significant role in qualification attainment pathways.

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) represents a critical point for Pacific secondary learners, particularly because literacy and numeracy requirements affect access to qualification attainment. Franken's (2023) critique of the Common Assessment Activities remains relevant, although it is now within a revised transition context. The ongoing concern is not the existence of the assessments themselves, but whether assessment design, implementation conditions, and progression requirements recognise diverse ways of demonstrating literacy and numeracy and avoid creating inequitable barriers for Pacific learners.

The challenge of assessment extends to broader questions of validity and cultural responsiveness. 'Otunuku, Brown, and Airini (2013) found that Tongan secondary students' conceptions of teaching, learning, and assessment were statistically associated with performance on high-stakes NCEA assessments in English and mathematics, although these effects varied by assessment type. These findings suggest that learners may be more likely to succeed when assessment and teaching practices feel meaningful, fair, and aligned with their ways of learning and understanding the world.

Structural Inequities and Institutional Responsibility

Addressing persistent achievement gaps requires acknowledging structural inequities within education systems. Teacher education and school practice must explicitly recognise structural inequities and racism in education if equitable outcomes for diverse Pacific communities are to improve (Hunter et al., 2024). The Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 identifies confronting systemic racism and discrimination as a critical shift that is necessary for change (Ministry of Education, 2020). The Plan recognises that discrimination, bullying, and systemic barriers can negatively affect attendance, belonging, and achievement for Pacific learners.

Building Cultural Capability

Resources such as Tapasā provide guidance for culturally sustaining practice with Pacific learners (Ministry of Education, 2018), while progress reporting indicates an ongoing need to strengthen Pacific cultural capability across the sector (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Teacher knowledge and practices remain uneven, and there is an ongoing need to reframe Pacific education through culturally sustaining and relational approaches (Hunter et al., 2024). Highfield et al. (2024) also show that although middle leaders can often describe culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies, they are less confident about how to evaluate and monitor these practices systematically.

Pathways and Educational Opportunity

The literature also highlights how organisational practices can shape learners' educational opportunities. The Action Plan for Pacific Education identifies the removal of streaming as a priority because of its potential to limit expectations and future pathways for Pacific learners (Ministry of Education, 2020). This concern is reinforced by Tokona Te Raki (2023), who contend that streaming can limit access to learning opportunities and reinforce inequitable educational outcomes. These findings highlight the importance of qualifications and school systems that maintain high expectations and provide meaningful pathways for all learners.

Synthesis

The literature presents a consistent picture of the conditions that support Pacific learner success. Alongside persistent barriers in assessment, structural inequities and uneven cultural responsiveness, research emphasises Pacific strengths and culturally sustaining approaches. Relationships, identity, family, belonging and responsive schooling are central, and Pacific communities hold strong educational aspirations for their children. The challenge is therefore not to 'fix' Pacific learners, but to create educational conditions that enable those strengths and aspirations to flourish.

Overall, research suggests that qualification reform should be assessed against five connected questions:

1. whether it recognises Pacific identities, languages, cultures and aspirations;
2. whether assessment and pathways are meaningful and equitable;
3. whether learners and families experience belonging and genuine partnership;
4. whether schools and educators have the capability and resources to implement change; and

5. whether responsibility for addressing inequity is assumed at system level rather than placed on individual learners, families or schools. These questions frame the analysis that follows.

SECTION 3 – Evaluating the qualification reforms against existing Pacific education policy commitments

Introduction

Tapasā: Cultural Competencies framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners (Ministry of Education, 2018), the Action Plan for Pacific Education (Ministry of Education, 2020), and Takiala Pasifika 2020–2023 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2020) articulate established Pacific education policy commitments. Although developed for different purposes, together they provide an established policy benchmark for culturally sustaining, equitable education.

Across these policy documents, shared commitments include Pacific identities, languages and cultures; reciprocal relationships with families and communities; equitable access to meaningful pathways; holistic understandings of success; culturally sustaining practice; and system responsibility for addressing inequity. This section assesses the extent to which those commitments are visible in the proposed qualification reforms.

3.1 The frameworks and action plans

Tapasā Cultural Competencies Framework for Teachers of Pacific Learners

The Tapasā framework (Ministry of Education, 2018) represents a core policy framework directly supporting secondary teachers of Pacific learners. Developed by the Ministry of Education through consultation with Pacific teachers, academics, experts, families, Tapasā provides a framework that secondary school teachers can use to strengthen their practice when working with Pacific learners. Tapasā is organised around three foundational competencies, or *turu*, that form the basis of the framework:

Turu 1 Identities, Languages and Cultures, and awareness of the diverse and ethnic-specific identities, languages, and cultures of Pacific learners.

Turu 2 Collaborative and Respectful Relationships and Professional Behaviours, maintaining collaborative, respectful relationships and professional behaviours that enhance the learning and wellbeing of Pacific learners.

Turu 3 Implementing effective Pedagogies for Pacific Learners.

Tapasā signals that reforms should do more than acknowledge Pacific learners. The commitments of Tapasā should be evidenced within the qualification and assessment design. Absence of this suggests that the responsibility for culturally sustaining practice will be carried by individual teachers, rather than being embedded within the reforms themselves.

The Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020-2030 (2023 refresh)

The Action Plan for Pacific Education (Ministry of Education, 2020) provides the overarching policy framework within which Tapasā and other initiatives operate, with clear implications for secondary schools. The Action Plan identifies five key shifts needed to achieve the vision that diverse Pacific learners and their families are safe, valued, and equipped to achieve their education aspirations. These shifts include

- Working reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities to respond to unmet needs, including growing and supporting Pacific bilingual and immersion education pathways
- Confronting systemic racism and discrimination in education
- Enabling every teacher, leader, and education professional to take coordinated action to become culturally competent with diverse Pacific learners
- Partnering with families to design education opportunities together with teachers, leaders, and education professionals so that aspirations for learning and employment can be met
- Growing, retaining, and valuing highly competent teachers, leaders, and educational professionals with diverse Pacific whakapapa.

The 2023 refresh strengthened the focus on Pacific languages in education. The Plan now includes new investment in Pacific education, including the introduction of professional learning and development through Tapasā, development of new Pacific language

NCEA subjects (Vagahau Niue and Gagana Tokelau), and support for Pacific bilingual education in schools, including additional operational funding and curriculum resources.

The key shifts articulated by the Action Plan indicate that qualification reform needs to move beyond structural change to show how Pacific learners, families and communities will expressly shape implementation, how inequities will be addressed, and how reforms will support and advance culturally sustaining education across the system.

Takiala Pasifika 2020-2023: NZQA's Action Plan for Pacific Learner Success

NZQA's Takiala Pasifika 2020–2023 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2020), which, as a plan, is now considered to be “part of our (NZQA's) everyday business” (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, n.d.-a). NZQA commits to improving outcomes for Pacific learners through a focus on equity, culturally responsive practice, and stronger partnerships with families and communities. With a specific focus on the qualification and assessment system, the plan positions Pacific learner success as dependent on culturally grounded approaches, meaningful engagement with communities, and improved navigation of education and employment.

NZQA is a Crown entity and Crown agent with statutory responsibilities within the qualification and assessment system. Takiala Pasifika represents an important Crown-level commitment to Pacific learner success within that system, especially in relation to equity, culturally responsive practice, partnerships and qualification pathways.

Takiala positions Pacific learner success as something that should be intentionally designed into qualification and assessment systems.

3.2 Evaluating the reforms against shared Pacific education policy commitments

The policy documents covered here were developed for different purposes, but present a consistent understanding of Pacific learner success, positioning it as dependent on:

- Pacific identities, languages and cultures being recognised as educational strengths
- reciprocal relationships with families and communities

- equitable access to meaningful pathways
- holistic understandings of success
- system responsibility for addressing inequities
- culturally sustaining practice

These shared commitments provide an evaluative benchmark for the following analysis, guided by three questions.

1. To what extent are the commitments explicitly recognised within the NCEA reform discussion document (Ministry of Education, 2025)?
2. To what extent are the commitments embedded within the design of the reforms?
3. Overall, to what extent do the NCEA reforms align with the shared Pacific education policy commitments?

Each commitment was examined using the same evaluative process to ensure judgments were applied consistently.

Table 1. Alignment evaluation scale

Strong	The commitment is explicitly recognised in the reform documentation, clearly embedded within the design of the reforms, and demonstrates strong alignment with the shared Pacific education policy commitments.
Partial	The commitment is recognised in some aspects of the reforms, but the alignment is incomplete, inconsistently embedded or only partially reflects the shared Pacific education policy commitments.
Limited	The commitment is indirectly or briefly reflected, with limited evidence that it has informed the design of the reforms or aligns with the shared Pacific education policy commitments.
Weak	The commitment is largely absent from reform documentation or is not meaningfully incorporated into the reform design. There is little or no evidence that it has influenced the design of the reforms or aligns with shared Pacific education policy commitments.

Table 2. Evaluating the NCEA reforms against shared commitments across shared Pacific education policy commitments

Shared commitment	What the commitments require	Extent of alignment	Evidence from the reforms
Identity, culture and languages	Pacific learners experience education that values their cultures, languages and belonging. e.g., Tapasā: Pacific learners’ have “shared and ethnic-specific identities, languages and cultures” and this underpins how they think and learn and are “fundamental to their well-being and success” (p. 9).	Limited	There is little explicit discussion of Pacific identities, languages, cultures, or Pacific ways of knowing in the qualification design.
Relationships and partnerships	Families and communities are genuine partners.e.g. The Action Plan: Pacific learners and families should be “safe, valued and equipped to achieve their education aspirations” (p. 3), and that learning and succeeding are often understood as a “collective activity” (p. 6)	Limited	The NCEA discussion document acknowledges that students, whānau and teachers need time to adjust, and it asked for public consultation. However, there is little evidence that Pacific families or communities are positioned as partners in the design.

Shared commitment	What the commitments require	Extent of alignment	Evidence from the reforms
Equity and aspirations	Pacific learners are able to access broad and ambitious educational pathways e.g., Takiala Pasifika commits to “equity of access and outcomes for all learners” and states equity and excellence should be informed by “data, evidence, and best practice” (pp. 3–4)	Partial	The reforms emphasise access to pathways into further employment, but they do not provide a Pacific-specific equity analysis or explain how existing inequities experienced by Pacific learners will be addressed.
Holistic learner success	Success is understood broadly, encompassing identity, wellbeing, belonging, cultural strengths and educational achievement e.g., Takiala Pasifika pp.3-4	Weak	Reform documentation asks whether the Foundational Award should recognise other areas of achievement, but it gives limited attention to holistic understandings of Pacific learner success.
Meaningful pathways	Qualifications should support meaningful pathways and diverse learner aspirations E.g., Action Plan pp.18-20	Strong	The reform document emphasises vocational pathways, coherent VET subjects, industry links, tertiary pathways, employment, and transition into post-school study or work.
Reciprocity and systems responsibility	Education agencies are responsible for responding to inequities and working with families and communities to improve Pacific learner outcomes E.g., The Action Plan’s first system shift is to “work reciprocally with diverse Pacific communities” (p. 5). It also names the need to confront systemic racism and discrimination in education (p. 5)	Limited	The document recognises inconsistencies in learner experience across schools. But it does not name racism, Pacific-specific barriers, or reciprocal work with Pacific communities
Culturally sustaining implementation	Reform implementation should include culturally sustaining practice, Pacific-focused capability, and ongoing support for educators and communities e.g., Tapasā pp .10-15	Limited	The document says teachers will need time, resources and support, and that implementation will be phased. But it does not specify Pacific-focused PLD, Pacific language resources, culturally sustaining assessment, or family support.

Note. Reform evidence is drawn from Ministry of Education (2025)

Interpretation

A clear pattern emerges from the analysis. The reforms align most strongly with structural and technical objectives, particularly qualification coherence, pathways, and transitions. Alignment is considerably weaker in the cultural, relational, and equity-focused commitments that sit at the heart of shared Pacific education policy commitments. This indicates that reform efforts have prioritised improving the architecture of the qualification system, while giving much less attention to the conditions that Pacific education commitments identify as essential for learner success.

SECTION 4 – Pacific Voices

Introduction

This section brings together the voices of Pacific knowledge holders, including academic experts and educators who participated in interviews, focus groups and surveys. They offer rich insights into Pacific perspectives, aspirations, and educational practice. These voices act as important evidence, ensuring Pacific perspectives remain central to the analysis and interpretations presented in this report.

4.1 Pacific Education Expert Perspectives on the Proposed Secondary Qualification Reforms

Six Pacific education experts who are employed at tertiary institutions across Aotearoa New Zealand were interviewed to explore their perspectives on the proposed replacement of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) with a new secondary qualification framework. Participants represented extensive expertise across schooling, teacher education, educational leadership, curriculum development, language revitalisation, Pacific education policy and research.

While participants brought different experiences and viewpoints, there was striking consistency across interviews regarding the aspirations of Pacific communities and the likely implications of the proposed reforms. Their responses centred less on structural aspects of assessment and more on broader questions of educational purpose, cultural equity, learner well-being, and the role of education in supporting Pacific communities.

Pacific Success is Holistic

Across all interviews, participants described successful schooling as extending far beyond examination results or qualification attainment.

Success was consistently framed as learners:

- knowing who they are;
- maintaining strong cultural identity;
- experiencing belonging;
- having confidence in themselves;
- remaining connected to family, culture and community;
- leaving school with multiple meaningful future pathways.

Several participants emphasised that Pacific families often define success differently from narrow academic measures.

“Parents talk about their child being happy. When we unpack that, it means connected to themselves, their identity, their family, their community and their future aspirations.”

“Pacific students come with aspirations. They want to see themselves in the curriculum, in the teaching, in the school values and in the pathways offered.”

Participants consistently rejected deficit understandings of Pacific learners. Instead, Pacific learners were described as “competent and confident learners... learners of promise.”

Success was therefore viewed as the education system recognising and building upon the strengths students already possess.

Language, Culture and Identity are Fundamental to Learning

The strongest point of agreement concerned the central importance of Pacific language, culture and identity. Participants argued that Pacific educational success is inseparable from cultural affirmation. Several highlighted decades of research demonstrating that learners achieve better when their identities are recognised and validated.

“Language, culture and identity are the foundation on which everything else is built.”

“Pacific students want to see their language, culture and values reflected in the curriculum. They want to know that who they are matters.”

Many expressed concern that the proposed reforms risk privileging a narrow interpretation of “knowledge-rich” curriculum based predominantly on Western traditions. Participants questioned whether Pacific knowledges would continue to be valued.

As one Pacific academic observed:

“Knowledge rich has become code for Western knowledge.”

Another noted:

“There are multiple knowledges, multiple languages and multiple worldviews. None cancel each other out.”

Several participants linked this directly to concerns about Pacific Studies, questioning whether Pacific peoples would become objects of study rather than active contributors to curriculum knowledge.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Mātauranga Māori impacting on Pacific education

Pacific teachers were cognisant that a qualification system that did not acknowledge Te Tiriti and Mātauranga Māori was not going to have a place for Pacific knowledges.

“When they started to take Māori out of curriculum and assessment, I knew that the same would happen for Pacific. So, they’re going to do the same. What they do to Māori, they will do to Pacific. It’s automatic. They remove Māori and Pacific follow. So, if they’re not being reflected in this, then we can bet our bottom dollar that Pacific is not being reflected”.

Pacific teachers acknowledged that Māori had paved the way for Pacific communities to follow in terms of reclaiming their language and indigenous rights and that this was an example for Pacific communities to follow. Teachers shared that significant work had been done in schools to enable NCEA assessments to recognise and value Pacific knowledge and culture and that under the qualifications reform the opportunity to do this would be diminished.

Assessment Must Promote Equity Rather than Uniformity

The proposed return to an examination-based qualification generated the greatest concern.

Most participants viewed NCEA as an imperfect but fundamentally more equitable system because it recognised multiple ways of demonstrating learning. While acknowledging that aspects of NCEA could be strengthened,

interviewees generally rejected replacing the system entirely.

“NCEA may have needed tweaking, but it certainly didn’t need to be completely thrown out.”

“An exam is a moment in time. It cannot capture everything a learner knows.”

Many argued that examinations privilege particular forms of knowledge and performance while disadvantaging bilingual learners, culturally diverse learners and those whose strengths are demonstrated through authentic practice.

“Why are we taking assessment away from where the learning happens?”

Others questioned why vocational education would also require external examinations.

Participants recognised the value of maintaining high expectations and rigorous learning but argued that rigour and equity are not mutually exclusive.

Several distinguished clearly between:

- high expectations for learners; and
- reliance on traditional examinations.

“There should be no dumbing down. But there should also be proper scaffolding and culturally responsive teaching.”

Educational Success Depends on Relationships

Participants consistently argued that educational reform cannot succeed without meaningful relationships.

Strong partnerships between schools, Pacific families and communities were described as essential.

Schools already demonstrating high Pacific achievement were frequently characterised by:

- culturally responsive leadership;
- long-term investment in relationships;
- strong mentoring structures;
- meaningful engagement with families;
- recognition of language and identity.

“It depends on the school.”

Several suggested that successful schools had developed these approaches over many years.

Implementation was therefore viewed as more important than structural reform itself.

Participants also expressed concern that consultation surrounding the proposed reforms had been insufficient.

“Consultation is an ongoing dialogue.”

“People can say they’ve consulted, but if no one turned up, have they really consulted?”

Many participants believed Pacific voices had not been adequately involved in shaping the reforms.

Growing Cultural Burden on Pacific Educators

Every interview discussed the increasing responsibilities carried by Pacific teachers and leaders.

Participants noted that Pacific educators already undertake extensive cultural labour beyond classroom teaching, including:

- mentoring students;
- supporting families;
- translating school systems;
- leading cultural initiatives;
- building community relationships;
- advocating for Pacific learners.

Several expressed concern that the reforms would significantly increase these expectations.

“The work that will fall on Pacific Kaiako will be astronomical.”

“We don’t stop in the classroom.”

Participants warned that unless reforms adequately recognise and resource this work, Pacific educators face increasing burnout.

Many also highlighted the importance of increasing Pacific representation in educational leadership and policy development.

Concerns Regarding Te Tiriti, Mātauranga Māori and Mana Motuhake

Nearly all participants believed the proposed reforms inadequately reflected Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Many argued that diminishing Māori knowledge inevitably affects Pacific learners because Pacific educational development has often progressed alongside Māori educational advancement.



“If Te Tiriti, mātauranga Māori and mana motuhake are not there, it does not bode well for Pacific interests.”

Several described the reforms as representing a movement away from partnership and towards greater standardisation. Participants frequently contrasted previous curriculum developments, which involved extensive consultation and local curriculum design,

with what they perceived as a more centralised approach. Some described the reforms as re-colonising curriculum; reasserting dominant knowledge systems and narrowing conceptions of educational success.

Schools Will Ultimately Shape the Impact of Reform

Despite widespread concerns, participants consistently recognised the agency of schools. Many believed that school leadership would largely determine whether Pacific learners experienced positive or negative outcomes.

Schools with:

- strong Pacific leadership;
- authentic community partnerships;
- culturally responsive pedagogy;
- confidence to adapt implementation

were viewed as better positioned to mitigate potential negative impacts.

“Schools that have done the work over many years will find ways to make it work for their communities.”

“Implementation is everything.”

Although participants differed in their emphasis, there was remarkable convergence across interviews.

Pacific education experts consistently argued that secondary qualifications should:

- affirm Pacific identity, language and culture;
- provide equitable rather than uniform opportunities for

success;

- recognise multiple pathways beyond university;
- maintain high academic expectations alongside culturally responsive pedagogy;
- strengthen partnerships with Pacific communities;
- value multiple forms of knowledge;
- support rather than increase the cultural burden carried by Pacific educators.

Participants did not oppose educational improvement or reform in principle. Several acknowledged the need for stronger vocational pathways, clearer progression, improved literacy and numeracy, and continued refinement of assessment practices.

However, there was broad consensus that the proposed reforms, as currently understood, risk narrowing definitions of knowledge, success and achievement while disproportionately affecting Pacific learners unless implementation is accompanied by sustained consultation, adequate resourcing, culturally responsive pedagogy, and meaningful Pacific leadership throughout the reform process.

4.2 Pacific Teacher Voice on the Proposed Secondary Qualification Reform

Three Pacific teacher focus groups were undertaken to explore the perspectives of Pacific educators regarding the proposed reforms to New Zealand’s secondary qualifications framework. The focus groups included members of **Komiti Pasifika PPTA**, an elected advisory committee representing Pasifika members across the breadth of the country within NZPPTA.

While considerable attention has been given to structural changes within the proposed reforms, comparatively little attention has been afforded to the voices of those responsible for implementing these changes in classrooms. The summaries of perspectives collected from Pacific teachers, who will be expected to implement changes across a range of school contexts, follow. Pacific teachers have a unique insight into their Pacific communities and their schools’ contexts.

Participants represented a diverse range of Pacific ethnicities, teaching experience, curriculum areas, leadership responsibilities, and school settings. Collectively, they brought extensive expertise in English, Mathematics, Visual Arts, Languages, Social Sciences, Drama, Learning Support, Pacific Studies and school leadership. Participants included beginning teachers, experienced classroom practitioners, curriculum leaders and senior leaders working predominantly in schools serving significant Pacific student populations. Despite these differences, there was a remarkable consistency in the themes that emerged throughout the talanoa.

Rather than focusing solely on the structural changes associated with assessment reform, participants consistently situated their responses within broader discussions of educational purpose, equity, identity, cultural

responsiveness and social justice. Their discussions revealed that concerns about qualifications could not be separated from wider issues relating to curriculum design, teacher autonomy, community aspirations and the educational experiences of Pacific learners.

Throughout the talanoa focus groups, teachers repeatedly shifted the discussion away from assessment mechanics and towards more fundamental questions:

- What does educational success actually mean for Pacific learners?
- Whose knowledge is valued within the curriculum?
- How do schools create environments where Pacific learners experience genuine belonging?
- What responsibilities do teachers carry in supporting Pacific students?
- How might proposed reforms influence educational equity?

These questions became the organising ideas underpinning the discussion. Rather than viewing qualification reform as an isolated policy change, participants described it as one component within a much larger educational ecosystem involving learners, families, communities, teachers, school leadership and wider society.

A notable feature of the discussions was the emotional investment participants demonstrated. Teachers frequently drew upon their own educational experiences, their family migration stories, their identities as Pacific peoples, and their professional experiences supporting Pacific learners. Their responses reflected both deep pride in the progress Pacific education has made under NCEA and significant concern regarding the possible implications of replacing the current qualifications framework.

Across all three focus groups, teachers consistently rejected deficit explanations of Pacific achievement. Instead, they described Pacific learners as capable, resilient and highly aspirational. Where challenges existed, participants located these within education systems rather than within learners themselves.

Talanoa Approach

The Pacific teacher voice was collected through three semi-structured focus group talanoa involving Pacific secondary school teachers from across Aotearoa New Zealand. Participants were invited to discuss the proposed secondary qualification reforms through seven

guiding questions examining aspirations for Pacific learners, perceptions of the proposed reforms, potential impacts on Pacific communities, and implications for Pacific educators.

Talanoa aligns closely with Pacific ways of generating knowledge. Talanoa privileges relational dialogue, shared storytelling, collective reflection and reciprocal meaning-making. Participants were encouraged to respond not only to the facilitator but also to one another, allowing ideas to be extended, challenged and affirmed throughout the conversations.

This approach proved particularly valuable. Rather than isolated opinions emerging independently, participants frequently built upon each other's experiences, often expressing agreement before adding further examples from their own schools and communities. The resulting discussions reflected collective sense-making rather than individual testimony.

The Talanoa identified recurring concepts, shared concerns and common aspirations. There were repeated references to educational success, identity, belonging, cultural responsiveness, assessment, consultation, teacher workload, community partnerships and educational equity. While individual experiences differed according to school context, teaching experience and subject area, there was considerable consistency across discussions. This convergence strengthens confidence that the themes presented reflect commonly held perspectives rather than isolated opinions.

Defining Pacific Success

The strongest and most consistent finding across all focus groups concerned the meaning of educational success. Participants overwhelmingly rejected narrow definitions of success based solely upon qualifications, examination performance or university entrance. Instead, they described success as a holistic concept encompassing identity, belonging, wellbeing, relationships, leadership, cultural knowledge, community contribution and future aspirations.

For many teachers, academic achievement remained important but represented only one component of success. It was noted that Pacific success was seeing “our children engaged, that they see themselves in the space, that they feel like they can belong there” and students “coming as their authentic selves” and confidently expressing who they are within school.

Belonging emerged as a foundational condition for learning. Teachers consistently argued that students learn most effectively when they experience genuine connection to their school environment.

“Kids learn best when they know they feel connected. If they’re not connected to whatever you’re trying to teach them, no way that they can learn.”

Success was viewed collectively rather than individually. Participants frequently described Pacific achievement as belonging not only to the learner but to their wider family, church and community.

“That one person goes across the stage... but it’s that one person, and then the fifteen people sitting in the seats cheering for them.”

Another explained that Pacific learners never arrive at school alone.

“They come with their communities, whether it’s the church behind them, whether it’s the village... we’ve made this network of people that have the same vision.”

This understanding reflects Pacific conceptions of collective success, where educational achievement represents shared family aspirations rather than solely individual accomplishment.

Participants challenged conventional indicators of success. One

teacher questioned why schools celebrate only academic achievement while overlooking leadership, cultural contribution and personal growth.

“For me, they turn up to school, they engage, they’re leaders, they come as their authentic selves.”

One participant noted that success for some Pacific students could be survival. Surviving the journey of schooling and coming out with a pathway to work or to go on to tertiary education could be considered success.

“It’s finishing work at 5 a.m. It’s getting ready for school, which is my journey... Finishing work at 5, getting home, getting ready for school, and getting out. It’s the home life, believing too much in school and trying to find that middle, and sometimes not being able to find it. So, if a Pasifika learner can say that they survived, then they succeeded”.

Others suggested success could simply be helping students navigate educational systems that were “never designed for us.”

“The ‘aha’ moment... when they leave and they can actually navigate those spaces by themselves without having us hold their hand for the rest of the journey.”

Several teachers connected Pacific success directly to migration narratives. They reflected that many Pacific families migrated to Aotearoa seeking improved educational opportunities for future generations. Consequently, educational success carries significance beyond individual learners.

“Better opportunities, better health, better education.”

... and that success should enable students to become “good citizens” while “achieving as Pacific... without losing identity.”

Importantly, teachers celebrated the progress achieved under NCEA. Participants described witnessing increasing numbers of Pacific graduates entering professions traditionally underrepresented by Pacific peoples.

“We’re getting more lawyers, more doctors, more teachers... all of them came through NCEA.”

Others described increased scholarship attainment, stronger academic outcomes and growing confidence among Pacific learners.

Teachers viewed these developments as evidence that culturally responsive assessment had contributed positively to Pacific educational achievement. Consequently, discussions about replacing NCEA were often framed against this backdrop of recent educational gains.

Identity, Belonging and Cultural Safety

Identity was discussed as inseparable from educational achievement. Participants consistently argued that Pacific learners should never be expected to sacrifice their cultural identity in order to succeed academically.

“Achieve as Pacific... without losing identity.”

They emphasised that students should continue to understand “their values” while navigating education in Aotearoa.

Teachers repeatedly described identity as a source of educational strength rather than a barrier to achievement. They argued that Pacific cultural knowledge, languages, histories and values provide rich foundations for learning across all curriculum areas.

However, many expressed concern that these strengths remain insufficiently recognised within curriculum documents. One senior leader explained:

“We advocate for our students that your identity matters... your culture matters... be seen, be heard... then we walk along with this document where they are not represented.”

This perceived contradiction generated considerable professional tension. Teachers described investing years encouraging students to value their identities, only to feel those identities had become increasingly invisible within curriculum and assessment reform.

Participants challenged assumptions that Pacific identity could be reduced to a single curriculum subject. Discussion surrounding Pacific Studies highlighted concerns that offering Pacific content only in the senior years reinforced tokenistic approaches.

Teachers questioned why students were expected to wait until Year 12 before seeing themselves represented academically. Others noted that many young Pacific people are themselves engaged in learning about their own identities and should not be assumed to possess comprehensive cultural knowledge simply because they identify as Pacific.

Teachers further argued that culturally responsive education extends beyond content to include pedagogy, relationships and classroom practice. They emphasised that students require teachers who understand Pacific contexts, pronounce names correctly, engage respectfully with families and create environments where Pacific learners feel culturally safe.

“There needs to be more teachers who are confident and comfortable with teaching Pacific contexts, no matter what subject they teach.”

Another argued that this responsibility should not rest solely with Pacific teachers but become part of every teacher’s professional capability.

Concerns about the Proposed Qualification Reform

The proposed qualification reform generated overwhelmingly cautious and, at times, strongly critical responses.

Participants did not oppose educational improvement. Rather, they questioned whether replacing NCEA represented the most effective pathway towards improved outcomes for Pacific learners.

The most immediate concern related to the perceived absence of Pacific identity within the proposed reforms. When asked if the proposed qualification reforms supported Pacific educational success many participants responded simply with “It doesn’t.”

One participant elaborated:

“It doesn’t support culture, belonging... it doesn’t support being that person whose parents and grandparents aspire for you to be.”

Teachers feared that greater emphasis on externally examined, standardised assessment would privilege a narrower conception of knowledge while reducing opportunities for students to demonstrate learning through culturally responsive approaches.

Participants also expressed concern regarding consultation.

Across all focus groups, teachers questioned whether Pacific educators and communities had been meaningfully involved in shaping the reforms.

“There’s no consultation.”

“If you really want proper consultation, you need to sit down and talk to people.”

Teachers contrasted previous curriculum developments, which they perceived as involving sustained

collaboration, with what they described as a rapid policy process characterised by limited opportunity for meaningful engagement. Participants also highlighted significant concern regarding implementation. Many described existing curriculum changes as creating substantial workload, uncertainty and professional fatigue.

One beginning teacher reflected:

“What I learned at university last year doesn’t relate to what I’m doing now... and now another thing is being added on top.”

An experienced teacher similarly observed:

“There’s a lot of change fatigue amongst teachers right now.”

Teachers consistently worried that continuous reform increased an already heavy workload and risked reducing teachers’ capacity to effectively support learners.

Underlying these concerns was a broader perception that the proposed reforms prioritised economic outcomes over human development. Several participants described the reforms as preparing students “for industry, not for society,” while others questioned whether the reforms reflected a narrowing of educational purpose.

Collectively, teachers argued that qualification reform should strengthen rather than diminish the relationships, cultural responsiveness and learner-centred practices that they believed had contributed to improved Pacific educational outcomes under the existing system.

Curriculum, Assessment and Equity

A dominant theme throughout all focus groups was the inseparable relationship between curriculum, assessment and educational equity. Participants argued that qualification reform cannot be considered independently from curriculum reform because “what we assess is what we teach.” Consequently, concerns regarding assessment were frequently framed as concerns about whose knowledge is recognised, whose identity is reflected, and whose ways of learning are valued.

Teachers repeatedly expressed concern that the proposed reforms privilege a narrow conception of knowledge that risks marginalising Pacific epistemologies and lived experiences. Participants argued that the curriculum appears increasingly disconnected from the realities of Pacific learners and their communities.

One senior leader explained:

“We advocate for our students that your identity matters, your culture matters, be seen, be heard. Then we walk along with this document where they are not represented.”

This statement encapsulated the tension many participants described between school-level commitments to culturally responsive education and the perceived direction of national curriculum reform. Teachers spoke of experiencing a professional dilemma, having spent years encouraging Pacific learners to value their identities only to feel those identities were becoming less visible and important official curriculum and assessment documents.

Participants challenged assumptions underpinning the proposed qualification framework. Many questioned the increased emphasis on externally assessed subjects, arguing that examinations privilege particular forms of knowledge and performance while overlooking the broader capabilities Pacific learners demonstrate throughout their schooling.

“Success for Pasifika learners can be reached by keeping them engaged in classroom learning and assessment.”

Teachers suggested that many Pacific learners demonstrate resilience, leadership, creativity and collaboration in ways that cannot be adequately captured through high-stakes examinations. Several expressed concern that a greater reliance on external assessment would reduce opportunities for students to demonstrate learning through authentic, contextualised tasks.

Participants consistently distinguished between academic rigour and standardisation. They rejected any suggestion that Pacific learners required lower expectations. Instead, they argued that equitable assessment recognises multiple ways of demonstrating high achievement.

“We’re smart because we’re creative.”

“We are storytellers. We are scientists.”

These comments highlighted participants' belief that Pacific learners possess significant intellectual capability that should be recognised through assessment approaches valuing creativity, collaboration, oral traditions and applied knowledge alongside conventional academic measures.

While the introduction of Pacific Studies as an approved senior subject was welcomed, participants questioned why Pacific knowledge remained largely absent from Years 9–11.

“I’m only Pacific in Year 12? I can’t be Pacific in Year 9, Year 10 or Year 11?”

Others described Pacific Studies as far more than learning geography or cultural celebrations. Rather, they envisioned a subject engaging critically with migration, identity, contemporary Pacific issues, language, politics, economics and diaspora experiences.

Teachers argued that Pacific knowledge should be integrated throughout the curriculum rather than confined to one optional senior subject. They believed that authentic inclusion would allow Pacific learners to encounter their histories, languages and cultures across learning areas from the beginning of secondary schooling.

Equity emerged as another significant concern. Participants consistently argued that identical assessment conditions do not necessarily produce equitable educational outcomes.

“It’s equality –but it’s not equitable.”

Teachers described inequities in school resourcing, teacher expertise and access to culturally responsive learning opportunities. They noted that schools already experiencing socioeconomic challenges would be disproportionately affected by reforms requiring significant curriculum redevelopment and assessment redesign.

Several participants questioned whether the reforms might unintentionally reinforce existing educational disparities by increasing barriers to achievement for learners already navigating complex social, cultural and economic realities.

Collectively, participants viewed curriculum and assessment not simply as technical policy instruments but as expressions of whose knowledge, identity and

aspirations are considered legitimate within New Zealand education.

Pacific Teacher Workload and Cultural Burden

Across all focus groups, participants identified the growing workload carried by Pacific teachers as one of the most significant implications of the proposed reforms. While teacher workload has been widely acknowledged as problematic, participants described an additional layer of responsibility unique to Pacific educators—what many referred to as the cultural burden.

Teachers explained that their responsibilities extend well beyond classroom instruction. They described mentoring students, supporting families, leading cultural programmes, translating between schools and communities, organising language weeks, coaching Polyfest groups, attending church events, providing pastoral care and acting as cultural advisors within their schools.

“We don’t stop.”

“There’s only so much cultural capital you can take before people get burnt out.”

These voices illustrate Pacific teachers' perception of carrying responsibilities that are both professional and cultural, often without formal recognition or additional resourcing.

Participants consistently expressed concern that the proposed qualification reforms would intensify this workload. Curriculum redevelopment, resource creation, professional learning and supporting colleagues were viewed as additional responsibilities likely to fall disproportionately upon Pacific staff.

“We’re working so hard—blood, sweat and tears—and our students see it.”

“Things just keep piling up.”

Participant comments highlight how reform fatigue intersects with broader workforce pressures. Teachers expressed concern that Pacific educators are frequently expected to carry responsibility for implementing culturally responsive practice across entire schools.

“There need to be more teachers who are confident and comfortable with teaching Pacific contexts.”

Participants emphasised that culturally responsive education is the responsibility of all teachers rather than resting primarily upon Pacific staff. They suggested that all educators require professional learning to develop confidence in teaching Pacific contexts regardless of subject area.

“We’re the bloodline of the curriculum... and if we leave and get burnt out, what is there?”

Participants’ comments consistently note the critical role of Pacific educators in sustaining culturally responsive schooling. Without greater organisational support, teachers feared increasing burnout and further difficulties attracting and retaining Pacific educators within the profession.

Several participants discussed emotional labour. They described carrying students’ anxieties, supporting families experiencing hardship and responding to wider social issues extending beyond schooling.

“Schools end up dealing with poverty, unemployment and everything else that impacts our people.”

Teachers argued that qualification reform cannot be separated from broader societal realities and expressed concern that additional educational change would further increase demands upon schools already responding to complex community needs.

Consultation, Trust and Policy Development

The strongest criticism emerging across all focus groups concerned the perceived absence of meaningful consultation during the development of the proposed reforms.

Participants repeatedly questioned whether Pacific educators, communities and learners had been genuinely involved in shaping the policy. While acknowledging opportunities to submit written feedback, teachers argued that consultation should involve sustained dialogue rather than one-way information gathering.

“If you really want proper consultation, you need to sit down and talk to people.”

“Sometimes thought cannot be recorded... when consultations take place and we are together, you start to understand what is really missing.”

Participants expressed frustration regarding the pace of reform. Several described significant curriculum changes already underway before further qualification reforms had been announced. Teachers questioned why previous initiatives had not been fully evaluated before additional reforms were introduced.

One participant summarised this frustration:

“Why can’t they just make it better?”

Another reflected:

“There is a lot of change fatigue amongst teachers.”

Participants suggested that continual policy change undermines teacher confidence, reduces opportunities for effective implementation and creates uncertainty for schools attempting to provide stable learning environments.

Trust emerged as an important issue. Teachers questioned whether educational decisions were being informed by classroom experience.

“It doesn’t sound like it’s been written by many teachers.”

Others questioned whether policy development adequately considered the realities facing schools serving Pacific communities. Participants repeatedly emphasised that effective educational reform requires sustained partnerships between government, schools, teachers and communities rather than top-down policy implementation.

Several teachers also described feeling that education had become increasingly politicised.

“I’m tired of governments coming in and using us as a football.”

This metaphor reflected broader concerns regarding the cyclical nature of educational reform and the disruption created when successive governments substantially redesign curriculum and assessment frameworks.

Collectively, participants argued that successful reform depends not only upon policy design but also upon trust, collaboration and authentic engagement with those responsible for implementation.

Aspirations for the Future

Despite expressing considerable concern regarding the proposed reforms, participants consistently articulated hopeful aspirations for Pacific education. Teachers described aspirations centred upon educational systems that recognise Pacific learners as capable, creative and intellectually rich. They envisioned schools where Pacific languages, histories and cultures are embedded throughout the curriculum rather than treated as supplementary content.

“Our children should achieve as Pacific... without losing identity.”

Others hoped future qualifications would continue recognising multiple pathways into employment, tertiary education, community leadership and life-long learning. Participants emphasised that success should never be limited to university entrance alone but should value vocational pathways equally while maintaining high expectations for all learners.

Teachers expressed aspirations for stronger partnerships between schools and Pacific communities.

Many envisioned educational systems where parents, churches, cultural organisations and schools work collaboratively to support learners.

Participants argued that Pacific communities possess significant educational knowledge and should be viewed as partners rather than stakeholders consulted only after decisions have been made.

Professional aspirations emerged with teachers calling for increased investment in Pacific teacher recruitment, culturally responsive professional learning and stronger Pacific representation within educational leadership and policy development. Several participants hoped for a future where responsibility for culturally responsive education is shared across the profession rather than concentrated among Pacific staff. Ultimately, participants described aspirations extending beyond curriculum reform itself.

They envisioned educational environments where every Pacific learner:

- experiences genuine belonging;
- sees their identity reflected within learning;
- encounters teachers who value their culture;
- achieves academically without sacrificing who

they are; and

- leaves school equipped to contribute confidently to both Pacific communities and wider New Zealand society.

Summary of Pacific teacher voice

Across the talanoa, Pacific teachers connected qualification reform to wider questions of educational success, identity, equity, relationships and system responsibility. They supported high expectations and educational improvement but questioned reforms that could narrow how success and knowledge are recognised, increase cultural workload, or proceed without sustained partnership with Pacific communities. Their accounts consistently called for Pacific learners to be able to achieve academically without compromising identity, belonging or connection to community.

4.3 Pacific Survey Voices – perceptions of the NCEA reforms

Designed by the Tiroiro Anō panel, with particular thanks to Dr Gavin Brown for his contribution to its development, the Pacific Survey Voices: Perceptions of the NCEA Reforms survey invited PPTA Pacific members to share their views as part of the inquiry. The survey provides a quantitative complement to the expert interviews and teacher talanoa.

Overall, Pacific educators expressed low confidence that the NCEA reforms would improve outcomes for Pacific learners or adequately reflect Pacific aspirations, identities, cultures and experiences. Across most survey items, disagreement outweighed agreement, particularly in relation to equity, belonging, implementation and resourcing.

Survey participants

111 educators completed the survey. Of the 108 who identified their role, 73% were kaiako or teachers, 29% middle leaders, 22% pastoral, cultural or specialist support staff, and 9% were senior leaders. Respondents could identify more than one role. Most respondents worked in English-medium secondary schools (94%). The group was also experienced, with 60% having worked in education for more than 10 years.

Perceived purpose of the reforms

Respondents showed limited confidence that the re-

forms reflected Pacific priorities. Around seven in ten disagreed that the intended benefits for Pacific learners were clear (68%), that the reforms addressed issues important to Pacific learners (73%), or that they reflected Pacific aspirations for educational success (70%). Sixty-seven percent disagreed that the reforms responded to challenges experienced by Pasifika students.

These findings suggest a perceived disconnect between the reform and the experiences and aspirations of Pacific learners and communities.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi in practice

Respondents were also sceptical about the reforms' alignment with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Around two-thirds or more disagreed that the reforms give effect to Te Tiriti in practice, uphold active protection obligations, support Māori decision-making and Crown-Māori engagement, strengthen mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori, or support equitable outcomes for ākonga Māori.

This reflects wider concerns in this chapter about equity, participation, responsiveness and system accountability.

Anticipated impacts on Pacific learners

Respondents again had limited confidence that the reforms would improve outcomes for Pacific learners. Seventy-two percent disagreed that they would improve educational outcomes, 70% that they would strengthen engagement, and 67% that they would create more equitable opportunities.

Sixty-eight percent disagreed that the reforms would better reflect Pacific identities, cultures and experiences, while 64% disagreed that they would improve wellbeing and belonging. Seventy percent disagreed that they would strengthen relationships between schools, whānau and Pacific communities.

These findings align with the wider chapter, which identifies identity, relationships, belonging, equity and meaningful pathways as central to Pacific educational success.

Implementation, workload and resourcing

Implementation was one of the strongest areas of concern. Seventy-eight percent disagreed that the timeframe was realistic, 80% that teachers would have enough time to adapt teaching and assessment practices, and 79% that the pace of change was manageable. Seventy-six

percent also disagreed that the reforms could be managed alongside other priorities facing schools.

Confidence in resourcing was also low, with 66% disagreeing that schools would have access to the resources required for effective implementation.

Cultural workload for Pacific educators

Respondents also raised concerns about additional demands on Pacific educators. Sixty-two percent mostly or strongly agreed that demands on Pacific teachers to support culturally responsive teaching and learning would increase.

Fifty-two percent strongly or mostly disagreed that Pacific-focused responsibilities would be shared across all staff, while 68% disagreed that Pacific teachers would receive adequate support for additional responsibilities.

These findings highlight that responsibility for culturally sustaining implementation could fall disproportionately on Pacific educators rather than being supported across schools and the wider education system.

Overall survey summary

Across the survey, Pacific educators expressed substantial concern about the proposed reforms. The strongest concerns related to whether the reforms reflected Pacific aspirations and identities, whether they would improve equity and belonging, and whether schools and educators would have sufficient time, resources and support to implement them effectively.

Overall, the findings suggest that respondents were not yet convinced that the reforms would create the cultural, relational, equitable and practical conditions needed to support Pacific learner success.

4.4 Bringing the voices together

Across expert interviews, teacher talanoa and the survey, a clear pattern emerges. Pacific participants support educational improvement and high expectations but define success more broadly than qualification attainment alone. They consistently emphasise identity, belonging, relationships, meaningful pathways, equitable assessment, genuine partnership, and adequate support for educators. The connections across these different sources add weight to the concerns and aspirations carried into the overall analysis that follows.

SECTION 5 – Overall implications

Where the reforms show potential and where there are gaps

The reforms have potential to strengthen qualification coherence and pathways beyond school. However, the combined evidence indicates that coherence alone will not address the cultural, relational and structural conditions that continue to shape Pacific learner outcomes. Pacific identities, languages and cultural knowledge are only weakly visible within qualification design, despite being consistently identified across research, policy and Pacific voices as integral to participation and success. This creates a risk that responsibility for culturally sustaining education remains devolved to individual schools and Pacific educators rather than being built into the reform itself. Genuine partnership is an implementation condition, not a consultation activity. Pacific learners, families, educators and communities need meaningful opportunities to shape how the reforms are interpreted, implemented and reviewed over time.

Likely impacts for learners, families, schools and communities

Clearer pathways might improve progression through the qualification system, but they do not guarantee equity. Whether learners benefit will depend on assessment flexibility, school capability, access to culturally sustaining teaching and the extent to which diverse learner pathways remain genuinely available.

The consequences of these reforms will not be evenly distributed. Pacific learners who require flexibility in assessment, are developing multilingual literacy, attend schools with limited Pacific expertise, or follow diverse pathways may face greater barriers. Family experiences are also likely to differ depending on how clear and accessible information is, the strength of relationships with schools and whether participation in decision-making is supported. Evaluating these impacts will require ongoing analysis of Pacific-specific data and stories, rather than relying on aggregate achievement trends.

System responsibility and accountability

The combined evidence points to system responsibility as the critical issue. Qualifications are one part of a wider education system in which relationships, resourcing, cultural capability and institutional responses to inequity shape learner experience. These conditions cannot reasonably be left to individual schools or Pacific educators to resolve alone.

Te Tiriti and Institutional Integrity

Although this chapter focuses on Pacific learners, qualification reform cannot be understood outside Aotearoa New Zealand's constitutional context. Te Tiriti o Waitangi establishes enduring obligations between Māori and the Crown that are distinct from the educational rights, identities, and aspirations of Pacific communities. Recognising Te Tiriti obligations requires acknowledging their unique constitutional status rather than treating them as synonymous with the aspirations of Pacific communities.

At the same time, the extent to which the education system honours its Te Tiriti responsibilities provides an important indication of its capacity to deliver equitable reform more broadly. Reforms that fail to recognise Māori authority, Indigenous knowledge, or Te Tiriti obligations raise concerns about whether the system can design and implement change that is genuinely inclusive, culturally sustaining, and responsive to diverse learners.

For this reason, the evaluation extends beyond questions of Pacific representation or achievement outcomes. It also considers whether the reforms demonstrate the institutional practices necessary for equitable education, including partnership, cultural responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. In this sense, Te Tiriti is not an additional criterion applied to Pacific learners; it is a measure of the integrity of the system itself.

SECTION 6– Recommendations

The evidence identifies five areas where action is required. These recommendations are grounded in the principle that responsibility for systemic inequity must remain at system level rather than being transferred to Pacific learners, families, educators or individual schools.

1. Recognising Pacific identities, languages and cultures

Pacific learner success cannot be separated from identity, language and culture. Existing Pacific education policy commitments consistently position these as integral to teaching, learning and educational success, while Pacific voices described the importance of seeing Pacific learners reflected in the education system. These responsibilities cannot be transferred to individual schools, communities or Pacific educators.

- We recommend that Pacific identities, languages, cultures and ways of knowing are deliberately reflected within qualification design and assessment, rather than being addressed solely through local implementation.
- We also recommend renewed active implementation of current Pacific education policy frameworks and action plans as reference points, providing strategic direction.

2. Building and maintaining genuine partnerships with Pacific communities

Relationships with Pacific learners, families, churches and communities were a common theme across literature, Pacific education policy and participant voices. These relationships were described as contributing not only to educational achievement but also to belonging, trust and confidence in the education system.

Consultation has formed part of the reform process. However, genuine partnership extends beyond consultation. It involves ongoing opportunities for Pacific communities to contribute to implementation, identify emerging issues and shape future development.

- We recommend that processes are established to support and advance sustained partnership with Pacific learners, families and communities throughout implementation and future review of the qualification system.

3. Monitoring equity as implementation progresses

Clearer pathways and greater qualification coherence do not guarantee equitable outcomes. Implementation must be evaluated for its effects on Pacific learners as the reforms progress.

- We recommend ongoing evaluation of the reforms against Pacific learner outcomes, including engagement, retention, achievement, progression and learner wellbeing, so that implementation can respond where inequities persist or new ones emerge.

4. Supporting schools to realise the aspirations of the reforms

Schools will translate the reforms into practice, but the evidence shows that implementation will occur within already demanding workload and capability conditions. Sustained support will be essential.

- We recommend ongoing investment in culturally sustaining professional learning, culturally sustaining assessment practice, Pacific languages resources and opportunities for schools to work and walk alongside Pacific communities during implementation and the reinstatement of Pacific-specific education support to strengthen schools' capacity to undertake this work.

5. Embedding system responsibility for Pacific learner success

Pacific learner success is shaped by the education system. Qualification design, implementation support, cultural capability, resourcing and accountability therefore need to be treated as shared system responsibilities. Te Tiriti o Waitangi establishes Crown obligations to Māori and shapes the constitutional and ethical context in which the system serves all learners. For Pacific learners, this responsibility extends beyond the design of qualifications to creating the wider conditions where learners, families and communities can participate, belong and succeed.

We recommend that implementation of the reforms is accompanied by ongoing system-level monitoring, collaboration and investment to ensure that improvements to qualification design are matched by improvements in the educational experiences and outcomes of Pacific learners.

SECTION 7 – Conclusion

This chapter examined the reforms through Pacific education research, existing Pacific education policy commitments and the voices of Pacific educators and education leaders.

The evidence demonstrates that Pacific learner success is not determined by qualification structures alone. It is shaped by the relationships Pacific learners' experience, the extent to which their identities, languages and cultures are recognised and valued, the strength of partnerships between families, communities and schools, and the accessibility of educational pathways that are meaningful and support diverse aspirations. Across research and Pacific voices, educational success is understood as both academic and holistic, incorporating achievement, wellbeing, identity, belonging, language, community connections and future opportunity.

There is limited evidence that the cultural, relational and equity-focused conditions identified by Pacific education research and policy have been explicitly embedded into the design reforms of the proposed qualification. Pacific identities, languages, cultures and ways of knowing appear largely absent from the reform documents, and there is limited evidence of how ongoing inequities experienced by Pacific learners will be specifically addressed through implementation.

Pacific educators and education leaders were clear that they do not oppose improvement, high expectations or educational reform. What they have called for are reforms that recognise multiple forms of knowledge, maintain equitable opportunities for success, strengthen relationships with communities, and enable Pacific learners to achieve without compromising their identities. Their perspectives reinforce the view that equitable educational success depends on both high academic expectations and learning environments that affirm Pacific learners' identities, languages and cultures.

The measure of success will be whether implementation creates the conditions where Pacific learners are valued, represented and able to advance the aspirations they hold for themselves, their families and their communities. Pacific learners must be able to “achieve as Pacific ... without losing identity.” This remains the benchmark against which the reforms should be judged.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge Tanya Wendt Samu for reviewing this chapter and providing thoughtful feedback that strengthened its development.

We also acknowledge Meiyang Hong and Professor Gavin Brown, for their invaluable technical expertise in quantitative data analysis and interpretation. Kate Gainsford for her knowledge and contribution to the survey writing process.

References

- Alansari, M., Webber, M., Overbye, S., Tuifagalele, R., & Edge, K. (2022). *Conceptualising Māori and Pasifika aspirations and striving for success* (COMPASS). New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0019>
- Came, H., O'Sullivan, D., Kidd, J., & McCreanor, T. (2024). Critical Tiriti Analysis: A prospective policy making tool from Aotearoa New Zealand. *Ethnicities*, 24(6), 985–1004. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687968231171651>
- Chapman, J. W., & Tunmer, W. E. (2019). Reading Recovery's unrecovered learners: Characteristics and issues. *Review of Education*, 7(2), 237–265. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3121>
- Chu-Fuluifaga, C., & Reynolds, M. (2024). *Learning from each other: A final report*. Teaching and Learning Research Initiative.
- Cunningham, E., Jesson, R., & Wendt Samu, T. (2022). Pacific parental engagement and intergenerational storytelling in Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 57, 125–141. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-022-00247-2>
- Edwards, F., & Krishnan, P. (2016). Thinkpiece: Making a case for nurturing Pasifika students through the arts in New Zealand: Now would be a good time. *Teachers and Curriculum*, 16(1), 77–80. <https://doi.org/10.15663/tandc.v16i1.119>
- Franken, M. (2023). The new national literacy tests for post-primary students in Aotearoa New Zealand: How process and design issues undermine principles of a strong and fair qualification. *Studies in Language Assessment*, 12(2), 59–93.
- Hau'ofa, E. (1994). Our sea of islands. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), 148–161.
- Highfield, C., Webber, M., & Woods, R. (2024). Culturally responsive middle leadership for equitable student outcomes. *Education Sciences*, 14(3), Article 327. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14030327>
- Hill, J. L., Hunter, J., & Hunter, R. (2019). What do Pāsifika students in New Zealand value most for their mathematics learning? In P. Clarkson, W. T. Seah, & J. Pang (Eds.), *Values and valuing in mathematics education: Scanning and scoping the territory* (pp. 103–114). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16892-6_7
- Hunter, J. (2021). An intersection of mathematics educational values and cultural values: Pāsifika students' understanding and explanation of their mathematics educational values. *ECNU Review of Education*, 4(2), 307–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120931106>
- Hunter, J., & Hunter, R. (2024). Weaving together the threads of Indigenous knowledge and mathematics. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 116, 501–518. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-023-10256-7>
- Hunter, J., Samu, T. W., & Rimoni, F. (2024). Re-framing Pacific education, teacher knowledge and practice: Innovations from within Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 50(5), 783–800. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2024.2413451>
- Matapo, J., & Baice, T. (2020). The art of wayfinding Pasifika success. *MAI Journal: A New Zealand Journal of Indigenous Scholarship*, 9(1), 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.20507/MAIJournal.2020.9.1.4>
- McDonald, L., & Lipine, T. (2012). Pasifika education policy, research and voices: Students on the road to tertiary success. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 21, 143–164. <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v21i0.4047>
- Ministry of Education. (n.d.-a). *Standards approved for NCEA co-requisite during the transition period (2024–2027)*.
- Ministry of Education. (n.d.-b). *Understanding how NCEA requirements are changing*. <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/understanding-how-ncea-requirements-are-changing>
- Ministry of Education. (2018). *Tapasā: Cultural competencies framework for teachers of Pacific learners*. <https://teachingcouncil.nz/resource-centre/tapasā/>

- Ministry of Education. (2020). *Action plan for Pacific education 2020–2030*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/overall-strategies-and-policies/action-plan-for-pacific-education/>
- Ministry of Education. (2023). *Action plan for Pacific education 2020–2030: Progress report summary*. https://web-assets.education.govt.nz/s3fs-public/2024-04/Pacific-Education-Plan_Progress-Report-Summary.pdf
- Ministry of Education. (2025). *Discussion document: Proposal to replace NCEA with new national qualifications*. Discussion Document: Proposal to replace NCEA with new national qualifications
- Mugisha, V. M. (2013). Culturally responsive instructional leadership: A conceptual exploration with principals of three New Zealand mainstream schools. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v15i2.645>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.-a). *About Takiala Pasifika*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/pasifika/takiala-pasifika/>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.-b). *Teaching Pasifika students*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/pasifika/information-for-teachers/>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2020). *Takiala Pasifika 2020–2023: NZQA’s action plan for Pacific learner success* Takiala Pasifika 2020–2023. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/pasifika/takiala-pasifika/>
- ‘Otunuku, M., Brown, G. T. L., & Airini. (2013). Tongan secondary students’ conceptions of schooling in New Zealand relative to their academic achievement. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 14, 345–357. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-013-9264-y>
- Reynolds, M. (2018). They always have my back: A strengths-based approach to understanding the value(s) of Pasifika brotherhoods in education in Aotearoa New Zealand. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 20(2), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v20i2.1515>
- Samu, T. (2013). *Pasifika education: Discourses of difference within Aotearoa New Zealand* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Canterbury]. University of Canterbury Research Repository. <https://doi.org/10.26021/9971>
- Samu, T. W. (2015). The “Pasifika umbrella” and quality teaching: Understanding and responding to the diverse realities within. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 20(3). <https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v20i3.229>
- Samu, T. W. (2020). Charting the origins, current status and new directions within Pacific/Pasifika education in Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 26, 197–207. <https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v26.7138>
- Sharp, T., Samu, T. W., Trotman, R., Cram, F., & Theodore, R. (2021). Pacific educational success in Aotearoa New Zealand: Comparing Ngā Tau Tuangahuru findings with policy directions and research. *Pacific-Asian Education*, 32(1), 59–74.
- Sililoto, V. (2022). Effective teaching for Pasifika learners: Know me, teach me! *Ethnographic Edge*, 5(2). <https://doi.org/10.24135/ethnographic-edge.v5i2.260>
- Taleni, L. T. O. (2017). *‘E saili i tautai se agava’a: A true leader masters the art of navigation: The impact of effective leadership in raising engagement and achievement of Pasifika learners in New Zealand schools* [Master’s thesis, University of Canterbury]. University of Canterbury Research Repository. <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/handle/10092/13442>
- Taleni, L. T., & Surtees, N. (2024). A Samoan pedagogy of the heart: ‘O auala a’oa’o e afua ma fa’atino mai le fatu. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 59, 31–47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-024-00308-8>
- Tokona te Raki. (2023). *Kōkirihiā: The plan for removing streaming from our schools*. <https://tokona-wp.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2022/12/Ko%CC%84kirihiā-Final-1.pdf>
- Tuifagalele, R., Uasike Allen, J. M., Meinders, R., & Webber, M. (2024). *COMPASS: Whānau Pasifika navigating schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand*. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. <https://doi.org/10.18296/rep.0052>
- Veukiso-Ulugia, A., McLean-Orsborn, S., Clark, T. C., Yao, E., Kuresa, B., Drayton, B., & Fleming, T. (2024). *Talavou o le Moana: The health and wellbeing of Pacific secondary school students in Aotearoa New Zealand*. A Youth19 report. Youth19 Research Group, the University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington.

2.5

The Role of Assessment Flexibility in Supporting Diverse Learners within the Qualifications System

by Katy Thorne and Karen Dobric

Executive Summary

This chapter examines the role of assessment flexibility within the qualifications system in supporting Diverse Learners, and considers how the proposed reforms may influence equitable access and learner success in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The analysis includes a survey of 509 educators and finds that flexibility within the current qualifications system is an important mechanism for enabling learners with diverse learning profiles, disabilities, educational histories and circumstances to demonstrate what they know and can do. While clear and meaningful qualification standards are essential, flexibility in how learning is assessed can ameliorate barriers unrelated to the underlying knowledge or skills being assessed.

The move towards more standardised, whole-subject qualifications may improve comparability and clarity across the system. However, findings suggest that without improvements in accessibility and support, reduced flexibility could create additional challenges for some learners. Concerns were particularly focused on learners who already face barriers to participation and achievement, including those requiring significant learning support needs who do not meet the threshold for high levels of formal resourcing.

The chapter also highlights the importance of considering qualification reform within a wider educational and wellbeing context. For learners already experiencing disability, mental-health challenges, disrupted schooling or unmet learning needs, repeated experiences of failure or exclusion may compound disengagement and reduce access to future educational pathways.

The evidence suggests that the success of qualification reform should not be judged solely by the consistency of the qualifications produced, but also by who is able to access, achieve and benefit from them. A qualification system that is clearer and more standardised but results in fewer Diverse Learners achieving meaningful qualifications would represent a significant equity concern.

The overall recommendations for this chapter are to maintain clear qualification standards while preserving sufficient flexibility to enable Diverse Learners to achieve them. Qualification reform should not simplistically equate greater standardisation with greater equity. Reducing structural flexibility and moving towards more standardised, whole-subject models risks creating additional barriers for learners whose circumstances, learning profiles or educational histories do not fit a conventional pathway. Any qualification reform should therefore be accompanied by robust accessibility, flexibility and equity safeguards, supported by ongoing monitoring of its effects on Diverse Learners.

Diverse Learners and the Qualifications System

Students in secondary education represent a diverse population with varying abilities, identities, and backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances. For the purposes of this report, the term “Diverse Learners” includes students with disabilities, neurodivergent learners, students experiencing mental health challenges, learners with interrupted educational pathways, English Language Learners (ELL) and other learners facing physical, sensory, mental, social or environmental barriers that affect their participation and achievement.

Disabled learners include students with physical disabilities, sensory disabilities (such as vision or hearing impairments), intellectual disabilities, communication difficulties, learning disabilities, and ongoing health conditions. The impact of disability is influenced not only by an individual student’s impairment, but also by the extent to which environments, systems and practices enable or restrict participation.

Neurodiversity describes natural variation in how individuals think, learn, communicate, and process information. Neurodevelopmental differences, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia and dyscalculia, can influence areas such as attention, executive functioning, communication, sensory processing, organisation, memory and information processing. These differences do not reflect reduced ability or intelligence; rather, learners may require different approaches, environments or supports to fully demonstrate their capabilities and thrive.

Some learners, including some neurodivergent learners, may also experience barriers associated with cognitive or sensory processing differences. These

challenges can affect the pace at which information is understood, the ability to follow instructions, manage multiple demands, or process information presented in particular formats. Without appropriate recognition and support, learners may be misunderstood as lacking motivation or ability when the underlying barrier relates to how they access and process information.

English Language Learners (ELLs) should also be recognised within a broad understanding of Diverse Learners. English language learning needs are often overlooked in discussions of diversity and learning support, despite representing a significant and growing group of learners in New Zealand schools. The term does not refer only to students who have recently arrived in New Zealand. Under the Ministry of Education’s definition for ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) funding, eligible students may be migrants to New Zealand, former refugees, or New Zealand-born students with at least one parent of migrant or refugee background where a language other than English is usually spoken at home (Ministry of Education, 2025a).

English language needs can create barriers to participation and achievement even where learners have strong prior knowledge, cognitive ability, or understanding of curriculum content. In 2025, more than 87,000 students received ESOL funding across New Zealand schools, with 37% of these students being born in New Zealand, illustrating the scale of English language learning needs nationally (Ministry of Education, 2025a, 2025b).

Learners’ educational journeys are affected by health, wellbeing, relationships and socio-economic

background. Mental health challenges, trauma, adverse childhood experience (ACE), bullying, changes in family circumstances, disrupted schooling and periods of absence from education can significantly influence a student's ability to engage consistently with school. All of these factors may affect concentration, memory, emotional regulation, confidence, attendance and a student's sense of belonging within the education environment.

Students do not always experience these challenges in isolation; a learner may simultaneously experience disability, neurodivergence, health challenges, anxiety, trauma, disrupted attendance, and/or social barriers.

The learners discussed in this chapter are not limited to formally recognised disabilities or learning difficulties. There are some learners with additional learning needs who remain unidentified or unsupported as there are several factors which may act as barriers to identification and support like financial restrictions, long waiting times, limited-service provision, or cultural differences in accessing the health and education sector. There are some learners with support needs who may not meet the formal criteria for funded assistance or access to assessment accommodations. Consequently, this chapter will also consider learners with unmet learning needs as part of the Diverse Learners category.

Barriers for Diverse Learners in education may include inaccessible learning materials, inflexible assessment conditions, inability to attend school full-time, limited access to appropriate supports, or negative assumptions about students' capabilities by others or themselves. Supports offered for diverse learners vary substantially from school to school and taper significantly at the Years 11-13 level for many learners beyond the provision of special assessment conditions (SACs).

The Current NCEA System

The current NCEA framework is a credit accumulation system. Students gain credits from a range of standards across different subjects and learning contexts and put them towards qualifications at different levels. This structure provides considerable flexibility, allowing schools to develop programmes that respond to individual learners' strengths, interests and circumstances. Students can combine different learning experiences, demonstrate progress through smaller components of learning and accumulate credits over

time. For example, a student could work towards completing NCEA Level 1 over two years. Qualification levels are NCEA Levels 1, 2 and 3 which are intended to align with Years 11, 12 and 13, but this is not mandatory.

To achieve NCEA at any level, students must also pass an online Literacy and Numeracy co-requisite Common Assessment Activity (CAA) which is currently benchmarked at a Year 9 level. Students may resit this assessment, which is accessible twice yearly, as many times as they wish. There are also additional pathways to achieve this co-requisite, either via designated Level 1 standards or via unit standards in specific specialist situations such as teen parent units, health schools, alternative education and youth justice educational units. These unit standards are unavailable to students in the mainstream secondary education system. However, students achieving the co-requisite via alternative unit standards are unable to bring these with them if they transfer back into mainstream education.

Under the current NCEA system, students can gain credits through two main types of standards: achievement standards and unit standards. Achievement standards are designed to recognise demonstrated achievement against subject-specific learning outcomes and can award Achieved, Merit or Excellence grades. They are aligned with the curriculum and assess a student's ability to demonstrate knowledge, skills and understanding at different levels of quality and complexity. Achievement standards are both internally and externally assessed. Internal assessments are intended to be of a different format to external examinations, with presentations, group work, speeches, videos, posters, blogs, zines and portfolios as possible forms of submission.

Unit standards assess whether a student can demonstrate a specific skill or competency. They are generally assessed on a competent/not yet competent basis and are often used to credentialise practical, vocational or applied learning. Unit standards have provided additional flexibility within NCEA by allowing students to gain credits through a wider range of learning experiences and pathways. Subjects which are commonly offered in Years 11-13 that may be primarily based on unit standards include Tourism, Hospitality, Building and Construction, Mechanical Engineering, Sports Studies, and Legal Studies. In some schools a pathways subject is constructed, made up of core generic unit standards. There are other ways schools offer students different learning experiences

that result in credits towards the NCEA qualification such as Gateway, Trades Academies and STAR funded opportunities such as Forklift Licence, First Aid, and Site Safe. Credits gained through achievement standards and unit standards are counted equally towards the credit requirements for NCEA qualifications, however only achievement standard credits count towards university entrance requirements and endorsements.

The ability to combine achievement standards and unit standards has been a distinctive feature of NCEA's flexibility. For many Diverse Learners, this flexibility has been crucial for participation and success. Diverse Learners may not always progress through a traditional linear pathway. The ability to recognise learning in smaller components and build towards a qualification through varied pathways has provided opportunities for these learners to achieve.

The Structure of the New Qualification Framework

The replacement of NCEA with the Foundational Award at Year 11, the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZCE) at Year 12 and New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE) at Year 13, creates a more structured qualification system and will instead require students to engage with a year-long programme of study across formalised subjects. Students will typically be required to take five subjects for NZCE and NZACE and achieve the qualifications by passing at least three subjects in one year, after meeting the requirements of the Foundational Award which is benchmarked at a Year 11 level (two years higher than the current system) and will include numeracy as a subset of Mathematics and literacy as a subset of English.

The Stated Purpose of the Reforms

The new qualification framework was proposed to meet several stated objectives: increasing coherence in programmes of learning, strengthening subject knowledge, improving comparability between students and schools, and providing more distinct pathways for students, families, employers and tertiary providers. However, these objectives do not appear to directly address an identified deficit in the current qualifications system for the considerable number of Diverse Learners. The Minister notes in her June 2025 cabinet paper that “the proposals make sure that all disabled learners have access to deep and coherent learning, which they may not receive through very individualised approaches” (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 12). Firstly, the definition of “disabled learner” in the context of the Minister’s note is not clear. Secondly, this position contrasts with the work of Bondie, Dahnke and Zusho (2019), who argue that differentiated and individualised approaches can support participatory fairness by responding to the plurality of learners within a classroom. Their work suggests that moving away from a one-size-fits-all model towards approaches responsive to individual needs can provide an important foundation for educational equity. This position also contrasts with recent developments in England, where similar models of coherent learning are being reviewed due to concerns about outcomes for learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including widening attainment gaps identified in Building a World-Class Curriculum for All (2025).

It is also interesting to note the juxtaposition between this move and the recent change of approach of the University of Auckland, New Zealand’s high-

est ranked university on the world stage, with regards to entry to their medicine programme, which is arguably one of their most rigorous and competitive programmes.

As outlined in their faculty news announcement (May 2026), they will no longer be using GPA rankings, once a certain threshold has been met or the UCAT test to determine entry. Instead, situational judgment tests and interviews will be used to identify a broader range of attributes. There is also a much wider range of first year of study pathways accepted. Professor Warwick Bagg, the Dean of the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences says, “Right now, success in admission is too closely linked to socio-economic advantage. We want to ensure more capable students see medicine as a realistic option so that our future health workforce is reflective of our society” (University of Auckland, 2026, “Updated Selection into Clinical Programmes” section, para. 10). The principle is not reducing rigour but becoming more purposeful, while reducing unnecessary barriers. The irony is that changes and additional requirements within the secondary qualification framework may mean that some of the very students this redesigned admissions system is intended to capture may never make it to the point of applying.



Potential Impacts of the Changes to the Qualification Framework on Diverse Learners

Ahead of the announcement to move away from NCEA, the Minister acknowledged in her 2025 proposal to cabinet that she had been advised of potential equity risks associated with the qualification changes. While the proposal suggested that there could be benefits from greater coherence and access to subject learning, it also noted that achievement rates were likely to decline initially, particularly for Māori, Pacific and disabled learners. The document states that learners currently supported through more individualised pathways, unit standards or flexible learning approaches are likely to be negatively affected by a move towards larger, subject-based assessment structures (Office of the Minister of Education, 2025). The Disability Survey administered by Stats NZ in 2023 found that there were approximately 140,000 disabled children and young people under the age of 19 in Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2023). The future achievement of this group of learners cannot reasonably be treated as peripheral when considering changes to the qualification system.

The new framework represents a significant shift in how achievement is recognised. Under the current system, a student who has difficulty in one area can continue to accumulate credits through other learning areas and experiences and may still progress towards a qualification. Equally, a neurodivergent student with a particular interest in certain subjects could reasonably accumulate a larger proportion of credits in their area of expertise. Under the new model, success requires sustained engagement across complete subject programmes over a whole school year.

A student whose disability, health needs or personal circumstances affect their ability to consistently participate in one subject may previously have been able to compensate by gaining credits in other areas. Within a whole subject-based model, difficulty completing a subject programme may have a greater impact on their ability to achieve the overall qualification. Missing a period of time from school due to ill-health, trauma or transience may lead to students feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of having to make up missed learning in a constrained time period on their return to school. Poor motivation affects chances of success in qualifications and that is where the benefit of the cumulative nature of the NCEA qualification lies, with the building blocks of achieving standards, that make the learning achieved explicit. Under the new system, deadlines for any externally set “coursework” or externally marked common assessment tasks are likely to be set nationwide with immovable timeframes whereas, under NCEA, teachers have a degree of autonomy to set deadlines for internal assessment and to give extensions for justified absences.

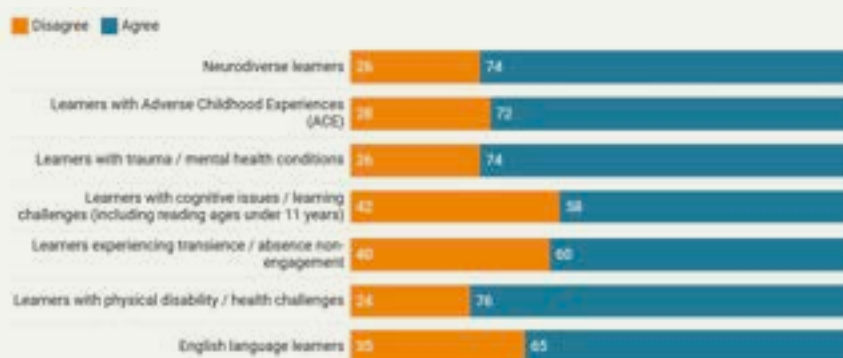
The June 2025 Cabinet paper also acknowledges this issue. It notes that the “proposals make it very difficult for learners who miss large periods of learning e.g. students with health needs, to attain the new qualification. Students will be assessed on whole subjects, including on content they may have missed” (Office of the Minister of Education, 2025, para 60). No further comment is made on how this may be mitigated or the wider implications for those students or their teachers. This is a concerning admission. The ramifications for students in this situation could be lifelong and lasting. Potential consequences include delayed qualification completion, repeating learning or leaving education without a qualification.

Teacher Experience of Diverse Learners

As part of this inquiry, a survey was distributed by email and social media to PPTA members. A total of 509 responses were received. Unless otherwise stated, the survey findings and respondent quotations reported in this section are drawn from this inquiry.

Firstly, the survey demonstrates that educating students with diverse learning needs is a reality for the majority of mainstream teachers. Between 57% and 95% of respondents reported experience working with each of the identified groups, with 95% having experience supporting neurodivergent learners and 87% having experience of supporting learners with cognitive or learning challenges. This indicates that supporting Diverse Learners is not confined to specialist settings or a small number of students, but is happening routinely across classrooms in Aotearoa New Zealand.

NCEA Supports these Learners to Achieve



76% agreed or strongly agreed that NCEA supports learners with physical disabilities or health challenges to achieve, while 74% reported that it supports neurodivergent learners and learners experiencing trauma or mental health conditions. In contrast, as shown below, only 15% believed that the reforms would support learners with physical disabilities or health challenges, and just 13% believed they would support neurodivergent learners. Similar patterns were evident across all Diverse Learner subgroups included in the survey.

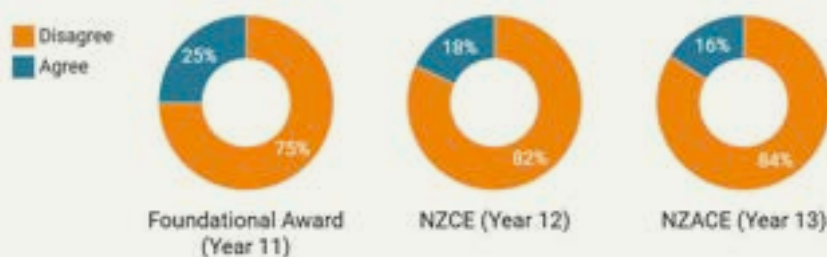
The qualification changes will support Diverse Learners to achieve



Respondents identified specific features of the current system as important supports for Diverse Learners. 87% identified Special Assessment Conditions (SACs), 77% the combination of unit and achievement standards, and 74% the ability to tailor a course or programme to an individual learner or group. The most prominent theme in the open-ended responses was the importance of flexibility, with roughly one in five comments referring to flexibility, choice, tailoring, prescription or concerns about a one-size-fits-all approach. Flexibility was described not simply as a teaching preference, but as an essential means of accommodating differences in learners' abilities, interests, circumstances and ways of demonstrating learning.

The strongest concern in the survey was whether Diverse Learners would have sufficient opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. 89% of respondents disagreed that the proposed reforms would provide such opportunities. Approximately one in seven comments raised concerns about examinations or high-stakes assessment, including examination anxiety, attendance difficulties, difficulties demonstrating learning under examination conditions, and implications for neurodivergent learners and students experiencing anxiety or trauma. Respondents also raised concerns about online examinations and reduced opportunities to demonstrate achievement through alternative modes. This concern was reflected in respondents' expectations of qualification attainment. 75% disagreed that Diverse Learners would be able to achieve the proposed Year 11 Foundational Award, increasing to 82% for Year 12 and 84% for Year 13.

Diverse Learners in my school will be able to achieve:



Approximately a quarter of the 191 comments similarly referred to learners potentially being unable to gain qualifications, being locked out of qualification pathways, or leaving school without formal qualifications. Concerns particularly related to learners significantly below curriculum level, those with interrupted schooling or substantial engagement barriers, and learners working towards vocational rather than university pathways.

The reduction of alternative pathways was also raised in approximately 34 comments, including concerns about unit standards, STAR, vocational pathways and non-timetabled learning. These were seen as important mechanisms for learners who do not engage successfully with a traditional academic pathway.

Respondents also did not consider existing learning support mechanisms sufficient to compensate for changes to the qualification structure. 90% disagreed that the reforms would meet unmet learning support needs, with respondents estimating that there is a 34.5% average of learners with unmet learning support needs across classrooms in which the survey respondents currently teach. 87% disagreed that the changes would improve equitable access to SACs.

SACs were the most commonly identified feature of the existing NCEA system supporting Diverse Learners. Comments raised concerns about learners whose needs are not formally diagnosed, difficulties accessing SACs, changing requirements and the practical difference between an accommodation being technically available and being accessible in practice.

The potential consequences identified by respondents extended beyond qualification attainment. Approximately 30 comments referred to stress, anxiety, wellbeing, attendance, motivation, engagement or belonging, while approximately 27 raised concerns about inequity or widening existing gaps. A recurring concern was that reduced flexibility could result in fewer opportunities for successful participation, contributing to frustration, disengagement or absence and ultimately reduced qualification attainment.

Respondents also raised concerns about the impact on learners already experiencing disadvantage and inequity, including disabled learners, Māori and Pacific learners, ELL students, learners from low socio-economic communities and those with undiagnosed learning needs. The underlying concern was that treating learners identically does not necessarily produce equitable outcomes when learners begin from substantially different positions.

One teacher comments: “The proposed changes in this new curriculum do not cater to our Diverse Learners because the system itself is not diverse, but instead heavily prescriptive. Every single diverse learner is different, needs unique supports and assistance, and requires different resourcing - therefore requires maximum flexibility and access to funding.”

There was some recognition that greater structure, consistency and clarity could benefit some learners, including some neurodivergent learners. Other respondents acknowledged that the current NCEA system is not without problems and that reform is necessary. There was also some uncertainty about the impact of the reforms while assessment arrangements and other implementation details remain under development. One person commented: “It is not possible to know if there will be negative effects on Diverse Learners until the system is in place. Any system that sees an issue with learners’ progress but then does nothing about it will have a negative effect on Diverse Learners in particular. Having higher expectations is not necessarily negative for Diverse Learners; if we do not take early steps to improve progress and support the learners to



find ways that they can be successful within the classroom with their peers, then the qualifications (current or future) will not succeed for these students.”

The overall pattern is clear. The central concern expressed by respondents was not resistance to change itself, but the possibility that changes to the structure and assessment of qualifications could remove flexibility currently used to enable Diverse Learners to participate and demonstrate achievement.

The Scale of Learning Support in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aotearoa New Zealand has a network of specialist schools providing education for over 4000 learners with significant and complex learning support needs (Ministry of Education, 2025e). These include schools supporting learners with intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, sensory impairments, communication needs and complex learning profiles. Examples include Tauranga Special School, Central Auckland Specialist School, Kimi Ora School in Wellington, the Richards Centre at Papatoetoe High School and specialist sensory providers such as BLENNZ and Ko Taku Reo Deaf Education New Zealand.

There are also three regional Health Schools in New Zealand - Northern, Central and Southern Health School. Together, these schools support thousands of learners each year, including a number of secondary students working towards NCEA while managing complex health circumstances. In 2024, Northern Health School supported 3,070 students, Southern Health School supported 578 students, and Central Regional Health School supported around 900 students.

For senior secondary learners, the ability to personalise programmes is particularly important. Students may be working towards NCEA while experiencing disrupted attendance due to chronic illness, hospitalisation or significant mental health needs. Health School teachers often work alongside students' home schools to select appropriate standards, adjust assessment timing, and build programmes that reflect each learner's circumstances and goals. For students in Years 11-13, this flexibility allows achievement to continue even when participation in a traditional school timetable is not possible. The main goal is to keep doorways open for students. Health School teachers tailor courses and target the essentials needed for future pathways. When working to engage learners, whole units can weave together multiple subjects around a topic of interest.

The Health Schools demonstrate that flexibility within NCEA is a key mechanism for ensuring equitable access to qualifications. By allowing achievement to be accumulated progressively and assessed in ways that recognise students' individual circumstances, NCEA can support learners whose educational journeys are interrupted or temporarily disrupted but whose aspirations remain unchanged. However, specialist schools represent only one part of the education system response.

The majority of Diverse Learners attend mainstream schools, where inclusive practice and appropriate supports are required to enable participation and achievement. More than 10,000 students received ORS funding in mainstream schools in 2025 (Ministry of Education, 2025d). There are

also many thousands of other students under the Learning Support umbrella, who do not meet the threshold for ORS but who would ideally receive additional support through Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs), teacher aides, specialist services, targeted interventions and other school-based supports. However, this is limited and varies from school to school depending on their funding and their policies. In addition, there is a significant proportion of learners with unmet needs with teachers in the PPTA survey estimating the percentage of learners in their classroom with unmet Needs to be around 34%. This could include learners who are already receiving some support. For example, 30% of parents surveyed in the The Educational Experiences of Disabled Learners study (He Whakaa-ro, 2020) reported that although their disabled child received some support with their school work, they needed more.

For learners with unmet needs, their barriers to learning and achieving remain officially unidentified, or alternatively may be assessed when a student is older. This gap or lateness in recognition of barriers to learning means that learners may miss getting support in Years 9-10 and typically do not access SACs and/or the type of support that they need to achieve.

Mental Health and Educational Disruption

Mental health challenges represent another significant source of diversity among learners and are an important consideration when assessing the potential impact of qualification reform. The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health in 2024 (McGorry et al., 2024) discusses the scale of need internationally, finding that even in high-income countries, less than half of the mental-health needs of young people are being addressed. The Commission also identifies mental ill-health as a major and increasingly significant contributor to the loss of young people's potential and wellbeing.

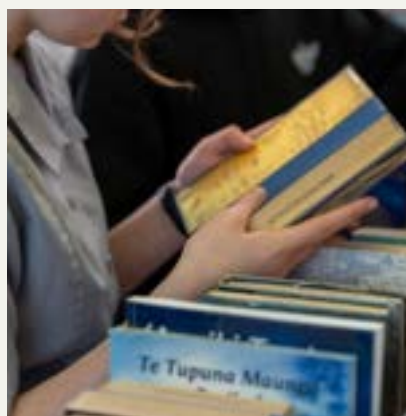
The 2023/24 New Zealand Health Survey found that rates of high or very high psychological distress were highest (22.9%) in young adults aged 15–24 years in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2024). Another study by Gorman et al (2023) which tracked over 270,000 students in Aotearoa over five years from 2013 to 2017 found that students with a mental health condition represented around 6.8% of the student cohort and that those students had poorer educational outcomes, with 11% less achieving a baseline qualification of NCEA Level 1 than students who had not been identified with a mental health condition.

A staff member at one of the Health Schools estimated that 70% of their students are on the roll for mental health reasons, with clinical anxiety accounting for 80% of these students. Neurodivergent students form a considerable proportion of these students, often when the move to college proves too overwhelming.

The Improving the Transition report (2011) found that less than a fifth of young people with depressive disorder had had any treatment. Counsellors and learning support staff in one South Auckland secondary school commented that issues relating to mental health are increasing, and there are increasing challenges with students at the interface of needs relating to undiagnosed mental health and anxiety, and school refusal. It is complex for both whānau and school. NEN students - who have been out of school for over six months - are returning to school in increasing numbers and adding to the range of needs (Office of the Prime Minister's Science Advisory Committee, 2011).

While mental health can affect educational attainment, it is also important to recognise that educational experiences themselves may contribute to student wellbeing. International evidence indicates that academic pressure is associated with a range of adverse mental-health outcomes among adolescents, including suicidal ideation. Steare et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 52 studies and found a positive association between academic pressure and at least one mental health outcome in 48 studies. Four of the five studies investigating suicidal ideation also identified an association. Note that the authors caution that the predominantly cross-sectional evidence does not establish causation, but identify academic pressure as a potentially modifiable risk factor for adolescent mental-health problems.

New Zealand also has comparatively high suicide rates internationally. New Zealand's youth suicide rate is high by international standards. OECD Society at a Glance (2024) analysis identified New Zealand as one of the countries with the highest suicide rates among young people aged under 30, alongside Korea, Japan and Estonia. While suicide has complex and multifaceted causes and certainly cannot be attributed to educational experiences alone, this broader context reinforces the importance of considering the potential wellbeing consequences of qualification and assessment systems for young people.



Assessment Requirements and the Foundational Award

75% of surveyed teachers did not believe that the Diverse Learners in their school would be able to achieve the Foundational Award, based on their current understanding of the proposed requirements. The pass rates for the CAA Reading, Writing and Numeracy assessments in 2025 were 72%, 68% and 63% respectively. There is no readily available disaggregated data to suggest how these figures translate for Diverse Learners which is concerning and makes it challenging to predict the direct impact of the reforms.

A staff member from a Health School is particularly concerned about this award. They say that the CAA already represents a significant barrier for many learners at their school. The challenge is that learners can have a period of particularly poor health at any point and with the CAA currently having locked in timings of a two week period, this means that weeks or months worth of work can result in no qualification. Raising the bar on this qualification level while reducing the relevance (based on the current draft of the Year 11 curriculum) and/or restricting the assessment period further is likely to have an impact on some of Aotearoa's most vulnerable learners.

Assessment Flexibility, SACs and Equity

In their report, “Making NCEA assessment more equitable”, Hipkins and Lee (2023) argue that improving equity requires assessments to be designed using Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, rather than relying solely on individual accommodations (such as SACs) after barriers have been identified. They suggest that assessments should minimise factors unrelated to the knowledge and skills being assessed, as these can interfere with a student's ability to demonstrate the intended learning. Rather than adapting assessments for individual learners, there should be a move towards designing assessments that are immediately accessible to a wider range of learners. This principle is closely aligned with Evidence-Centred Design (ECD), an assessment design approach used internationally in countries such as the United States. ECD begins by clearly identifying the knowledge, skills and abilities that an assessment is intended to measure and developing an explicit “assessment argument” linking the task design, evidence collected and judgements made about student performance. By clarifying what is being assessed from the outset, ECD provides a framework for identifying and removing barriers that could interfere with students demonstrating the intended learning.

This approach balances maintaining consistent standards and standardising the ways in which learners demonstrate achievement. Assessment does not require all learners to encounter identical experiences. Assessment conditions, however, should allow learners to demonstrate the intended knowledge and skills.

International experience also shows that greater standardisation can lead to an increase in need for individual accommodations. In England, where GCSE and A Level qualifications operate within a highly standardised assessment system, schools have seen a sustained increase in the use of access arrangements such as extra time, readers, writers and computer readers to enable disabled learners and learners with special educational needs to access ex-

aminations equitably. The continued growth in these arrangements has prompted debate about whether increasingly standardised assessment models are placing greater reliance on individual adjustments, rather than reducing barriers through more inclusive assessment design.

This is particularly concerning from an equity perspective because learners with significant literacy difficulties do not always qualify for SAC. Learners whose reading age falls below a level at which they can independently access assessment material may still be ineligible for SAC, despite the substantial barrier this creates to demonstrating their learning. This creates a particular inequity for learners with low reading ages: they may be capable of understanding the mathematical or conceptual content being assessed, but unable to access the written language of the assessment sufficiently to demonstrate that understanding. The result is that the assessment can measure their reading ability rather than their knowledge of the subject. The issue is not simply whether SACs are available, but whether the eligibility criteria are sufficiently responsive to learners. For learners with significant but unmet needs, this can contribute to lower achievement, disengagement and reduced access to qualifications.



Inequality in access to SACs

There is a substantial socio-economic and ethnic disparity in access to SACs. The data from the NZQA Qualification 2025 report showed that schools with the “Fewest” socio-economic barriers to attainment had SACs approved for students at a rate of 11.31% to their overall student population in 2025. This is more than double the 4.25% for schools with the “Most” socio-economic barriers. This disparity is likely to contribute to existing achievement gaps between these groupings.

Learners in the European ethnicity category were over 70% more likely to have approved SACs than Māori students and over 90% more likely to have approved SACs than Pacific students. Given that we know that both Māori and Pacific students are overrepresented in disability and unmet need statistics, this is especially stark. Additionally, even having NZQA approved SACs does not mean that they are always able to be provided. Some schools report that they simply do not have the resourcing to consistently provide reader/writers for assessments, particularly for internal assessments, as they may not have access to the same level of local volunteers as others and may not have the same level of teacher aide resourcing, which is often funded out of schools’ operational grants.

Moving to a system that may place even greater reliance on SACs to support many of those in the Diverse Learner category serves only to increase this divide.

Potential Impacts on Ākonga, Kaiako and Kura

The implications for qualification reform are significant. If some students are already leaving school without qualifications because their underlying needs have not been adequately met, raising the threshold for achieving a qualification would likely increase the number who are unsuccessful rather than address the reasons they are struggling. This is not about high expectations, but about whether the qualification system provides realistic and supported pathways for learners whose barriers to achievement are substantial and significant, not simply a matter of effort or aspiration.

Learners whose apparent lack of engagement with school may be a consequence of unmet needs rather

than a lack of ability, aspiration or willingness to learn. For some learners, apparent disengagement from school may be the result of unmet learning support needs, disability, mental health challenges, behavioural difficulties, disrupted schooling or repeated experiences of failure.

Behaviour is often a response to an unmet need.

This is reflected in outcomes for young people who become NEET (not in employment, education or training). Ministry of Education research found that school disengagement could be a factor in later NEET status, while young people with no NCEA or Level 1 only were more likely to become NEET than those achieving NCEA Level 2 or 3. Research into young people experiencing prolonged periods of NEET also found higher rates of behavioural interventions, mental-health service use and housing instability, alongside lower rates of protective factors such as NCEA Level 2 (Ministry of Education, 2016). In the March 2026 quarter, 14.4% of young people aged 15 to 24 were not in employment, education or training (Stats NZ, 2026). Perhaps even more concerning, in the June 2026 quarter the youth underutilisation rate sat at 37% (Staffing Industry Analysts, 2026).

These reforms have the potential to reduce some aspects of teacher workload, in respect to setting and marking internal assessments. However, once the initial workload associated with implementing the new curriculum, including learning the curriculum, re-writing schemes of work, and sourcing or developing new resources, has passed, it is worth considering the impact of high-stakes examinations and common assessment tasks. As well as likely expectations around the provision of additional revision workshops etc, it will inevitably fall on teachers to catch up those who have been absent. Where there have been large absences, there will be choices to be made around what it will take to “get over the line”, what content is unlikely to be heavily assessed and can be ignored, what core skills are necessary and what is peripheral. And yet, these are some of the key issues that the reforms are touted to address. This raises an important question: does reducing structural flexibility actually remove the burden, or does it simply shift it elsewhere within the system?

Conclusion

An equitable qualification structure should allow Diverse Learners valid opportunities to demonstrate achievement. International research on inclusive assessment demonstrates that equitable systems require clear standards alongside mechanisms to remove barriers that are unrelated to the knowledge and skills being assessed. Robertshaw, Clarke, and Karaka-Clarke sum this up beautifully in their report, *He Awa Whiria - He aromatawai mō te anamata: Braiding kaiako voices in the future of NCEA* (2026): “Education, like a river, flows at multiple speeds. Recognising and honouring these different temporalities, those of kaiako, ākonga, and communities enables assessment to become a truly dialogical practice that affirms life rather than measures compliance” (p. 13).

The evidence also identifies recognised risks within the proposed qualification framework for Diverse Learners. Some of these risks have been acknowledged by the Minister for Education and are causing significant concern among teachers seeking to support their learners.

It is also worth noting the findings of the Youth Development and Education Network Aotearoa, who in their 2026 White Paper note: “Our final key recommendation relates to the critical importance of youth and whānau voice. Disengaged young people know what they need to learn well – they know what works for them, and what hinders their learning. Over many decades we have been working directly with young people disenfranchised from education, and we have never met a young person who does not want to learn. When we ask them what they need to support their learning, they can all tell us” (Youth Development and Education Network Aotearoa, 2026, p. 21).



Recommendations

1. Retain meaningful flexibility within the qualifications system

Preserve opportunities for learners to accumulate achievement progressively rather than requiring success through whole-year subject completion. The qualifications system should retain opportunities for learners to demonstrate achievement through smaller components of learning and across varied assessment opportunities. Structural flexibility is particularly important for learners whose attendance, health, learning profile or circumstances make sustained participation in a conventional whole-subject pathway difficult.

2. Protect multiple pathways to qualification

Retain diverse routes through which learners can achieve recognised qualifications. Achievement standards and unit standards should remain valid pathways where they support different learner needs and circumstances. Qualification design should not assume that a single, standardised pathway will provide equitable access to achievement for all learners.

3. Build accessibility into assessment design

Apply Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Evidence-Centred Design (ECD) principles when developing qualifications and assessments. Assessment should minimise barriers within the assessment itself and ensure that learners are assessed on the intended knowledge and skills rather than unrelated factors such as reading difficulty, processing speed, language demands or sensory barriers. Accessibility should be designed into assessment from the outset rather than relying primarily on individual accommodations.

4. Reduce reliance on individual accommodations as the primary accessibility mechanism

Ensure that accessibility is not dependent on learners obtaining and accessing Special Assessment Conditions (SACs). While SACs remain an important safeguard, they should complement rather than compensate for inaccessible assessment design. This is particularly important given evidence of inequitable access to SACs across different student groups. A more standardised qualification system that simultaneously reduces structural flexibility and relies heavily on individual accommodations risks increasing existing inequities.

5. Strengthen SAC eligibility, resourcing and implementation

Ensure that learners experiencing significant barriers to assessment are able to access appropriate accommodations. Review eligibility criteria where learners have substantial learning barriers but do not meet current requirements, and ensure that schools have sufficient resourcing and capability to implement approved accommodations consistently.

6. Build flexibility for learners experiencing disrupted education

Provide mechanisms that enable learners experiencing illness, disability, mental health challenges, transience, family disruption or extended absence to remain connected to qualification pathways. This should include appropriate flexibility around assessment timing, progression and opportunities to resume learning following disruption.

7. Recognise the scale of unmet learning needs

Design qualification policy around the actual diversity of learners rather than only those with formally identified disabilities or access to specialist funding. Many learners experience significant learning barriers without a formal diagnosis or access to additional resourcing. Reform should therefore consider learners with unmet learning needs alongside those who are formally identified or funded.

8. Monitor equity impacts throughout implementation

Systematic monitoring of the effects of qualification reform should include the collection and reporting of achievement, participation, retention, and progression data across diverse learner groups. Monitoring should occur throughout implementation so that emerging inequities can be identified and addressed rather than retrospectively documented.

9. Include learner voice in qualification reform

Include the experiences and perspectives of Diverse Learners in the ongoing evaluation of qualification reform. Student voice should form part of the evidence base used to assess whether changes to qualifications and assessment are improving access, participation and opportunities to demonstrate achievement.

References

- Bondie, R. S., Dahnke, C., & Zusho, A. (2019). How does changing “one-size-fits-all” to differentiated instruction affect teaching? *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), 336–362. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821130>
- Department for Education. (2025). *Curriculum and assessment review final report: Building a world-class curriculum for all*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf
- Education Review Office. (2021). *Wellbeing in secondary schools*. <https://www.ero.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-05/ERO-Wellbeing-SecondSchools-web.pdf>
- Gorman, E., Bowden, N., Kokaua, J., McNeill, B., & Schluter, P. J. (2023). A national multiple baseline cohort study of mental health conditions in early adolescence and subsequent educational outcomes in New Zealand. *Scientific Reports*, 13, Article 11025. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-38131-8>
- Hipkins, R., & Lee, J. (2023). Making NCEA assessment more equitable: Can UDL principles help? *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, 2, 49–52. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.1534>
- McGorry, P. D., et al. (2024). The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on youth mental health. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 11(9), 731–774. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(24\)00163-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(24)00163-9)
- Ministry of Education. (2020a). *He whakaa-ro: The educational experiences of disabled learners*. Education Counts. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/199030/He-Whakaa-ro-the-educational-experiences-of-disabled-learners.pdf
- Ministry of Education. (2020b). *He whakaa-ro: What is the relationship between attendance and attainment?* Education Counts. https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/198013/He-Whakaa-ro-What-is-the-relationship-between-attendance-and-attainment.pdf
- Ministry of Education. (2025a). *English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) funding*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/education-professionals/schools-year-0-13/funding-and-financials/english-speakers-other-languages-esol-funding>
- Ministry of Education. (2025b, July 14). *ESOL, migrant and refugee news*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/bulletins/esol-migrant-refugee-news/14-07-25>
- Ministry of Education. (2025d). *Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS)*. Education Counts. <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/ongoing-resourcing-scheme>
- Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Change 1: Make NCEA more accessible*. NCEA Change Programme. Retrieved August 30, 2026, from <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/change-1-make-ncea-more-accessible>
- Ministry of Health. (2024). *Annual update of key results 2023/24: New Zealand Health Survey*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/publications/annual-update-of-key-results-202324-new-zealand-health-survey>
- Ministry of Health. (2025). *Health and Independence Report 2024-Te Pūrongo mō te Hauora me te Tū Motuhake 2024*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/publications/health-and-independence-report-2024-online-version>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2025). *Annual report: NCEA, University Entrance and New Zealand Scholarship data and statistics*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/NCEA/Secondary-school-and-NCEA/Annual-Reports-NCEA-Scholarship-Data/2025-Annual-Report-on-NCEA-UE-and-NZ-Scholarship-Data-and-Statistics.pdf>
- Office of the Minister of Education. (2025, June 30). *Public consultation on proposal to replace NCEA* [Cabinet paper]. New Zealand Government. https://web-assets.education.govt.nz/s3fs-public/2025-08/82%20-%20Proposal%20to%20Replace%20NCEA_Redacted.pdf
- Office of the Prime Minister’s Science Advisory Committee. (2011). *Improving the transition: Reducing social and psychological morbidity during adolescence*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2021-10/pmcsa-Improving-the-Transition-report.pdf>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). *Society at a glance 2024: OECD social indicators*. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/06/society-at-a-glance-2024_08001b73/918d8db3-en.pdf
- Robertshaw, C., Clarke, A., & Karaka-Clarke, T. H. (2026). He awa whiria - He aromatawai mō te anamata: Braiding kaiako voices in the future of NCEA. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, (1), 8–14. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.1588>
- Staffing Industry Analysts. (2026, August 18). *Staffing Industry Analysts Global Daily News*. <https://www.staffingindustry.com/news/global-daily-news/new-zealands-jobless-rate-rises-to-56-in-june-quarter>
- Statistics New Zealand. (2023). *Disability statistics: 2023*. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/disability-statistics-2023>
- Statistics New Zealand. (2026, May 6). *Labour market statistics: March 2026 quarter*. <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/labour-market-statistics-march-2026-quarter/>
- Steare, T., Gutiérrez Muñoz, C., Sullivan, A., & Lewis, G. (2023). The association between academic pressure and adolescent mental health problems: A systematic review. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 339, 302–317. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2023.07.028>
- UNICEF Innocenti. (2025). *Child well-being in an unpredictable world* (Innocenti Report Card 19). UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti. https://unicef-nz.cdn.primic.io/unicef-nz/aCO_OCdWJ-7kSCq__UNICEF-Innocenti-Report-Card-19-Child-Wellbeing-Unpredictable-World-2025.pdf
- Youth Development and Education Network Aotearoa. (2026). *YDNA white paper*. https://ydena.rocketspark.co.nz/site_files/50720/upload_files/YDNAWhitepaper.pdf?dl=1
- University of Auckland. (2026, May 18). *New undergraduate health programmes to prepare future health workforce*. <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/news/2026/05/19/new-undergraduate-health-programmes-prepare-future-health-workforce.html>

2.6a

Beyond One Size Fits All: English, Equity and the Challenge of Qualification Reform.

by Natalie Faitala

Executive Summary

This chapter examines what the proposed senior secondary qualification reforms could mean for English teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand. It draws together evidence from a national survey of 86 English teachers, two teacher focus groups involving 10 participants, interviews with five academics who are English education specialists, relevant research literature, and the position of the English teacher subject association - New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English (NZATE).

The evidence does not suggest that English teachers are opposed to change. There is recognition that NCEA has weaknesses. Teachers and academics identified concerns about fragmented programmes, credit-driven behaviour, inconsistent assessment experiences and uneven access to challenging English learning. There is some support for clearer national expectations, stronger progression across Years 11–13 and qualifications that encourage students to participate in a complete programme rather than disengaging once they have accumulated sufficient credits.

However, the evidence raises significant questions about whether greater consistency needs to come at the cost of flexibility. English is a broad subject encompassing reading, writing, speaking, viewing, presenting and creating across written, oral, visual, digital and multimodal texts. It develops not only literary knowledge but also communication, critical thinking, creativity, cultural understanding and the ability to interpret the increasingly complex information environment in which young people live.

What teachers are telling us

The clearest concern from the teacher survey is the potential impact of the reforms on meeting the needs of diverse learners, considering the wide range and abilities that learners have. Ninety-two per cent of respondents identified a negative impact on flexibility to meet the range of learner needs, while only 2% anticipated a positive impact. There was substantial concern about

- a stronger examination focus (73% negative)
- assessment workload and pressure on students (69% negative), and
- the impact on course design (68% negative).

Greater clarity of learning pathways attracted more mixed responses, suggesting that teachers can see potential benefits in a more coherent qualification but remain uncertain about how it will operate in practice.

Across the survey, focus groups and academic interviews, a consistent message emerged: student engagement in English depends on much more than the structure of a qualification. Students are more likely to engage when they encounter relevant and culturally meaningful texts, experience strong relationships with teachers, have appropriate choice and agency, receive useful feedback and can see realistic opportunities to succeed. Teachers repeatedly linked engagement with the ability to respond to the actual learners in front of them.

This makes flexibility an important equity issue rather than simply a matter of teacher preference. Current English programmes can include literature, film, speeches, oral language, creative writing, research, digital texts and other multimodal forms. Different pathways allow students with different strengths to demonstrate sophisticated English learning in different ways. Teachers acknowledged that flexibility can be misused and that clearer national expectations may be needed. Their argument was therefore not for unlimited flexibility, but for managed flexibility within a nationally coherent system.

Equity must remain central

The strongest concerns relate to learners who may be disproportionately affected by increased prescription and high-stakes assessment, including Māori and Pacific learners, neurodiverse students, students requiring additional learning support, students with lower literacy levels and those experiencing disrupted schooling or socioeconomic disadvantage.

A common assessment system does not mean that students experience common conditions. Students enter classrooms with different cultural knowledge, literacy experiences, access to resources, learning needs and opportunities outside school. The chapter therefore distinguishes consistency from equity. Requiring every learner to complete the same task under the same conditions may appear fair, but it does not necessarily provide every learner with an equally valid opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do.

For Māori and Pacific learners in particular, teachers emphasised the importance of representation, local knowledge, culturally meaningful texts and multimodal forms. A Te Tiriti-responsive English curriculum must allow more than the inclusion of isolated Māori texts within a predetermined programme. Schools need sufficient space to build relationships with mana whenua and communities and to make local knowledge, identity, language and perspectives meaningful parts of English learning.

Protecting the breadth of English

Teachers and academics were concerned that increased prescription and examination could narrow what counts as English. Film, oral language, performance, digital texts and multimodal communication were repeatedly identified as legitimate and intellectually demanding parts of the subject, not easier alternatives to literature.

This matters because English prepares students for far more than further literary study. It develops the ability to evaluate information, recognise persuasion and misinformation, construct arguments, communicate clearly, understand different perspectives and participate critically in civic, cultural and working life. These capabilities are increasingly important in a world shaped by social media, artificial intelligence and rapidly changing forms of communication.

Implementation will determine whether reform succeeds

Much remains dependent on the final assessment design. The academics interviewed repeatedly cautioned that firm judgements are difficult while important details remain unresolved, including the balance between internal and external assessment, examination formats, compulsory components, accommodations,

marking arrangements and how curriculum content will contribute to the final subject result.

Teachers will require much more than new curriculum and assessment documents. Successful implementation will require clear exemplars, model programmes, subject-specific professional learning, moderation support, culturally responsive resources, guidance for supporting neurodiverse learners, assessment trials across diverse schools, adequate preparation time and meaningful opportunities for teachers to contribute to the development of the new system.

Professional trust is particularly important. Teachers in the focus groups did not simply ask for more resources; they asked to be listened to as professionals with knowledge of their subjects, students and communities. Reform that is implemented too quickly or without sufficient teacher involvement risks transferring the uncertainty of policy development directly to the first cohorts of students.

The central message

The evidence supports reform that strengthens coherence, progression and national confidence in English qualifications. It does not support an assumption that consistency requires uniformity.

A strong national English qualification can establish ambitious expectations for what students should know and be able to do while still allowing teachers to select appropriate texts, respond to local communities and provide more than one credible way for students to demonstrate learning.

The challenge is therefore to hold together several things that can too easily be treated as opposites: coherence and flexibility; disciplinary knowledge and cultural responsiveness; national expectations and professional judgement; academic rigour and accessibility; consistency and equity.

The chapter's strongest message for teachers and policymakers is straightforward: students are not a homogeneous group. Fairness does not mean requiring every student to learn and demonstrate achievement in exactly the same way. Greater coherence should therefore be pursued without losing the student agency, culturally meaningful learning, multimodal English, teacher judgement and multiple pathways to success that enable diverse learners to participate meaningfully in senior English.

Ko te reo te tuakiri. Ko te reo tōku ahurei. Ko te reo te ora.

Language is my identity. Language is my uniqueness. Language is life.

— Ministry of Education, *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007, p. 18)

English occupies a distinctive position within secondary education. It is both a subject in its own right and a foundation for learning across the curriculum. Through English, students develop the capacity to read critically, communicate clearly, interpret different perspectives, create texts and participate in cultural and civic life. The subject includes much more than the study of conventional literary texts. It encompasses written, visual, oral, digital and multimodal communication, including novels, poetry, film, speeches, drama scripts, a range of media and students' own creative and critical work.

This chapter examines how the proposed senior secondary qualification reforms may affect student engagement with English, access to meaningful learning pathways and educational equity in Aotearoa New Zealand. It considers the current and proposed qualification structures, the stated purposes of the reforms, possible benefits and risks, the link between curriculum change and qualification change and the professional and practical conditions required for successful implementation.

Evidence from a survey of secondary English teachers, teacher focus groups and interviews with five academics with an English specialisation indicate broad support for greater coherence and clearer expectations, alongside serious concern about the loss of qualification responsiveness, cultural relevance, learner choice and professional autonomy. Contributors recognised that NCEA can encourage fragmented programmes, inconsistent assessment experiences and credit-driven behaviour. They nevertheless questioned whether a more prescribed and examination-oriented system would solve those problems without producing deeper inequities.

The central question is therefore not simply whether the new system will be more consistent. It is whether greater consistency can be achieved while retaining the features that currently enable diverse students to

see themselves as capable readers, writers, speakers, viewers and creators.

Overview of the Current and Proposed English Qualification Structures

Under the current NCEA structure, Year 11 English has already undergone significant reform while remaining within NCEA. Since 2024, schools have worked with four Level 1 English standards, each worth five credits:

- AS91924: Demonstrate understanding of how context shapes verbal language use – internally assessed
- AS91925: Demonstrate understanding of specific aspects of studied text – externally assessed
- AS91926: Develop ideas in writing using stylistic and written conventions – internally assessed
- AS91927: Demonstrate understanding of significant aspects of unfamiliar texts – externally assessed

The four-standard structure provides a possible 20 English credits and creates a balance between internal and external assessment. It also recognises several dimensions of English: verbal language, studied texts, writing and unfamiliar-text analysis.

Schools retain considerable freedom to decide how these standards are connected within a coherent programme. A studied-text programme may incorporate novels, short stories, poetry, film, speeches, drama or other text forms. Writing can be developed from students' cultural knowledge, personal experience, research, social concerns or responses to literature. Verbal-language assessments can be situated within authentic communicative contexts rather than taught as isolated technical exercises.

At Years 12 and 13, English currently offers a wider selection of standards. At Level 2, students may be assessed in studied written texts, studied visual or oral texts and unfamiliar texts through external examinations. Internally assessed options include writing, oral presentation, visual and verbal text creation, connections across texts, information literacy, independent reading and close viewing.

Level 3 follows a similar pattern at greater conceptual depth. Students can respond critically to studied written, visual or oral texts; analyse unfamiliar texts; produce fluent and coherent writing; deliver oral texts; examine connections across texts; undertake critical literary study; and complete other internally assessed

English work. English remains an approved subject for University Entrance, with a broad range of Level 3 English standards contributing towards the subject requirement.

This structure permits schools to create different English pathways. Some courses combine literary study, film analysis, writing, research and oral language. Others place greater emphasis on visual and oral texts, literacy development, academic preparation, creative writing or vocationally relevant communication. Schools can design pathways that respond to their communities while retaining access to nationally recognised achievement standards.

Internal assessment currently allows students to demonstrate learning through a range of forms and over different periods of time. Students may develop a writing portfolio, deliver a speech, produce a visual and verbal text, undertake an inquiry, maintain a reading programme or examine connections across several texts. Teachers can provide formative feedback and allow students to craft, revise and strengthen their work. This process is particularly important in English, where writing, interpretation and oral communication develop through rehearsal, discussion, reflection and redrafting.

Under the confirmed replacement framework, NCEA will be progressively replaced by:

- a Foundational Award at Year 11 from 2028;
- the New Zealand Certificate of Education at Year 12 from 2029; and
- the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education at Year 13 from 2030.

English or Te Reo Rangatira will be compulsory for Year 11 students. At Years 12 and 13, students will normally enrol in at least five subjects. The new qualifications will be subject-based and aligned with a more prescribed national curriculum.

At the time of writing, aspects of the detailed English assessment design are still being developed. However, the direction of reform indicates fewer nationally defined subjects, greater commonality in course expectations, centrally designed assessment components and at least one externally assessed component within senior subjects. Teachers have consequently expressed concern about the extent to which local programme design, multimodal English and alternative assessment pathways will remain available.

Purpose of the Proposed Changes

A principal purpose of the qualification reforms is to address concerns about fragmentation within NCEA and behaviours associated with credit accumulation. Under the existing system, students may sometimes approach English by asking how many credits they need rather than considering the knowledge and capabilities that make up a coherent course.

Teachers acknowledged this problem. One participant observed that some students completed selected standards and then disengaged once they had accumulated sufficient credits. This could lead students to perceive English as a series of disconnected assessment events rather than a sustained programme of reading, writing, speaking, viewing and critical thinking.

The proposed subject-based qualification seeks to establish clearer expectations about what students should know and be able to do across a complete English course. A subject grade may provide students, families, employers and tertiary institutions with a more immediately understandable indication of overall achievement. One teacher saw potential value in this approach because it might encourage students to “have a crack at everything” rather than withdrawing once they had secured enough credits.

Greater coherence could also encourage students to recognise connections among different areas of English. Close reading can strengthen writing; literary study can support cultural and critical understanding; oral communication can develop confidence and clarity; and the analysis of film and digital media can deepen understanding of how meaning is shaped through language, image and sound.

However, teachers questioned whether wholesale replacement of NCEA was necessary to achieve these aims. The redesigned Level 1 English programme had already reduced the number of standards and increased their size. One teacher explained that the four-standard structure allowed teachers to concentrate on “skills and knowledge rather than the assessment”. Another asked why it was being replaced before its effectiveness could be properly evaluated:

*“We haven’t trialled it long enough,
or we don’t have enough data ...
to say that it’s not working.”*

For these teachers, the recent Level 1 changes represented a credible response to fragmentation. As one participant concluded,

“That refinement was the right path.”

Literature scan: Curriculum and assessment in secondary English

Curriculum and assessment in secondary English are mutually constitutive: curriculum establishes what knowledge, practices and purposes are valued, while assessment strongly influences which of these are enacted in classrooms. Under NCEA, the combination of a broadly framed curriculum and flexible standards has supported localised programmes, diverse texts and responsiveness to learners; however, assessment incentives can also encourage fragmentation, strategic standards selection and the narrowing of teaching to readily assessable outcomes. Hughson (2021) argues that this outcomes-focused environment can obscure larger questions about what students should encounter in English and why, while Wilson et al. (2016) demonstrate that curricular and assessment flexibility has not produced equitable opportunities to develop disciplinary literacy. Māori, Pacific and lower-socio-economic students were less likely to participate in academically challenging English standards and were often offered less complex texts and learning experiences. Nevertheless, greater prescription is not an uncomplicated remedy. Highly specified curricula and common assessments may improve coherence and entitlement to disciplinary knowledge, but can also create curriculum overload, prioritise coverage and constrain teachers’ capacity to connect texts with students’ identities, cultures and contexts (Hughson & Poulton, 2026).

This tension is especially significant in English, where knowledge is developed through interpretation, dialogue and engagement with varied linguistic, literary, cultural and multimodal traditions, rather than solely through the acquisition of predetermined content (Green, 2026). Consequently, the transition from NCEA to the proposed curriculum and qualification framework should not be understood as a change to assessment alone. Because assessment will shape the enacted curriculum, close alignment is required between prescribed knowledge, the purposes of English,

teaching opportunities and valid ways of demonstrating learning. The literature supports a carefully balanced framework that guarantees every learner access to challenging disciplinary knowledge while preserving sufficient teacher judgement, cultural responsiveness, text diversity and multiple assessment pathways to prevent greater coherence from producing new forms of inequity.

Debate surrounding the English curriculum in Aotearoa

Debate over the English curriculum in Aotearoa New Zealand reflects fundamentally different understandings of what English is, whose knowledge it should represent and how much control should reside nationally or locally. Critics of the relatively open 2007 curriculum and NCEA framework argue that insufficient specification of disciplinary content has produced substantial variation between schools, fragmented learning and inequitable access to challenging texts and knowledge; consequently, a more coherent, knowledge-rich curriculum may provide all learners with a stronger common entitlement (Rozas, 2024).

Conversely, critics of greater prescription contend that English cannot be reduced to a fixed body of objective content because interpretation and text creation necessarily draw upon students' language, identity, experience and cultural location. The rapid movement from the biculturally grounded Te Mātaiaho refresh to a more structured curriculum has therefore been interpreted as an ideological contest between different "versions and visions" of English: one foregrounding place, identity, mātauranga Māori and critical participation, and another prioritising nationally sequenced disciplinary knowledge, explicit instruction and standardisation (Green, 2026).

Concerns have also been raised that a narrowly defined knowledge-rich approach may privilege Anglo-European literary traditions, marginalise digital and multimodal communication, and reduce teachers' professional agency to select texts responsive to ākonga and local communities (Bacalja et al., 2026). The central issue is thus not a simple choice between knowledge and flexibility. Rather, it is whether a national curriculum can guarantee equitable access to significant literary and linguistic knowledge while recognising Te Tiriti o Waitangi, sustaining diverse cultural traditions and preserving the dialogic, creative

and interpretive character of English. This debate has direct implications for qualification reform: if assessment privileges prescribed content, standardised responses and external examinations, it will consolidate one conception of English, whereas a broader assessment design could support shared disciplinary expectations alongside cultural responsiveness, multimodality and legitimate differences in interpretation.

English Subject Association stance – New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English (NZATE)

The New Zealand Association for Teachers of English (NZATE) has made a significant contribution to debate about curriculum and assessment reform by providing both a national forum for professional discussion and a collective response grounded in English teachers' experience. NZATE's 2025 special curriculum edition of their publication *English in Aotearoa* brought together varied perspectives on disciplinary knowledge, cultural representation, Te Tiriti obligations, prescribed texts, teacher autonomy and the relationship between curriculum and assessment.

NZATE extended this work through consultation forums with members and a detailed submission on the draft Phase 5 English curriculum. Although supporting clearer progression, greater guidance and mandatory engagement with Aotearoa New Zealand and Māori literature, the association cautioned against excessive prescription, curriculum overload and the narrowing of English through the exclusion of film, oral, digital and multimodal texts. It also identified potential inequities arising from differences in school resourcing, specialist expertise and students' access to prescribed texts (New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English [NZATE], 2026).

Importantly, NZATE's contribution connects curriculum design directly with assessment reform. The argument is that unclear boundaries between the disciplinary curriculum and qualification requirements could cause assessment to determine what is taught, while common assessment arrangements may further constrain text selection and local responsiveness. NZATE therefore advances a balanced position, supporting national coherence and ambitious learning expectations while maintaining that successful reform must preserve cultural responsiveness, disciplinary breadth, teacher judgement and equitable access for diverse learners.

Assessment Quality, Consistency and Teacher Workload

A purpose of the proposed reforms is to improve the consistency and comparability of assessment. Under the current system, teachers and departments make substantial decisions about texts, contexts, assessment tasks and course structures. This creates opportunities for responsive teaching but also requires considerable assessment knowledge, moderation expertise and professional judgement.

The quality of internally assessed English tasks can vary. Some assessment contexts generate rich, authentic responses; others may constrain students or provide uneven opportunities to meet the standard. Teachers can also differ in their interpretation of ideas such as “convincing”, “perceptive”, “crafted” and “controlled”. Internal moderation and national external moderation are therefore essential for sustaining confidence in results.

Providing centrally designed assessment tasks could reduce some work associated with assessment development. External marking may lessen teachers’ summative marking burden, which is substantial in English because student responses are often extended and must be evaluated holistically. Any reduction in unnecessary assessment administration could allow more time for planning, formative feedback, conferencing and direct support for students.

Nevertheless, externally designed assessment does not automatically reduce teacher workload. If common tasks are unfamiliar, narrowly timed or poorly aligned with the learners in a particular school, teachers may need to invest additional time interpreting requirements, redesigning programmes and preparing students for unfamiliar assessment conditions. An externally marked task may remove summative marking while increasing the amount of teaching directed towards assessment rehearsal.

There is a professional-learning cost when teachers no longer mark their own students’ work. Close engagement with student writing and interpretation gives teachers important information about the effectiveness of their teaching. It reveals patterns of misunderstanding, weaknesses in textual knowledge and areas in which students have developed original or sophisticated ideas.

Greater consistency need not require the removal of teacher judgement. Nationally developed assessment frameworks, shared task banks, annotated exemplars, stronger moderation and collaborative assessment development could improve reliability while retaining meaningful teacher involvement. As the mathematics chapter also argues, there may have been less disruptive ways to address assessment variability than replacing the entire qualification structure.

The central challenge is to strengthen national confidence in English assessment without treating consistency as synonymous with uniformity.

Why English Matters

English is not simply preparation for the further study of literature. It develops capabilities required across tertiary education, employment, community participation and everyday life.

Students need to interpret complex information, distinguish reliable evidence from misinformation, recognise persuasion, understand different viewpoints and communicate ideas to varied audiences. These capabilities have become increasingly important in a digital environment shaped by social media, algorithmically distributed content, artificial intelligence and rapidly changing forms of communication.

English also supports success across the wider curriculum. Students studying history, geography, biology, health, business, religious studies and many other subjects must read complex material, construct arguments, use evidence and communicate conclusions. Weaknesses in reading and writing can therefore restrict achievement even where students possess relevant subject knowledge.

Senior English supports pathways into education, law, journalism, communications, public policy, social work, psychology, business, marketing, media, publishing, creative industries and the humanities. It develops transferable capabilities valued in almost every occupation: clarity, interpretation, creativity, empathy, critical judgement and communication.

The study of literature and other texts contributes to more than economic participation. It gives students opportunities to encounter lives and perspectives beyond their immediate experience. It can build cultural understanding and create spaces in which social val-

ues, power, identity, language and belonging are examined critically.

Creative and oral work also gives students opportunities to develop a public voice. One teacher described current student work as capable of “blow[ing] your socks off” because learners were “putting on the power for voicing”. This suggests that English can help students move from receiving knowledge to participating in its creation and contestation.

A reduction in senior English participation would therefore have consequences extending beyond English departments. It could reduce the number of students receiving sustained instruction in extended reading, writing, argument, interpretation and communication at precisely the time when these capabilities are becoming more important.

Survey Data and English Teacher Voice analysis

A survey for English teachers throughout Aotearoa, New Zealand was conducted in June and July 2026. The survey was posted in NZATE communication to members of the English Teachers’ Association throughout Aotearoa, New Zealand. There were 86 respondents to the survey.

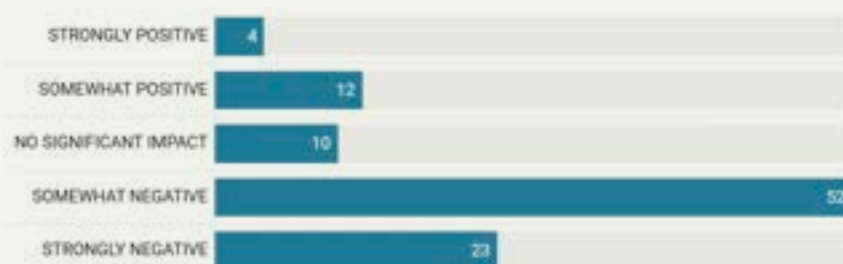
Survey percentages report the balance of coded positive and negative responses for each item. They should be read alongside the qualitative comments, teacher focus groups and academic interviews, which explain the reasoning, conditions and equity concerns underlying those judgements.

Figure 1.
Overall sentiment [positive-negative]



[methodology: total negative reactions and subtract from total positive reactions]

Effect of changes on engagement



Continued studies in Y12/Y13



45% thought students were more engaged under NCEA than other qualification frameworks they had taught under.

Key findings from this section

- Respondents expressed significant concern about the impact of the proposed changes on diverse learners. The strongest and clearest finding was around flexibility to meet diverse learner needs, with 92% of respondents identifying a negative impact and only 2% identifying a positive impact. This indicates widespread concern about the ability of the proposed framework to support learners with varied literacy backgrounds, learning needs and pathways.
- There was strong concern about the increased emphasis on examinations. Almost three-quarters of respondents (73%) viewed a stronger examination focus negatively, suggesting concerns that increased assessment emphasis may narrow English learning experiences, reduce opportunities for authentic engagement with texts, and limit flexibility in programme design.

- Course design was viewed negatively by the majority of respondents. 68% identified a negative impact, compared with only 18% who viewed the changes positively. This suggests concerns about whether the proposed structure will allow teachers sufficient flexibility to design meaningful and responsive English programmes.
- Assessment workload and pressure on students was identified as a significant concern. 69% of respondents indicated a negative impact, highlighting concerns about increased assessment demands, implementation workload and the potential impact on student wellbeing.
- Clarity of learning pathways was the most positively perceived area, although views remained mixed. While 43% of respondents identified a negative impact, 34% identified a positive impact and 23% reported no change. This suggests that some respondents see potential benefits in greater coherence, but uncertainty remains about how pathways will work in practice.
- Overall, respondents appear most concerned about the potential narrowing of learning opportunities and reduced flexibility within the qualification framework. The dominant themes emerging from responses relate to inclusion, accessibility, assessment pressure and maintaining the richness and breadth of English as a subject.

Figure 2. Comments analysis:

Theme	Key ideas emerging	Approx. frequency
1. Concern about equity, inclusion and diverse learners	Proposed framework favours academic learners; concerns for Māori/Pasifika, ESOL, neurodiverse students, students with learning challenges, alternative education, trauma backgrounds, low literacy learners; fear that students will disengage or lose pathways	Very high
2. Loss of flexibility and student pathways	Current NCEA allows multiple pathways; concern that a single academic English pathway will exclude students who need practical literacy, vocational English, communication skills, or alternative ways to demonstrate learning	Very high
3. Move towards an overly academic/ elitist English model	Concerns English is becoming university preparation rather than a subject for all learners; emphasis on literature, exams and canonical texts may reduce participation; fear English becomes inaccessible	Very high
4. Concerns about assessment changes and increased external examination focus	Moving away from standards-based assessment; concern that exams disadvantage some learners; internal assessment valued for feedback, relationships, scaffolding and demonstrating growth; concerns about stress and wellbeing	High
5. Curriculum overload and lack of depth	Too much content; too many prescribed texts; teachers will “tick box”; insufficient time for deep learning; unrealistic expectations given interruptions and wider school demands	High
6. Lack of consultation, clarity and implementation planning	Teachers feel uninformed; insufficient detail about assessments, resources, PLD, timelines and moderation; concerns about rushed implementation and lack of piloting	Very high
7. Loss of teacher autonomy and professional expertise	Scripted lessons, prescriptive content and restricted choices seen as undermining teacher expertise, creativity and ability to respond to students in front of them	High
8. Concerns about removal of film and visual texts	Film provides access points into literature, supports diverse learners, reflects modern communication; concern visual literacy is undervalued	High
9. Concerns about prescribed texts and literary canon	Questions around focus on colonial-era texts, Shakespearean play requirements, New Zealand texts chosen for compliance rather than merit, narrowing student engagement	Moderate-high

Theme	Key ideas emerging	Approx. frequency
10. Support for greater consistency and academic rigour	Some respondents support clearer expectations, stronger curriculum focus, common national expectations, reduced “gaming” of NCEA, greater rigour and consistency	Moderate
11. Defence of aspects of NCEA/preference for refinement rather than replacement	Many believe NCEA needed improvement but not replacement; current flexibility enables success; concerns changes discard strengths alongside weaknesses	High
12. Concerns about workload and teacher capacity	Significant change fatigue; new curriculum plus qualification changes overwhelming; lack of staffing, inexperienced teachers, limited support; concerns about implementation burden	High
13. Concerns about impact on student engagement and subject uptake	English already perceived as difficult; fear students will avoid senior English; removal of engaging options may reduce enrolments	High
14. Questions about evidence base and rationale for reform	Concern government has not demonstrated problem requiring overhaul; claims of “gaming” questioned; lack of evidence provided for benefits	Moderate
15. Positive support for change	Some see current NCEA as inconsistent and able to be ‘gamed.’ Welcome stronger subject identity, clearer progression, external assessment and cumulative learning	Moderate

Interviews with academics with English specialisations.

Purpose, scope and ethical treatment.

Qualitative data for this study was provided by five semi-structured interviews with academics and specialists in English education, curriculum, assessment and educational equity. The interviews examined factors affecting engagement in Years 11–13 English, the problems the proposed reforms seek to address, likely consequences for different learner groups, features of NCEA that should be protected and the conditions required for responsible implementation. The transcripts were analysed through an inductive–deductive thematic process, combining the domains of the interview schedule with patterns that emerged across the complete dataset.

The interview sample was small and purposively assembled. The findings should therefore be interpreted as expert qualitative evidence rather than as statistically representative opinion. To protect anonymity, no names, institutions or biographical details are reported. Quotations are attributed only to an academic interview participant and have been lightly edited to remove verbal fillers without altering meaning.

Engagement is relational, contextual and larger than qualification design

Across all five interviews, engagement was described as the product of interacting personal, relational, curricular and structural conditions. Participants identified prior literacy success, confidence, attendance, housing and family circumstances, cultural recognition, classroom relationships, text choice, relevance and the visibility of achievable progress. No participant treated assessment architecture as a sufficient explanation for either engagement or disengagement.

One participant captured the importance of relational pedagogy succinctly: “Ultimately, it’s about the relationship that you have with that teacher.” Another explained that engagement depends on learners being able to recognise both themselves and a worthwhile future in the subject. These accounts align closely with teacher focus-group evidence about relevance, representation and trust, while placing those classroom factors within wider material conditions that qualification reform alone cannot repair.

Credits were interpreted ambivalently. Participants accepted that credit accumulation can narrow programmes or encourage students to disengage once they believe they have enough. At the same time, credits can provide visible milestones and attainable evidence of progress. As one participant observed, the structure of NCEA affects both students who may “tune out when they feel they’ve got enough credits” and teachers who may “narrow the curriculum or reduce what’s on offer”. The interviews therefore caution against assuming that removing credits will, by itself, create sustained intellectual engagement.

Judgements about reform remain conditional on missing detail

A striking area of agreement was that definitive judgements were premature while key features of the new assessment system remained unknown. Participants repeatedly qualified their views with phrases such as “in theory”, “it depends” and “the devil will be in the detail”. They wanted to see the balance of internal and external assessment, compulsory components, task and examination models, marking arrangements, assessment windows, accommodations, transition pathways and the relationship between curriculum content and the final subject result.

One participant stated: “Show me some assessment schedule. Show me some sample exams ... before I actually make up my mind.” Another warned that “policy always has unintended consequences” and that these become more likely when reform is not grounded in robust research. This was not an argument for suspending all analysis. Rather, the academics identified foreseeable risks and insisted that claims about coherence, validity and equity be tested against concrete assessment instruments and diverse learner experiences.

Fragmentation is real, but its causes and remedies are contested

Participants agreed that fragmented learning and inconsistent expectations can occur under NCEA, but they differed over how systemic the problem is and whether the proposed reforms would resolve it. Some saw value in a common structure that could give students a broader conceptual schema and connect reading, writing, speaking, viewing and critical interpretation across a complete course. Others argued that fragmentation often reflects mobility, housing inse-

curity, interrupted attendance or programme design rather than the existence of standards themselves. For these learners, a cumulative whole-year course may intensify discontinuity rather than repair it.

Credit-driven behaviour was also understood in more than one way. Participants acknowledged strategic standard selection and curriculum narrowing, but resisted describing students’ pragmatic decisions as simply “gaming” the system. One argued that such behaviour is “often strength based”, particularly when students use available standards to demonstrate genuine capabilities. The removal of credits would not remove incentives: marks, pass thresholds, University Entrance requirements and school accountability measures could generate new forms of triage. A simpler subject result may reduce one kind of fragmentation while producing sharper pass-fail divisions.

Equity depends on access, recognition and valid ways to demonstrate learning

Equity was the most sustained concern across the academic interviews. Participants questioned whether a more standardised and examination-focused system would provide substantively fair access for Māori and Pacific learners, neurodiverse students, learners requiring additional support and those already at risk of disengagement. Their concern was not a deficit view of these learners. It was that apparently uniform conditions interact unevenly with colonisation, socio-economic inequality, interrupted opportunity, anxiety, disability and cultural representation.

Cultural recognition was treated as integral to engagement and validity. “If learners don’t feel that their world is represented and seen in content, they’re much more likely to disengage,” one participant explained. Contemporary Aotearoa texts, Māori and Pacific writing, oral and visual forms and locally meaningful contexts were valued as ways of enabling students to enter disciplinary English without lowering intellectual expectations.

Participants also stressed that neurodiversity is heterogeneous. Some learners may struggle with the administrative complexity of multiple internal assessments; others may be significantly disadvantaged by a compulsory timed examination. This produced a strong argument for adaptive assessment: schools should retain enough flexibility to design a programme that gives learners “the best chance for success”. The interviews consistently separated high ex-

expectations from high stakes. Ambition for all learners did not require a single route or one decisive performance; a caring and rigorous system should provide “multiple opportunities for success”.



Protecting the breadth and identity of English

The academics repeatedly identified flexibility, authentic coursework, course-design choice, explicit criteria, teacher judgement and purposeful opportunities to improve as strengths worth retaining. These features were not understood as loopholes that weaken rigour. They were mechanisms for connecting nationally credible standards to diverse learners and for assessing English practices in forms that resemble their authentic use.

Coursework was especially important to the “creating meaning” dimension of English. Speaking can be assessed through a presentation to an audience; writing can be developed through drafting and revision; and visual, oral and multimodal composition can demonstrate sophisticated control of purpose and form. One participant warned that a highly examination-focused system may prevent many students from showing “what they know and what they can do”. Another noted that greater external assessment might produce results that are “more consistent, but not necessarily better quality”.

There was nevertheless qualified support for a richer common entitlement to disciplinary knowledge. Some participants were concerned that existing programmes can recycle a small range of texts or become dominated by assessment preparation. Greater coherence could expose learners to wider literature, larger ideas and clearer progression. The tension was not between knowledge and relevance, but between an intellectually rich entitlement and a prescribed programme that becomes culturally narrow, overloaded or superficially covered.

Participants also distinguished subject English from functional literacy. They were concerned that students who did not meet an early foundational threshold might be diverted into a narrower literacy pathway and lose access to the cultural, critical and creative dimensions of English. Reform must therefore ask not only who passes, but who is permitted to participate in English as a full disciplinary and cultural field.

Implementation requires clarity, time, collaboration and trust

All five interview participants called for early clarity, protected time, manageable workload, model assessments, high-quality resources, sustained professional learning and collaboration. These conditions were interdependent: resources without time cannot be understood and adapted; professional learning without collaborative inquiry may not change practice; and specifications released too late transfer implementation risk directly to teachers and students.

One participant explained: “Good professional learning is slow and long. It takes time ... [and] folks are better off in professional learning communities where they can work together, trial things, reflect on them, and carry on.” Participants described a profession already fatigued by overlapping change and regarded rushed implementation as an ethical concern because the first cohorts would bear the consequences of provisional interpretation and underprepared systems.

Professional trust underpinned these requests. Teachers were understood as knowledgeable practitioners with an ethic of care, not simply as delivery agents for centrally defined content. Participants wanted reform developed with teachers and students rather than “done to them, not with them”. This finding strongly converges with the focus-group call for authentic consultation and a slower, evidence-led implementation process.

Synthesis of the academic interview evidence

Taken together, the academic interviews offer a cautiously critical rather than oppositional account of reform. Participants recognised fragmentation, variable opportunity, curriculum narrowing and credit-focused behaviour, and some saw genuine promise in greater coherence, transparency and intellectual breadth. Their support was conditional, however, on whether the final system could meet three linked tests: validity, equity and feasibility.

Validity requires assessments that permit learners to demonstrate the capabilities the qualification claims to measure. Equity requires content, pathways and conditions that expand meaningful access rather than sorting students into academic English and a lesser literacy track. Feasibility requires sufficient information, time, resources, collaboration and professional trust for schools to construct coherent programmes.

The central academic warning is that formal consistency is not the same as substantive fairness. Reform can strengthen English only if it holds productive pairs together: coherence with flexibility; disciplinary knowledge with cultural recognition; robust assessment with more than one valid mode of demonstration; and national expectations with professional and local judgement.

English Teacher Focus-Group Evidence

Further qualitative evidence considered for this chapter was drawn from focus-group discussions with English teachers working across different secondary-school settings. Teachers who participated in the focus groups come from diverse settings across the country including area school, private school, correspondence school, schools with project-based learning, high equity and low equity public schools. Participants reflected on student engagement, the strengths and weaknesses of NCEA, the proposed qualification reforms, equity implications and the support required for implementation. Two focus groups were held with a total of 10 teacher participants.

Although participants differed on some matters, there was substantial agreement that engagement in English is strengthened by:

- relevant and culturally meaningful content;
- student choice and agency;
- strong teacher–student relationships;
- multiple forms of text and communication;
- adaptable assessment pathways;
- timely feedback and opportunities to improve;
- high expectations combined with appropriate support; and
- teachers’ capacity to respond to the learners in front of them.

Teachers consistently associated engagement with students’ ability to connect learning to their identities,

interests and experiences. One participant explained that engagement depended on selecting texts and topics that were “interesting to them” and concluded that it “comes down to flexibility primarily”.

Another teacher stated that students participate more confidently “when they feel that they can offer something” and “when they can connect to the content”. Film was provided as one example because it enabled students to draw upon “their cultural capital and their prior knowledge and experiences”.

The importance of representation was summarised directly by another participant:

“When the students can see themselves in whatever topic or assessment that they’re doing, that engagement goes up.”

Film study, oral texts, performance and digital texts were regarded as legitimate and intellectually demanding components of English. They were also important entry points for students who might not initially identify themselves as confident readers of conventional literary texts.

Course choice was similarly linked to participation. One teacher described separate written English and visual and oral English pathways at Year 13. The availability of these options resulted in “more students choosing English than would otherwise be the case”.

Teachers therefore understood engagement as more than student enjoyment within individual lessons. It included whether students selected English, remained in the subject, experienced success and developed identities as capable communicators.



Flexibility and Responsiveness to Learners

Flexibility emerged as the most valued feature of the current system. Teachers used the term to describe choice of texts, topics, standards, assessment modes, course structures, pace, timing and pathways.

One teacher described the strength of NCEA as “the pathways they’ve got, the texts that they can use and the accessibility of assessment”. If a student was unsuccessful in one context, “they can try another way of doing things”.

Another participant explained that teachers could “concentrate on the strengths or the weaknesses” of individual learners rather than being “hell-bent on getting through a particular structure”.

The relationship between flexibility and learner-centred practice was articulated particularly clearly by one participant:

“When you put the learner in the middle of your thinking, what do you put in around them? ... What does that individual or group of individuals need in terms of text, in terms of timing, in terms of topics, in terms of approaches, in terms of pedagogy?”

Participants did not defend unlimited flexibility. They recognised that some schools had used the current system to create narrow courses, direct students away from challenging learning or select standards mainly to maximise credit attainment. One participant described this as taking “the easy way out in the name of helping them to succeed”.

However, the same participant warned:

“It was too much flexibility, but I don’t think the answer to that is to take away all flexibility.”

The teacher evidence therefore supports managed rather than unrestricted flexibility: nationally credible expectations combined with sufficient room for professional judgement, local curriculum design and multiple ways of demonstrating achievement.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Cultural Responsiveness

The implications of qualification reform for Māori learners cannot be considered solely through participation and attainment data. A Te Tiriti-informed approach must also consider whether learners can experience success as Māori, whether local communities can influence curriculum and whether mātauranga Māori, Māori texts, reo, identity and cultural perspectives are treated as integral rather than supplementary.

English is unavoidably concerned with whose stories are studied, whose language is valued and whose interpretation is treated as authoritative. Decisions about prescribed texts and literary traditions are therefore also decisions about cultural power.

The flexibility of the current system allows schools to select texts connected to local histories, mana whenua, community experiences and students’ cultural identities. Students may study Māori and Pacific writers, oral traditions, film, speeches, waiata, spoken-word poetry and contemporary texts alongside works from wider literary traditions. This does not prevent the teaching of canonical literature; it allows teachers to construct conversations among texts and perspectives.

Participants were concerned that a prescribed curriculum might reduce this local agency. One teacher contrasted the proposed direction with earlier curriculum priorities that foregrounded “identity and collective and who you were and knowing yourself and your place in the world”. The teacher feared that Māori and Pacific learners could be “disadvantaged in a subtle kind of a way”.

Another participant expressed concern that the reduced prominence of “film, waiata, performance and those other multimodal or digital text forms” would remove important ways for students to encounter culturally meaningful English learning.

A Te Tiriti-responsive English curriculum must do more than insert isolated Māori texts into a predetermined literary sequence. Schools require authentic relationships with mana whenua, appropriate professional learning and opportunities for local knowledge to shape programme design.

Flexibility alone cannot guarantee culturally sustaining practice. However, its removal could restrict schools that are already working with Māori communities to develop more locally grounded learning.

Potential Impacts on Diverse Learners

Neurodiverse learners and students requiring additional support

Teachers expressed strong concern about students who need adjusted pacing, regular feedback, alternative modes of assessment or intensive relational support. These learners may succeed when a course is broken into achievable stages and when they can receive evidence of progress during the year.

One participant described a neurodivergent student who needed regular individual support and help understanding “the personal relevance for why something is worth doing”. Sustaining this student’s motivation towards a high-stakes assessment at the end of the year was considered possible, but likely to require substantial additional support. The teacher concluded that there was “massive risk for kids like him”.

Another participant was concerned about “the rigidity, the inflexibility, the high-stakes assessment” and the loss of capacity “to tailor a programme to the needs of a kid or for a kid to navigate it at their own pace”.

English examinations require students to read, plan, recall, interpret and compose sustained responses within time limits. These conditions may provide a valid indication of learning for some students but can create significant barriers for learners with dyslexia, processing difficulties, anxiety, attention differences or working-memory challenges.

Special assessment conditions can reduce some barriers, but they require early identification, documentation, staffing, appropriate spaces and technological capacity. Schools with limited learning-support resources may find it particularly difficult to provide equitable access.

Māori and Pacific learners

Participants anticipated disproportionate effects for Māori and Pacific students if the new English curriculum reduced student choice, culturally relevant texts, local knowledge and multimodal learning.

The concern was not that Māori and Pacific students were incapable of succeeding in a more literary or examination-based curriculum. Rather, teachers questioned whether the system would recognise the knowledge, language practices and cultural resources these learners bring.

A multimodal selection of learning opportunities can enable students to connect school English with family, community and cultural experience. A narrower definition of legitimate English knowledge may inadvertently privilege students whose home experiences already align closely with the language, texts and assessment practices of formal schooling.

Socio-economic inequality

A standardised assessment system does not operate in standardised material conditions. Students have unequal access to devices, quiet study spaces, private tutoring, books, internet connectivity, learning support and family members familiar with academic English.

Students in well-resourced schools may receive extensive examination preparation, individual feedback and specialist support. Schools with staffing shortages or large classes may struggle to provide comparable opportunities.

One teacher predicted that the reforms could “exacerbate what already exists”. This concern is particularly significant where externally assessed work carries greater weight and where success requires the cumulative retention of knowledge across an entire year.

Student confidence and participation

Internal assessments can provide students with tangible evidence that they are capable of succeeding in English. A well-developed speech, piece of writing, research project or textual analysis can become a confidence-building experience.

These successes may encourage students to attempt more challenging tasks and remain in English at Years 12 and 13. If opportunities for success during the year are reduced, some students may conclude earlier that English is “not for them”.

Teachers feared that a more academically prescribed and examination-oriented course would attract a narrower group of learners. One participant described the proposed content as “quite academic” and questioned its “mass appeal” in a contemporary multimodal world.

Another believed that the proposed framework resembled “an education system for a world that doesn’t exist anymore”.

Participants did not oppose literary knowledge or academic challenge. Their concern was that rigour was being defined through uniform content and assessment conditions rather than through the depth, originality and quality of students' thinking.

Teacher Autonomy and Professional Knowledge

Teacher autonomy was consistently linked to responsiveness. Teachers were concerned about losing the authority to choose texts, construct courses, adjust assessment timing and determine how learners could best demonstrate achievement.

One participant identified the core issue as:

“The autonomy that the teacher has to provide for the kids in front of them.”

This does not mean that teachers should work without shared expectations. National curriculum guidance, subject knowledge frameworks and assessment criteria are necessary. However, professional autonomy enables teachers to interpret these expectations in relation to particular learners and communities.

The proposed knowledge-rich English curriculum may require teachers to develop expertise in areas that have not been equally emphasised in recent English programmes. These may include literary history, language development, grammar, rhetoric, linguistics, phonics, critical theories, referencing and prescribed traditions of literary study.

English is frequently taught by teachers whose principal specialisation lies elsewhere. A curriculum that assumes extensive disciplinary knowledge will require sustained professional learning, especially where schools face recruitment difficulties.

One participant distinguished between curriculum knowledge and “the pedagogical knowledge of how to put that in place in a way that doesn’t just destroy the population”. This captures an important implementation principle. Knowing more about literary periods, grammar or rhetoric does not automatically equip a teacher to make this knowledge meaningful and accessible to diverse adolescents.

Professional and Practical Implications

Successful English qualification reform will require considerably more than the publication of a curriculum document and assessment specifications.

Teachers will need:

- detailed guidance on curriculum progression across Years 11–13;
- clarity about compulsory and optional content;
- extensive annotated exemplars;
- model programmes showing different ways to sequence learning;
- guidance on integrating reading, writing, speaking, viewing and presenting;
- subject-specific professional development;
- moderation support;
- culturally responsive teaching resources;
- guidance for supporting neurodiverse learners;
- assessment trials conducted in diverse school settings;
- adequate preparation and transition time; and
- opportunities to participate meaningfully in qualification development.

If assessment becomes more cumulative, teachers will need support to develop programmes that deliberately revisit and connect knowledge throughout the year. Students cannot simply encounter content once and then be expected to reproduce it months later. Effective cumulative learning requires planned retrieval, repeated application and increasingly sophisticated use of knowledge.

If prescribed literary and language knowledge becomes more prominent, schools will need high-quality teaching resources rather than lists of required content. Text availability will also need careful consideration. A prescribed programme may create additional costs for schools needing new class sets, digital licences, audiovisual material and teacher resources.

Expanded external assessment will create infrastructural pressures. Digital examinations require reliable devices, power, internet access, technical support and appropriate spaces. Students using reader-writers or other special assessment conditions require additional rooms and staff. One participant warned that the scale of concurrent assessment could mean a school would “not be able to run school for the younger kids”.

Professional development must be sustained rather than concentrated in isolated workshops. Teachers need time to plan collaboratively, examine student work, trial approaches, discuss interpretations and evaluate the effects of changes on different learners.

Online moderation hui could enable teachers to question assessment specialists directly, examine borderline judgements and discuss common difficulties. These should complement, rather than replace, written exemplars and national moderation reports.

Consultation, Trust and the Pace of Reform

Teachers' strongest implementation message was that they wanted an authentic professional voice before major decisions became fixed.

When asked what support teachers needed, one participant rejected the assumption that resources and training alone would be sufficient:

“What do we need? We actually need a voice ... [we] need to be listened to.”

Participants believed that experienced teachers possessed important knowledge about engagement, curriculum design, assessment and the needs of diverse learners. One teacher explained:

“What we really need is to be treated as professionals with experience and knowledge in our fields, and be listened to.”

The emotional intensity of the discussions reflected concern for students rather than simple resistance to change. Participants used words including “worried”, “depressing”, “frustration”, “sad” and “profound sadness”.

Teachers were especially concerned about the first cohorts entering an unfamiliar system. One described the situation as asking students to “jump hurdles” when teachers could not yet explain “how high or what the spacing is”. Another characterised implementation as “flying the plane and building it simultaneously”.

The staged introduction of the Foundational Award in 2028, NZCE in 2029 and NZACE in 2030 provides some preparation time. However, time alone will not ensure readiness. Detailed information, accessible

resources, teacher involvement, trials across diverse schools and responsive revision will all be required.

Implications

The survey, teacher focus groups and academic interviews examined in this chapter do not present an uncritical defence of NCEA. Across the three evidence strands, contributors recognised genuine concerns about fragmentation, credit accumulation, inconsistent assessment and uneven course quality. Some could see benefits in clearer subject coherence, stronger disciplinary progression and a result that encouraged students to engage across a complete course.

However, teachers and academics strongly questioned whether these aims required the removal of the flexibility, responsiveness and multiple pathways that currently enable many students to succeed. Their concern was that a system designed to improve consistency may unintentionally narrow English, reduce senior participation and deepen inequalities between learners and schools.

The central issue is what the qualification places at the centre of decision-making. At its best, the present system allows teachers to begin with the learner and construct appropriate texts, contexts, pathways and assessment opportunities around them. Participants feared that the new framework would instead place prescribed content, common schedules and system comparability at the centre.

One teacher described this as a movement away from “putting the kid in the middle” and towards using education as a “sorting mechanism”.

English qualifications should provide national confidence that students can read, interpret, communicate and think critically. This does not require every student to encounter identical texts, complete identical tasks or demonstrate learning under identical conditions. Consistency of valued capabilities can coexist with diversity of content, culture, context and expression.

The strongest collective message is therefore not a rejection of reform but a call for proportionate, evidence-informed change. As identified in other recent research, reform of NCEA itself “rather than wholesale replacement, offers a more coherent and just pathway forward” (Robertshaw, Clarke, & Karaka-Clarke, 2026, p.9). Greater coherence should be pursued

without sacrificing student agency, culturally meaningful learning, multimodal English, teacher judgement or multiple opportunities for success.

As one participant concluded, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is “not the reality, and it’s not equitable”. Perhaps more than any other finding, this encapsulates the central concern for English educators surrounding the proposed assessment framework reform: students are not a homogeneous group and an assessment framework built upon expectations of sameness will not create fairness; instead, it risks intensifying existing inequities and causing more harm than good.

Recommendations

The evidence in this chapter supports the following actions:

- Retain meaningful flexibility within nationally coherent English qualifications.
- Protect the place of written, visual, oral, digital and multimodal texts.
- Preserve opportunities for local curriculum design and partnership with mana whenua and Pacific communities.
- Ensure students have multiple credible ways to demonstrate reading, writing, speaking, viewing and critical-thinking capabilities.
- Trial proposed assessment conditions with Māori and Pacific learners, neurodiverse students and students requiring learning support.
- Evaluate the reformed Level 1 English standards before abandoning the design principles underpinning them.
- Provide detailed assessment exemplars and model programmes well before implementation.
- Invest in sustained professional learning in disciplinary knowledge and responsive English pedagogy.
- Assess schools’ device, staffing, space and special-assessment-condition capacity before expanding common external assessment.
- Retain teachers’ involvement in assessment and moderation as a source of professional learning.
- Monitor the effects of reform on English enrolment and retention at Years 12 and 13.
- Establish genuine teacher, student, whānau, iwi and community participation in ongoing qualification development.

Conclusion

Whilst a compulsory element of our qualification system, English has never been a one size fits all subject, because students have never been one size fits all learners. The evidence in this chapter does not make a case against change, it makes a case for getting change right. Greater coherence, clearer expectations and stronger national confidence are worthwhile goals, but not if they are purchased at the expense of flexibility, cultural responsiveness, professional judgement and genuine opportunities for diverse learners to succeed.

A fair English qualification should be rigorous enough to challenge every learner, flexible enough to recognise different ways of demonstrating that learning, and broad enough to reflect what English is: language, literature, culture, communication, creativity and voice. If a key purpose of English is to help young people find, develop and use their voices, we should be wary of building an assessment system that requires them all to speak with the same one.

References

- Bacalja, A., Doecke, B., McLean Davies, L., & Yandell, J. (2026). English in a neoliberal age: (Re)shaping subjectivities. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-026-00434-5>
- Green, B. (2026). Versions and visions: A (new) national English curriculum for Aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-026-00460-3>
- Hughson, T. A. (2021). Learnification and the outcomes-focused curriculum: The case of secondary school English in Aotearoa New Zealand. *The Curriculum Journal*, 32(4), 652–666. <https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.91>
- Hughson, T., & Poulton, P. (2026). The possibilities and pitfalls of curricular autonomy and curricular prescription: Seeking a balance point. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 53, Article 65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-026-00985-y>
- Ministry of Education. (2007). *The New Zealand curriculum*. Learning Media. <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum>
- Ministry of Education. (2026, May 16). *New senior secondary qualifications replacing NCEA*. Tāhūrangi. <https://tahurangi.education.govt.nz/senior-secondary-quals-finalised>
- New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English. (2025). Special edition on curriculum [Special issue]. *English in Aotearoa*.
- New Zealand Association for the Teaching of English. (2026). NZATE's feedback on draft Phase 5. *English in Aotearoa*, (117), 25–44.
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.-a). *English achievement standards and assessment resources: Level 1*. Retrieved August 2, 2026, from <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/assessment/search.do?level=01&query=english&view=all>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.-b). *English achievement standards and assessment resources: Level 2*. Retrieved August 2, 2026, from <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/assessment/search.do?level=02&query=english&view=all>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (n.d.-c). *English achievement standards and assessment resources: Level 3*. Retrieved August 2, 2026, from <https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/assessment/search.do?level=03&query=english&view=all>
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2026, May 20). *Approved subjects for University Entrance*. <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/ncea/understanding-secondary-quals/university-entrance/ue-subjects/>
- Robertshaw, C., Clarke, A., & Karaka-Clarke, T. H. (2026). He awa whiria—He aromatawai mō te anamata: Braiding kaiako voices in the future of NCEA. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, (1), 8–14. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.1588>
- Rozas, C. (2024). How to win a curriculum war. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 59, 363–370. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-024-00338-2>
- Wilson, A., Madjar, I., & McNaughton, S. (2016). Opportunity to learn about disciplinary literacy in senior secondary English classrooms in New Zealand. *The Curriculum Journal*, 27(2), 204–228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2015.1134339>

2.6b How Reforms May Influence Engagement in Mathematics

by Katy Thorne

Executive Summary

This chapter examines how the qualification reforms may impact student engagement with mathematics, and the implications of these changes for learner pathways and equity in Aotearoa New Zealand. The evidence considered suggests that the reforms may significantly alter participation and progression in mathematics, particularly at the transition from the Foundational Award in Year 11 into senior mathematics pathways.

As part of the research for this chapter, 267 mathematics teachers and educational professionals were surveyed. This was supplemented by a formal interview with Professor Jodie Hunter, Institute of Education at Massey University as well as informal discussions with other university academics about the implications of the reforms. While mathematics teachers recognise that the current NCEA system could be improved, a central concern is that the new model may reduce the flexibility currently available within mathematics programmes and consequently disadvantage learners. Under the existing system, schools can develop a range of pathways that allow students with different strengths, interests and aspirations to continue studying mathematics. This includes students following applied or statistics-focused pathways, as well as those progressing towards more traditional advanced mathematics and STEM pathways. A more prescribed structure risks narrowing these opportunities and creating barriers to participation.

The potential consequences extend beyond overall mathematics achievement. Reduced participation in Year 12 and Year 13 mathematics could disproportionately affect Māori and Pacific learners, Diverse Learners, female participation in advanced mathematics, and progression into STEM pathways. There is also concern that increased reliance on common external assessment may affect student confidence, mathematics anxiety and engagement with the subject.

This report identifies substantial implementation challenges. Teachers will require significant support to successfully transition to new curricula and assessment systems. International experience suggests that major qualification reform requires comprehensive national resources, clear progression guidance, high-quality assessment exemplars, effective moderation systems and sustained professional learning. Without this support, implementation is likely to be inconsistent and to place further pressure on an already stretched teaching workforce.

Implementation should proceed cautiously and be accompanied by rigorous monitoring of participation, achievement and equity outcomes. In particular, the Government should undertake a specific impact assessment before implementation and establish systems for ongoing monitoring of Year 11 qual-

ification success, participation in senior mathematics, and achievement across different learner groups.

Overall, the qualification reforms should preserve sufficient flexibility to maintain broad participation in mathematics while ensuring that pathways remain accessible, engaging and responsive to different learners. Successful implementation will require substantial investment in teacher capability, national resources, moderation support and transition planning. High expectations and equity should not be treated as competing objectives: a successful mathematics qualification system must be capable of supporting both.

Overview of the Current and New Mathematics Qualification Structures

Under the current NCEA structure, mathematics at Year 11 has already undergone reform. There are four available Level 1 mathematics standards, two internally assessed and two externally assessed, each worth 5 credits. Schools have considerable flexibility in designing courses, with some offering programmes assessed through all four standards, while others use fewer standards or target Numeracy for students who may not yet have achieved the co-requisite Common Assessment Activity (CAA). Some schools may build courses which align related learning and standards from other areas such as Geography, Science and Business.

At Year 12, mathematics currently operates through a single Level 2 subject area, Mathematics and Statistics with fourteen available standards. Yet often a course will consist of four to six standards selected from these fourteen to meet different purposes and potential pathways. This flexibility has allowed schools to design a variety of pathways, including internally assessed courses, statistics-focused programmes, or courses designed to prepare students for particular Year 13 pathways. NCEA reform was due to reduce the number of standards available at Level 2.

At Year 13, students can currently undertake two commonly recognised mathematics pathways, Calculus and Statistics. A third mathematics pathway, often referred to as Mathematics (or General Mathematics), may also contribute towards University Entrance and can be constructed from a combination of any available Level 3 standards.

Current assessment options include six externally assessed standards, with traditional calculus and

statistics courses typically incorporating up to three external assessments, with the rest of the course being made up of internal assessments. Some tertiary pathways, such as engineering, may specify particular calculus standards as part of their entry requirements. NCEA reform was due to reduce the number of standards available at Level 3.

Scholarship Calculus and Statistics qualifications are also available to Level 3 students, which are both rigorous and comprehensive assessments covering and building on the breadth of both curriculum areas.

External assessments are currently completed through a three-hour examination period, with students able to use approved graphical calculators and formula sheets. Internal assessments operate under different conditions, with conditions of assessment (TKI) outlining that they intend greater flexibility to be utilised than for external examinations. While internal assessments must still meet requirements for validity, authenticity, and reliability, they can take a range of forms, including investigations, assignments, projects, presentations and can allow use of digital technologies in order to “provide opportunities to meet the diverse needs of all students, and be valid and fair”. Consequently, schools currently have considerable scope to design assessment experiences that reflect local contexts and meet the needs of the learners in front of them.

A high school in Whakatane designed a time series investigation around their own solar data and an Auckland college used SpheroBots to assess trigonometry. Under the original Level 1 system, there was scope to assess transformation geometry by investigating Kōwhaiwhai and tukutuku patterns in local marae. Schools can create design projects and animations using the properties of Level 2 graphs. Critical path theory can be used to streamline the management of a school event such as a play or a community hāngī. Students could research climate change data or investigate social justice as part of statistics internal assessments.

Underpinning achievement at all levels is a Common Assessment Activity (CAA), the Numeracy co-requisite. Without passing the Numeracy (and Literacy) co-requisites, students cannot achieve NCEA qualifications at any level. The idea behind this is to ensure that no matter what combination of subjects and standards that a student has passed, they must have a basic standard of numeracy and literacy to be awarded a qualification. Whilst Numeracy is considered to be the responsibility

of all teachers, with some areas of Numeracy naturally falling under the domain of other subjects, the reality is that mathematics teachers have found themselves responsible for this in many schools.

Under the new qualification framework, the Foundational Award will replace the Numeracy CAA and be introduced in Year 11, with mathematics included as a compulsory component. The Foundational Award is expected to assess core capabilities in reading, writing, mathematics, and or numeracy and literacy (depending on the final framework documentation). Unlike the current Numeracy CAA, which is benchmarked at approximately a Year 9 level, the Foundational Award is intended to represent achievement aligned with Year 11 expectations. Given that roughly 3 in 5 students pass the Numeracy CAA in any given sitting, and that success in the assessment is strongly associated with socio-economic status, there is good reason to consider carefully the potential implications of raising this benchmark by two years. If the Foundational Award reflects a higher level of abstract mathematical demand and a lack of real-life relevance, as indicated in the draft curriculum at Year 11, there is a risk that existing disparities and inequities in achievement may be exacerbated unless appropriate support is provided for learners.

Successful completion of the Foundational Award will be required for students to achieve both the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZC) and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE).

At the time of writing, we know that Years 12 and 13 mathematics courses will include at least one compulsory external assessment, with assessment designed to cover the breadth of the subject area and assessed through common conditions. Courses are expected to include approximately three or four assessment components which are understood to be common tasks which are externally set. The draft new curriculum includes two mathematics subjects at Year 12, both intended to allow a pathway to any of the four subjects being offered at Year 13.

Purpose of the Framework Changes

A key purpose of the qualification reforms is to address concerns regarding fragmentation within the current qualification system and “gaming” behaviours associated with credit accumulation. The new framework seeks to create greater consistency by establishing clearer

expectations regarding what students must demonstrate to achieve a qualification, alongside a common approach to assessment across mathematics courses.

Under the current NCEA structure, schools have significant flexibility in designing mathematics pathways, which can allow students to complete qualifications through different combinations of standards. While this flexibility provides opportunities for schools to respond to learner needs and local contexts, concerns have been raised that it may contribute to variation in student experiences and outcomes. For example, students may be able to achieve sufficient credits without completing all available assessment opportunities, including external examinations.

The proposed framework changes aim to reduce these differences by requiring students to engage with a more consistent qualification structure where all students have engaged with the same breadth of curriculum and been assessed in the same manner against it. A further rationale provided for the changes is to improve confidence among tertiary providers and employers that students entering further study or employment have experienced comparable mathematical expectations, rather than arriving with significantly different combinations of assessed knowledge and skills. However, with four different mathematics subjects available at Year 13, students will continue to complete substantially different mathematics pathways. There is also no guarantee that all students will be taught or choose to engage with the entire content of a complete course.

Assessment Quality, Consistency, and Teacher Workload

Another stated purpose of the qualification reforms is to improve assessment quality and consistency. Under the current NCEA structure, responsibility for developing internal assessments rests largely with individual teachers and departments. This provides considerable flexibility, allowing teachers to design assessment experiences that are responsive to their learners and local contexts; however, it also requires significant assessment expertise, time, and professional judgement.

Not all teachers feel confident in designing high-quality assessment tasks, and variability in assessment design was identified as a potential challenge during the implementation of NCEA. In response, the mathematics teaching community developed collaborative

approaches to strengthen assessment capability. For example, the New Zealand Association of Mathematics Teachers (NZAMT) has invested significant time and effort supporting assessment-writing initiatives, specifically “writing camps”, where teachers collaboratively develop and refine assessment resources with input from NZQA and the Ministry of Education. These resources provide teachers with access to quality assessment materials while maintaining teacher involvement in the assessment process. More recently, NZQA has developed an online “Assessor Practice Tool”, which allows teachers to practice making judgements on exemplars of student work. At time of writing, there were Assessor Practice modules available for four of the 22 mathematics and statistics standards.

Variation remains possible within a system where schools and teachers design their own assessments. Tasks may differ in structure, difficulty, and the mathematical opportunities provided, and not all interpretations of a standard will necessarily provide equivalent experiences for students. One of the notable sources of variation is the reluctance of some schools and teachers to allow the use of a “page of notes” or formula sheets and or appropriate technology for internal assessment. This leads to some assessments becoming exercises in memory, rather than the problem-based assessments that they are intended as. The lack of clarity and specificity has led to some resentment on both sides as to the fairness to students from these differing approaches. The qualification reforms seek to address these concerns through greater consistency in assessment expectations and the use of common assessment approaches.

A potential benefit of greater standardisation is a reduction in teacher workload associated with assessment design, resource development, and moderation. Providing common assessment materials and marking externally may allow teachers to redirect time away from developing and marking assessment tasks and towards activities more directly connected to student learning, such as planning, feedback, and supporting student engagement.

The transition to a new qualification framework will require significant initial time investment from teachers and departments, as well as subject associations. Teachers will need time to understand new requirements, adapt existing courses, develop familiarity with new assessment processes, and support students through changes in expectations. Therefore,

while greater standardisation may reduce some on-going assessment workload, this benefit will depend on the quality of implementation support provided which is discussed later in the chapter. As Professor Jodie Hunter comments, “There would have been easier ways to do that, to just make up some actual assessments that are suitable for NCEA that schools then can pick and choose from, rather than chucking out the whole system and starting again”

There is professional value in teachers being directly involved in assessing their students’ work. The process deepens teachers’ understanding of student thinking, common misconceptions and the expected standard of achievement. It can provide valuable feedback on the effectiveness of their own teaching, as patterns in student work may reveal both strengths in learning and areas where students have not yet developed sufficient understanding. There are systems being developed in other countries which could further support this. In England, a blinded comparative judgement tool is being adopted in some areas, which takes anonymised assessment work and allows schools to rank student responses based on conceptual understanding within schools and across schools.

A key issue is, therefore, how to achieve a balance between consistency and professional flexibility. The current system demonstrates the value of teacher expertise and responsiveness, while the new framework seeks to address concerns about variability. The extent to which the reforms improve assessment quality and support student engagement will depend on whether they retain opportunities for meaningful teacher input and judgement while reducing unnecessary assessment administrative burden.

Why this matters

The study of mathematics at Level 3 provides students with access to a wide range of university degrees and future career opportunities. Calculus is a key prerequisite for many university programmes, including engineering, physics, mathematics, actuarial science, computer science, quantitative economics, aerospace, mechatronics, and some chemistry degrees. Students who do not study calculus at school may be required to complete bridging courses before they can enrol, or may not meet entry requirements at all. Engineering is one of the most popular destinations for students enjoying and excelling in Calculus at school. The contribution of engineering to the New

Zealand economy is significant, with the Economic Impact of Engineering 2021 report estimating it to be around 5% of New Zealand's GDP in 2021 (between \$14.8 billion and \$18.1 billion)

Similarly, statistics has become increasingly important in a world driven by data. It underpins fields such as data science, biostatistics, epidemiology, public health, psychology, business analytics, artificial intelligence, market research, sports analytics, and government policy. While statistics is not always an explicit university entrance requirement, students without a Level 3 background often begin these courses at a significant disadvantage. Together, Level 3 Calculus and Statistics open pathways to many of the fastest-growing and highest-skilled professions, while developing the analytical, quantitative, and logical problem-solving skills that are valued across many sectors of the modern economy.

Achieving mathematics at Level 2 is the requirement for entry into study for quantity surveying and architecture and is recommended for many trades, such as electrical, plumbing and building apprenticeships. Entry into initial teacher education now requires Level 2 Mathematics or equivalent.

The demand for mathematically capable graduates continues to grow as economies become increasingly data-driven and technology-focused. Careers in engineering, computer science, data science, actuarial science, finance, artificial intelligence, health research, and many other high-growth industries all rely on advanced mathematical skills. Employers consistently report shortages of workers with strong quantitative skills, with the potential for demand for mathematical capability to continue to increase as digital and AI technologies expand.

Mathematical skills translate directly into higher earnings. OECD analysis of the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC - 2024) shows that workers with high numeracy skills earn substantially more than those with low numeracy skills. Across OECD countries, the wage premium for high numeracy exceeds that of literacy, with highly numerate workers earning around US\$1 more per hour than equally literate workers on average. In New Zealand, the premium for workers with high numeracy proficiency is approximately NZ\$13 per hour, highlighting the significant economic value placed on mathematical capability.

The OECD 2024 report shows that adults with stronger numeracy skills have higher employment rates, higher productivity, improved financial decision-making and better health outcomes than adults with weaker numeracy. International research suggests that sustained improvements in mathematical achievement can increase a nation's long-run GDP by up to 15%. Conversely, low numeracy is linked to lower workforce participation, poorer health, greater reliance on social services, and reduced economic productivity.

New Zealand currently has comparatively high participation in mathematics studied in Year 13 where mathematics is a choice. In many countries, including the US and Singapore, mathematics is compulsory right up to university level. Where the option exists, New Zealand continues to have relatively strong participation in advanced secondary mathematics compared to other countries. In 2022, approximately 58% of Year 13 students achieved Level 3 Mathematics. By comparison, in England only 11.5% of students even studied A-Level Mathematics in 2021/22, despite widespread concern about national shortages of STEM graduates. While New Zealand's participation remains below countries where mathematics is compulsory until the end of secondary schooling, it remains comparatively high internationally and this represents an important strength that should be maintained (OECD 2024).

Maintaining broad access to Level 3 Mathematics is not simply an educational issue, it is an investment in New Zealand's future workforce, economic productivity, and social wellbeing. The important question is this: should we risk reducing participation in advanced mathematics across the wider student population in an attempt to standardise mathematics for the subset who will go on to use it at university, especially given that universities are able to set their own prerequisites for entry and specify exactly what they wish students to have achieved in order to access certain programmes? Whilst some advocates for the change have cited the first-year experience of engineering undergraduates as being an example of the issue, engineering enrolments have increased by 58% and graduations by 80% over the past decade-

Engineering education in New Zealand (2026). The available evidence does not suggest that the current pathway is failing to produce growing numbers of engineering graduates or that adding rigidity to the secondary curriculum and qualification framework is the way to meet increasing demand for engineers.

Research and Sector experience

A survey conducted on mathematics teachers across Aotearoa New Zealand in June 2026 yielded 267 responses including 166 classroom teachers and 92 middle or senior leaders. A further nine respondents identified primarily through other education or specialist roles. The survey went via email and social media to members of the New Zealand Association of Mathematics Teachers and was filled out on a voluntary basis.

Figure 1. Effect of Changes on Engagement %



60% of those responding considered that in their view, the new assessment framework would have a negative impact on students' engagement in mathematics compared with 26% who thought it would have a positive impact.

Figure 2. % Overall Sentiment [Positive-Negative]



Participants considered the proposed changes to the following aspects of the framework: stronger focus on examinations, course design, flexibility to meet the needs of Diverse Learners, assessment workload and pressure on students, and the clarity of learning pathways. The strongest result relates to concern around flexibility for Diverse Learners, with almost four out of five mathematics educational professionals (78%) predicting a negative impact and an overall sentiment level of -65% (positive - negative). Concerns about course design and assessment workload were also prominent, with more than half of respondents expressing negative views.

Responses regarding examinations and learning pathways were more balanced, indicating differing views about the intended purpose and likely impact of the reforms.

Overall, respondents appear more concerned about the reforms' impact on access, inclusion and workload than about academic challenge or qualification clarity.

Figure 3. Continued Studies in Y12/Y13 %



73% of mathematics teachers surveyed were concerned that students would be less likely to continue studying mathematics at Year 12 and 13 under the new qualification. This is a significant and worrying finding.

While many respondents value a clearer curriculum, around one in ten respondents who commented fully supported the changes to the qualification framework. There were others who supported some aspects or who were just looking for reform of some sort but weren't sure that this was it or that it was viable. Some argued that the coming NCEA reforms would have addressed concerns they had. Approximately three-quarters of respondents who commented expressed concern that the new qualification framework would negatively affect students who struggle with mathematics and or learners requiring additional support. Many respondents specifically identified concerns for students who are neurodivergent, Māori and Pacific learners, students with learning support needs, and those who benefit from more flexible pathways and assessment approaches. One teacher commented, "The lack of flexibility will mean we keep fewer students in maths. Reading it feels like someone's wish list hankering for the good old days rather than a realistic plan to encourage students into continued study in maths."

Teachers surveyed repeatedly raised concerns that the framework would create a "one-size-fits-all" mathematics programme and would reduce flexibility to tailor courses to learner needs. The increased reliance on high-stakes examinations was seen to disadvantage many learners.

Many commented that Year 11 would be the end of mathematics for many students as changes would re-

move applied or statistics pathways at this level that currently keep students engaged. Some were concerned that the gap would widen between stronger and weaker mathematicians, with mathematics at senior level becoming an “elitist” subject.

Te Tiriti implications

Under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori educational success cannot be understood solely through participation rates, attainment measures or parity with other groups. Ford (2013) argues that the challenge for mainstream education is not simply enabling Māori students to succeed within existing structures, but ensuring students can experience educational success as Māori. This has implications for mathematics education, where engagement is shaped not only by access to learning opportunities but also by identity, belonging and whether learners see mathematics as relevant and meaningful.

The flexibility of NCEA internal assessment has provided opportunities for schools to design learning experiences that reflect their local communities, including contexts connected to place, identity and culture. From a Te Tiriti perspective, this provides a space for genuine partnership with mana whenua and for Māori learners to experience mathematics in contexts that are meaningful and relevant to them. While many factors influence educational pathways, these opportunities have coincided with significant improvements in engineering outcomes for groups traditionally underrepresented in the profession.

Between 2013 and 2023, the number of Māori students graduating with a Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) increased by 157%, from around 35 to 90 graduates per year, while Pacific graduate numbers increased by 200%, from around 20 to more than 60 graduates annually, according to the Engineering Education in New Zealand report (2026). This means that Māori now comprise around 5% of engineering graduates, whilst an improvement, this is still a significant underrepresentation. Similarly, the proportion of Pacific graduates has doubled from approximately 2% to 4%. These trends suggest that the current system, alongside positive targeted interventions from universities, has supported increasing participation and success for Māori and Pacific learners in mathematics-focused academia. A more centrally prescribed assessment model, with externally designed coursework and examinations, may reduce opportunities for schools and communities to exercise local curriculum agency, potentially limiting the ability to engage learners through culturally meaningful contexts.

Allowing flexibility alone does not guarantee culturally responsive practice. Many mathematics teachers have had limited professional learning in mātauranga Māori and kaupapa Māori approaches within mathematics education, meaning attempts to incorporate Māori perspectives have sometimes risked becoming superficial rather than authentic. This is not a reflection on their willingness to do this, more the lack of experts available to provide support. There are two important considerations for reform going forward: ensuring teachers have the capability and support to engage meaningfully with mātauranga Māori, while also retaining opportunities for schools and communities to shape mathematics learning in ways that reflect local aspirations.

Robertshaw, Clarke, and Karaka-Clarke (2026) discuss the positives of the current NCEA system in their report and what could be strengthened further: “He awa whiria reminds us that the strength of a river lies in its confluence. When distinct streams, Western systems and Māori values, policy design and classroom practice flow together, the result is not dilution but depth.”

Referencing the increased level of difficulty in the new mathematics curriculum as well as the change in framework, Professor Jodie Hunter said, “We’re already failing our Māori learners in teaching mathematics, that’s very clear. And they’re already completely disadvantaged. So, one, we are making maths a lot harder, and two, we have assessment systems which we know don’t align with the values or the experiences of Māori and Pacific learners, timed tests and exams.”

Potential Impacts

A strength of the current NCEA model is the role that internal assessment, as well as the ability to accumulate credits over time, plays in developing mathematical confidence, particularly for students who experience mathematics anxiety. This is a significant issue internationally and New Zealand students report comparatively high levels of mathematics anxiety compared with many OECD countries. For example, 72% of New Zealand students reported “even if I am well prepared for a test I feel anxious” compared to 56% average across the OECD in a 2017 report on anxiety and wellbeing (OECD 2017). The study found that levels of anxiety were proportional to the “level of threat” caused by the test, with high-stakes assessments causing more anxiety than low stakes. Mathematics anxiety is also strongly gendered: across OECD countries and in New Zealand, girls typically report higher levels of mathematics anxiety than boys, including among high-performing students. For these students, successful experiences accumulated during the year can act as important sources of mathematical self-efficacy. Completing internal assessments provides opportunities for students to have success, recognise their capability and build confidence before encountering externally assessed examinations. These experiences may influence whether students perceive themselves as capable mathematics learners and whether they continue into more advanced mathematics pathways.

This is particularly relevant given international evidence that highly exam-focused senior mathematics systems can experience persistent gender disparities in participation. In England, participation in post-compulsory mathematics has historically included fewer girls than boys, with the gender imbalance particularly evident in Further Mathematics (Department for Education, 2023). Similarly, in Australia, higher-level Year 12 mathematics participation remains strongly male-dominated. In 2023, females accounted for only 36.5% of students undertaking higher mathematics, despite females making up a larger proportion of students completing Year 12 overall (Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute, 2024). By contrast, in New Zealand, females comprised 49% of students achieving at least 14 credits in a Level 3 Mathematics course in 2022 (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2023), reflecting a much more balanced pattern of participation. This balance has been accompanied by encouraging trends in engineering, where the number of women graduating with a Bachelor of Engineering (Honours) has more than doubled, from fewer than 200 graduates in 2015 to over 400 annually since 2020, although this still represents a significant disparity, with more to be done to eliminate it (Engineering New Zealand, 2021, 2026). While these outcomes cannot be attributed solely to assessment structures, they raise important questions about whether features of New Zealand’s qualification system, including its flexibility and multiple opportunities to demonstrate achievement, may help support female students with greater confidence, belonging and persistence in advanced mathematics.

Professional and Practical Implications

The reform of A-Level Mathematics in England, first examined in 2017, provides a useful case study of the professional support required when implementing significant changes to senior secondary mathematics qualifications. The reform involved a substantial shift from a modular qualification, where teachers could select sequence content and select combinations of Pure Mathematics, Statistics, Mechanics and Decision Mathematics modules to suit the needs and interests of their students, to a fully linear two-year course assessed through three external examinations (two Pure Mathematics papers and one combined Statistics and Mechanics paper).

The English reforms were introduced for reasons similar to those underpinning the New Zealand changes including increasing rigour, coherence and preparedness for further study, and required teachers to substantially redesign both curriculum planning and classroom practice.

Teachers reported a number of challenges during implementation. They needed to adapt to a completely new qualification structure and redesign programmes so that mathematical ideas developed coherently across two years rather than through discrete modules. They also needed to understand new assessment expectations, ensure students retained and connected learning over a much longer period, and adopt teaching approaches that promoted cumulative understanding rather than preparing students for individual assessment events.

Recognising these challenges, the examination boards invested heavily in implementation support. They produced editable schemes of work for both one- and two-year delivery models, together with guidance on sequencing topics, identifying prerequisite knowledge and making explicit connections between

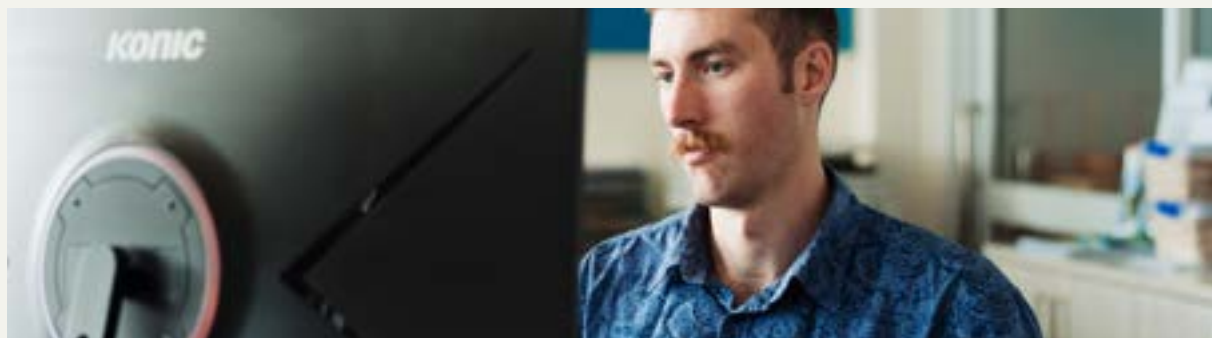
mathematical ideas. Additional planning guidance was developed where multiple teachers shared classes, along with resources explaining the links between Mathematics and Further Mathematics programmes. Teaching resources were equally comprehensive. Detailed delivery guides identified prerequisite knowledge and conceptual connections between topics, while classroom planning materials, topic-based assessments and progress tests were designed to support the development of procedural fluency, reasoning, proof, modelling and problem solving throughout the course. Assessment support extended well beyond the publication of sample examinations. Teachers were provided with extensive banks of examination-style questions, practice papers, examiner reports highlighting common misconceptions, diagnostic assessment materials to identify gaps in student understanding, and exemplar responses illustrating expected standards.

The experience of the English reforms demonstrated that introducing a new qualification requires considerably more than publishing a new curriculum document or assessment specification. Teachers required sustained professional learning, high-quality teaching resources, clear guidance on curriculum progression, assessment exemplars and sufficient time to redesign programmes of learning. Perhaps the most significant lesson was that the move to cumulative assessment required a corresponding shift in pedagogy. Teachers needed support to develop teaching approaches that deliberately revisited and connected ideas throughout year-long programmes, rather than treating topics as isolated units of study. This represented a substantial change in classroom practice, not simply a change in assessment.

These findings have direct relevance for New Zealand. If the new qualifications place greater emphasis on external assessment, cumulative knowledge and reduced assessment flexibility, a comparable investment in teacher capability is likely to be essential. Successful implementation will depend not only on the quality of the qualification design itself, but also on providing coherent teaching sequences, assessment guidance, exemplar materials, sustained professional learning and adequate transition time.

The reforms provide an opportunity to modernise approaches to moderation and teacher support. During curriculum reforms in the early 1990s in Victoria, Australia, moderation included interactive opportunities for teachers to seek clarification in real time through televised broadcasts supported by telephone and fax. While innovative for its time, today's technology offers considerably greater possibilities. Regular online moderation sessions using platforms such as Zoom could allow teachers to ask questions directly of assessment specialists, clarify interpretations of assessment criteria, discuss common misconceptions and share effective practice across schools. Such an approach would complement written moderation reports and exemplars while helping to improve consistency and confidence during the implementation of new qualifications.

The reforms in England demonstrate that successful qualification reform depends not only on sound curriculum design but also on substantial investment in implementation. Curriculum documents alone are insufficient. Teachers require time, exemplars, professional learning, moderation support and high-quality teaching resources if they are to redesign programmes with confidence. Without comparable investment in implementation, there is a risk that variation between schools will increase during the transition, potentially undermining the consistency and equity the reforms seek to achieve.



Recommendations

While many mathematics educators will agree that some reform of the NCEA qualification for mathematics was needed, care must be taken to ensure that the strengths of the current system are not lost. These strengths support a relatively high level of participation in senior mathematics and should not be sacrificed in a push for rigour intended to solve a problem that may have been overstated in terms of its impact.

The evidence considered indicates that the qualification reforms to mathematics and statistics carry significant risks for participation, progression and equity. While the reforms aim to strengthen coherence and raise expectations, changes to the structure of mathematics pathways, assessment and curriculum flexibility may have particularly significant consequences for learners who do not fit easily within a single prescribed progression.

Implementation should therefore proceed cautiously and be accompanied by robust monitoring and evaluation. The following recommendations are intended to support a qualification system that maintains high expectations while protecting broad participation and equitable access to mathematics learning.

1. Undertake a Mathematics Impact Assessment

Before full implementation, the Government should undertake a specific impact assessment examining how the reforms are likely to affect participation, achievement and progression in mathematics.

This assessment should consider the likely impact on:

- participation in Year 12 and Year 13 mathematics
- Māori and Pacific learners
- Diverse Learners and students requiring additional support
- female participation in advanced mathematics
- progression into STEM pathways.

Given the central role mathematics plays in access to further education and employment, potential consequences for participation and progression should be identified before the new system is fully implemented rather than retrospectively, once opportunities have already been lost.

2. Monitor Participation and Achievement Data

A national monitoring framework should be established to track the impact of the reforms over time. This should include:

- success rates in the Year 11 Foundational Award
- enrolment in Year 12 and Year 13 mathematics
- achievement and participation by ethnicity, gender, Diverse Learners and socio-economic background.

Particular attention should be paid to whether the Foundational Award creates barriers to progression into senior mathematics, and whether participation becomes more restricted among groups who have historically been underrepresented in advanced mathematics.

3. Retain Flexibility Within Mathematics Pathways

The new framework should preserve multiple meaningful routes through senior mathematics.

Narrow prescribed pathways risk constricting participation and excluding learners whose strengths, interests or future pathways do not align with a traditional progression through mathematics. Maintaining flexibility would allow schools to continue designing programmes that meet the needs of their students while still providing clear and coherent pathways into further study.

4. Invest Significantly in Teacher Support

Successful implementation will require substantial investment in teacher capability and support. Teachers should be provided with:

- coherent teaching sequences
- high-quality assessment exemplars
- accessible moderation support
- sustained professional learning opportunities
- adequate transition time to understand and implement the new system.

Curriculum and qualification reform should not rely on individual schools and teachers developing the majority of the required systems and resources themselves, nor should they overload subject associations. Without adequate national support, implementation is likely to vary significantly between schools and place substantial additional demands on an already stretched workforce.

5. Develop Comprehensive National Resources

The Ministry of Education should develop a comprehensive suite of national resources to support consistent implementation. Drawing on lessons from other qualification reforms, these should include:

- editable schemes of work
- diagnostic assessment tools
- sample assessments
- examiner reports
- curriculum progression guides.

These resources should be developed in sufficient depth to support both teachers new to particular areas of mathematics and experienced teachers adapting existing programmes. They should be available well before implementation and continue to be developed in response to issues identified during the transition.

6. Establish Ongoing National Moderation Networks

Should teacher marking be required as part of the new qualification, regular national moderation and support networks should be established to provide teachers with timely and ongoing access to guidance.

These networks should enable teachers to:

- clarify assessment expectations
- discuss common issues
- share effective practice
- receive guidance from assessment experts.

Regular online sessions to help ensure issues are identified and addressed early, and reduce the inconsistency that can develop when schools and departments are left to interpret new assessment requirements independently.

7. Evaluate the Impact of Increased External Assessment

The reforms should be evaluated to determine whether increased reliance on common external assessments affects:

- mathematics anxiety
- student confidence
- learner engagement
- participation rates in senior mathematics.

Assessment systems can influence not only what students achieve but whether they remain engaged with a subject. It is therefore important to monitor whether changes to assessment create unintended barriers, particularly for learners who may have previously benefited from greater flexibility in how and when they demonstrated their learning.

8. Develop and Protect Culturally Responsive Mathematics

The qualification and curriculum framework should retain sufficient flexibility for schools to develop mathematics programmes that are locally meaningful and culturally responsive. Schools should be able to:

- incorporate local contexts
- engage with mana whenua
- connect mathematics learning to learners' identities, communities and aspirations.

A nationally coherent mathematics curriculum should not require a uniform learning experience. Local flexibility is essential if mathematics is to remain relevant and engaging for learners in different communities.

References

- Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute. (2024). *State of mathematical sciences report 2024*. <https://amsi.org.au/report-downloads/AMSI-State-of-Mathematical-Sciences-report-2024.pdf>
- Department for Education. (2023). *A level and other 16 to 18 results: 2022 to 2023*. Explore education statistics. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/a-level-and-other-16-to-18-results/2022-23>
- Engineering New Zealand. (2021). *Economic impact of engineering: Update 2021*. https://d2rjvl4n5h2b61.cloudfront.net/media/documents/Economic_impact_of_engineering_update_August_2021_Final.pdf
- Engineering New Zealand. (2026). *Engineering education in New Zealand*. https://d2rjvl4n5h2b61.cloudfront.net/media/documents/EngineeringEducationReport_FINAL.pdf
- Ford, T. (2013). *Applying culturally responsive practices: Implications for mainstream education*. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/35215780>
- Ministry of Education. (n.d.). *Level 2 mathematics and statistics: Conditions of assessment*. Te Kete Ipurangi. <https://ncea.tki.org.nz/Resources-for-internally-assessed-achievement-standards/Mathematics-and-statistics/Level-2-Mathematics-and-statistics>
- OECD. (2017). *PISA 2015 results (Volume III): Students' well-being*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264273856-en>
- OECD. (2024a). *Mathematics for life and work: A comparative perspective on mathematics to inform upper secondary reform in England*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/26f18d39-en>
- OECD. (2024b, December). *Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/piaac.html>
- Robertshaw, C., Clarke, A., & Karaka-Clarke, T. H. (2026). He awa whiria—He aromatawai mō te anamata: Braiding kaiako voices in the future of NCEA. *Set: Research Information for Teachers*, (1), 8–14. <https://doi.org/10.18296/set.1588>

He Āpitahanga—

Appendices

Analysis of PPTA Te Wehengarua Pasifika Members Survey

Analysis of PPTA Te Wehengarua Māori Members Survey

Responses to the Proposed Changes in National Qualifications: Analysis of PPTA Te Wehengarua Pasifika Members Survey

by Meiyang Hong

The University of Auckland

Email: meiyang.hong@auckland.ac.nz

Quality assurance for this report was provided by Prof. Gavin T L Brown,
Faculty of Arts and Education, The University of Auckland.

1. Introduction

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (NZPPTA) commissioned national surveys to gather educator' perspectives on the proposed National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualification reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey examined the educational, equity, implementation, and system-level implications of the proposed reforms associated with the new curriculum from 2027 and the replacement of the school qualification system from 2028. This technical report describes the survey scale validation and data analysis processes and presents the findings on Māori and Pasifika teachers' views of the proposed qualifications reforms.

2. Materials and Coding

Data were collected using the online questionnaires developed by NZPPTA. The questionnaires for Pasifika Members consisted of demographic questions and five sections on educator' perspectives on the proposed NCEA qualification reforms, including Purpose of Reforms (6 items), Te Tiriti in Practice (6 items), Potential Impacts (9 items), Manageability and Resourcing (8 items), and Potential Cultural Workload Impacts (5 items). The demographic questions included multiple-response items (role, setting, and medium), which were recoded into binary variables (0 = not selected, 1 = selected), a single-response item (experience), and an open-ended item on cultural affiliation (ethnic groups in the Pasifika survey). The five sections measured teachers' attitudes using six-point rating scales ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree).

3. Participants.

Descriptive summaries of participants' roles, educational settings, medium, experience, and iwi or ethnic affiliations were based on all available survey respondents.

Table 1 shows the distributions of professional roles. Kaiako/ Teachers were the largest professional group in Pasifika (71.3%) educators. Around one-third of participants were middle leaders. Around one-fifth of participants held a pastoral, cultural, or specialist support role. Smaller proportions of respondents identified as senior leader, specialist support, or other roles. Around two-thirds (73, 67.6%) of Pasifika respondents had only one role.

Table 1. Distributions by Professional Roles (N = 108)

Role	Pasifika survey n (%)
Kaiako/Teacher	79 (71.3)
Middle leader	31 (28.7)
Pastoral, cultural, or specialist support role	24 (22.2)
Senior leader	10 (9.3)
Other roles	7 (6.5)
Kaiāwhina/ Support staff	4 (3.7)
Total selections	155

Note. Respondents could select more than one professional role. The Total selections row sums selections rather than respondents.

Table 2 shows the distributions of educational setting in the Pasifika survey. Almost all of the respondents worked in an English-medium secondary school (94.4% of Pasifika participants). All Pasifika respondents worked in only one school setting.

Table 2. Distributions by Educational Setting

Educational setting	Pasifika n (%)
English-medium secondary school	102 (94.4)
Another school or kura setting	4 (3.7)
Charter School	2 (1.9)
Total selections	108

Note. Respondents could select more than one setting. The Total selections row sums selections rather than respondents.

Table 3 shows the distribution of respondents by experience working in education. Just under a third most Pasifika respondents (29, 27.0%) had more than 21 years of working experience in education.

Table 3. Distributions by Experience

Experience	Pasifika n (%)
21 + years	29 (27.4)
11–20 years	35 (33.0)
6–10 years	19 (17.9)
0–5 years	23 (21.7)

4. Analysis Procedure

4.1 Missing Response Screening

Participants with more than 10% missing responses of items of perspectives on the proposed NCEA qualification reforms were removed to improve the quality and reliability of the dataset (Little & Rubin, 2020). 13 Māori respondents were excluded, resulting in 103 participants as the Māori analytical sample for the following analysis. 36 Pasifika respondents were excluded, resulting in 75 participants as the Pasifika sample. While missing value imputation could have been done, we have instead opted to retain only participants with minimal missing data.

4.2 Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted within Jamovi (Version 2.7) to establish the psychometric and content validity of the proposed factor structures. Maximum likelihood extraction with oblique minimisation was used (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Items were kept with factor loadings of $>.40$ and excluded with cross loadings on another factor of $>.30$ (Bandalos & Finney, 2018). Conceptual themes were also considered for items in a factor.

Once a logically coherent model had been found with EFA, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure that the model has acceptable to good fit. Generally, multiple fit indices were used to evaluate how well a model was fitted to the data (Fan & Sivo, 2007; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). The values used in this report were:

- ratio of χ^2 to df (χ^2/df) has $p > .05$,
- comparative fit index (CFI) $> .90$,
- Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) $> .90$,
- gamma hat $> .90$,
- root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) $< .08$, and
- standardised root mean residual (SRMR) $< .08$

Scale robustness was estimated using Hancock and Mueller's coefficient H with values $> .80$ indicating a factor that will consistently replicate (Hancock & Mueller, 2001).

Inspection of modification indices (MI) allowed identification of items that potentially violated key requirements including independence of residuals (i.e., no correlations among residuals; Barker & Shaw, 2015) or simple structure (i.e., each item belongs to only one factor; Revelle & Rocklin, 1979). Items with high misspecification ($MI > 20$) were sequentially trimmed until an acceptable fit was achieved while preserving the hypothesized structure (Bandalos & Finney, 2018).

4.3 Analysis of Variance against Demographic Characteristics

Following the CFA, scale scores were calculated by averaging the retained items within each scale. Averaging item scores preserves the original response metric and provides a single score representing each construct, making the re-

sults straightforward to interpret and appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses when each item loads on only one factor (DiStefano et al., 2009). These scale scores were used in the analyses of variance (ANOVA) to examine whether there were statistically significant differences across participant groups.

For the multiple-response demographic items (role, setting, and language-medium), the ANOVA was conducted as selected versus not selected while a conventional ANOVA was conducted for the single-response demographic item (experience). If a statistically significant result was found, inspection of the effect size partial eta-squared (η^2_p) revealed whether the size of the difference. Values $<.06$ were small.

5. Results Pasifika Survey

5.1 CFA Model

EFA and CFA resulted in a three-factor interrelated CFA model (Figure 1) that provided a good representation of educators' responses to the survey. The model had excellent fit to the data ($\chi^2/df(p) = .24 (.62)$; CFI = .99; TLI = .98; SRMR = .04; RMSEA [90%CI] = .06 [.00, .10]; Gamma hat = .94). The model consisted of three constructs: (1) Benefit for Pasifika, (2) Reforms Manageable, and (3) Benefit for Pasifika teachers.

Figure 1. Path Diagram of The Four-factor Interrelated CFA Model (Pasifika survey)

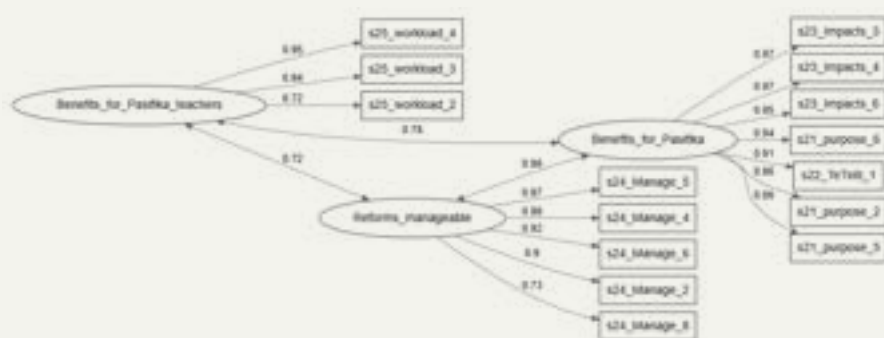


Table 4 shows the items of each factor and the standardised loadings of each factor. The values of coefficient H (.95 - .98) suggested that all scale were robust and likely to replicate in future research. All items were statistically significant and all had strong loadings ($>.70$), indicating the factors extracted sufficient variance from those measurements.

Table 4. Item Wording and Standardised Loading by Factor (Pasifika survey)

Indicators	Item expression	Loading
<i>Benefit_for_Pasifika (Coefficient H = .98)</i>		
s23_Impacts_4	The reforms will better reflect the identities, cultures, and experiences of Pacific learners.	.97
s23_Impacts_3	The reforms will create more equitable opportunities for Pacific learners.	.97
s23_Impacts_6	The reforms will improve wellbeing and belonging for Pacific students within the education system.	.95
s21_purpose_6	The reforms reflect Pasifika aspirations for educational success.	.94
s22_TeTiriti_1	The reforms give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi in practice.	.91
s21_purpose_2	The intended benefits of the reforms for Pasifika are clear.	.86
s21_purpose_5	The reforms maintain the strengths of the current NCEA system.	.86
<i>Reforms_manageable (Coefficient H = .98)</i>		
s24_Manage_5	The pace of change associated with the reforms is manageable.	.97
s24_Manage_4	The reforms are achievable within existing workload demands.	.96

Indicators	Item expression	Loading
s24_Manage_6	The reforms are practical to implement across different learning areas and educational contexts.	.93
s24_Manage_2	The timeframe for implementation is realistic.	.90
s24_Manage_8	My kura/school will have access to the resources needed to implement the reforms effectively.	.73
Benefit_for_Pasifika_teachers (Coefficient H = .95)		
s25_workload_4	The reforms are likely to create opportunities for Māori knowledge, expertise and leadership to be recognised within kura/schools.	.95
s25_workload_3	Kaiako Māori are likely to receive adequate support for additional responsibilities associated with the reforms.	.94
s25_workload_2	Responsibility for implementing Māori-focused aspects of the reforms is likely to be shared across all staff, rather than falling primarily on Māori educators.	.72

Note. Coefficient H indicates scale robustness.

Table 5 shows the intercorrelations between these three factors. All correlations were statistically significant and strong, indicating that these factors mutually impact each other and elicited similar responding.

Table 5. Factor Intercorrelations

Factor	I	II	III
I. Benefit for Pasifika	1.00		
II. Reforms manageable	.86	1.00	
III. Benefit for Pasifika teachers	.78	.72	1.00

5.2.2 Scale Scores

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for the three scales. Respondents generally disagreed that the proposed reforms would benefit Pasifika learners ($M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.23$). They expressed limited confidence that the reforms would reflect Pacific identities and aspirations, improve equity, wellbeing, and belonging for Pacific learners, or clearly deliver their intended benefits for Pasifika education.

Respondents generally considered the proposed reforms difficult to implement ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.10$), with the mean close to “mostly disagree”. They expressed concerns about the pace and timeframe of implementation, feasibility within existing workloads and across different educational contexts, and access to adequate implementation resources.

Respondents generally expressed low expectations that the proposed reforms would benefit Pasifika teachers ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.33$). They had limited confidence that Pasifika educators would receive adequate support and recognition or that responsibility for culturally focused aspects of the reforms would be shared across all staff.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Pasifika Final Scales

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Benefits for Pasifika	2.19	1.23
Reforms manageable	1.96	1.10
Benefits for Pasifika teachers	2.39	1.33

Note. *SD* = standard deviation. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of each construct.

5.2.3 Differences between Demographic Groups

ANOVAs were not conducted when one comparison group was too small to provide a meaningful and stable estimate. Therefore, Support Staff ($n = 1$ selected) and Other roles ($n = 4$ selected) were excluded from ANOVA. Setting-based ANOVAs were also omitted because the responses were highly unbalanced: 71 respondents selected English-medium secondary school, compared with one selecting charter school and three selecting Other.

Table 7 shows the ANOVA results. The results suggested that experience in education significantly affected

perspectives on Benefit for Pasifika ($p = .017$) and Reforms Manageable ($p = .006$). The differences were substantial for both factor ($n^2p = .14$ for Benefit for Pasifika and $n^2p = .17$ for Reforms Manageable). Senior leadership status was also significantly associated with view on Benefit for Pasifika ($p = .025$) and Reforms Manageable ($p = .030$) with medium effect sizes ($n^2p = .07$ for Benefit for Pasifika and $n^2p = .07$ for Reforms Manageable). However, the groups were substantially unbalanced, with only nine respondents selecting senior leader compared with 66 who did not. Therefore, the effect-size estimates may be unstable. These findings require confirmation in a larger, more balanced sample.

Overall, perceptions of Benefit for Pasifika and Reforms Manageable varied significantly with large effect sizes by teaching experience.

Table 7. Analysis of Variances (Pasifika survey)

Indicators	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	n ²	n ² p
<i>Benefit for Pasifika</i>							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.05	1	0.05	0.04	.836	0.00	0.00
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	2.99	1	2.99	2.37	.129	0.03	0.03
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	6.64	1	6.64	5.26	.025	0.06	0.07
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	2.02	1	2.02	1.60	.211	0.02	0.02
q3_experience	13.80	3	4.60	3.64	.017	0.13	0.14
Residuals	84.65	67	1.26				
<i>Reforms manageable</i>							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	.981	0.00	0.00
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	2.22	1	2.22	2.16	.146	0.02	0.03
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	5.06	1	5.06	4.92	.030	0.06	0.07
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	1.20	1	1.20	1.17	.283	0.01	0.02
q3_experience	14.16	3	4.72	4.59	.006	0.15	0.17
Residuals	68.88	67	1.03				
<i>Benefit for Māori teachers</i>							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.64	1	0.64	0.38	.539	0.00	0.01
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	2.65	1	2.65	1.58	.214	0.02	0.02
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	1.20	1	1.20	0.72	.401	0.01	0.01
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	5.98	1	5.98	3.56	.063	0.05	0.05
q3_experience	9.87	3	3.29	1.96	.128	0.07	0.08
Residuals	112.44	67	1.68				

Note. Values in red are statistically significant

6. Conclusion

Overall, Pasifika educator respondents expressed generally negative views of the proposed reforms. They had limited confidence that the reforms would benefit Pasifika learners or teachers and generally considered the reforms difficult to implement within existing timeframes, workloads, and resources. Perceptions of Benefits for Pasifika and Reforms Manageable varied significantly by teaching experience.

Responses to the Proposed Changes in National Qualifications: Analysis of PPTA Te Wehengarua Māori Members Survey

by Meiyang Hong

The University of Auckland

Email: meiyang.hong@auckland.ac.nz

Quality assurance for this report was provided by Prof. Gavin T L Brown,
Faculty of Arts and Education, The University of Auckland.

1. Introduction

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (NZPPTA) commissioned national surveys to gather educator' perspectives on the proposed National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualification reforms in Aotearoa New Zealand. The survey examined the educational, equity, implementation, and system-level implications of the proposed reforms associated with the new curriculum from 2027 and the replacement of the school qualification system from 2028. This technical report describes the survey scale validation and data analysis processes and presents the findings on Māori and Pasifika teachers' views of the proposed qualifications reforms.

2. Materials and Coding

Data were collected using the online questionnaires developed by NZPPTA. The questionnaires for both Māori Members consisted of demographic questions and five sections on educator' perspectives on the proposed NCEA qualification reforms, including Purpose of Reforms (6 items), Te Tiriti in Practice (6 items), Potential Impacts (9 items), Manageability and Resourcing (8 items), and Potential Cultural Workload Impacts (5 items). The demographic questions included multiple-response items (role, setting, and medium), which were recoded into binary variables (0 = not selected, 1 = selected), a single-response item (experience), and an open-ended item on cultural affiliation (iwi affiliation in the Māori survey). The five sections measured teachers' attitudes using six-point rating scales ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree).

3. Participants.

Descriptive summaries of participants' roles, educational settings, medium, experience, and iwi or ethnic affiliations were based on all available survey respondents.

Table 1 shows the distributions of professional roles. Kaiako/ Teachers were the largest professional group in Māori (70.2%) educators. Around one-third of participants were middle leaders. Around one-fifth of participants held a pastoral, cultural, or specialist support role. Smaller proportions of respondents identified as senior leader, specialist support, or other roles. Around two-thirds (78, 68.4%) of Māori respondents had only one role.

Table 1. Distributions by Professional Roles (N = 114)

Role	Māori survey n (%)
Kaiako/Teacher	80 (70.2)
Middle leader	36 (31.6)
Pastoral, cultural, or specialist support role	20 (17.5)
Senior leader	14 (12.3)
Other roles	11 (9.6)
Kaiāwhina/Support staff	1 (0.9)
Total selections	162

Note. Respondents could select more than one professional role. The Total selections row sums selections rather than respondents.

Table 2 shows the distributions of educational setting in the Māori survey. Most of the respondents worked in an English-medium secondary school (78.9% of Māori participants and 94.4% of Pasifika participants). Nearly all (108, 94.7%) of Māori respondents worked in only one school setting.

Table 2. Distributions by Educational Setting (Māori Survey) (N = 114)

Educational setting	Māori n (%)
English-medium secondary school	90 (78.9)
Another school or kura setting	13 (11.4)
Wharekura	9 (7.9)
Ngā Kura ā-Iwi	6 (5.3)
Kura Hourua	2 (1.8)
Charter School	-
Total selections	120

Note. Respondents could select more than one setting. The Total selections row sums selections rather than respondents.

Table 3 shows the distributions of language-medium setting in the Māori survey. Most respondents (74.6%) worked in an English-medium setting. About one-fifth of respondents (21.9%) worked in Māori-medium bilingual setting. Almost all (104, 91.2%) of Māori respondents worked in only one setting.

Table 3. Distributions by Language-medium Setting (Māori Survey) (N = 114)

Language-medium setting	n (%)
English-medium	85 (74.6)
Māori-medium bilingual	25 (21.9)
Māori-medium / Rumaki	11 (9.6)
Other	3 (2.6)
Total selections	124

Note. Respondents could select more than one setting. The Total selections row sums selections rather than respondents.

Table 4 shows the distribution of respondents by experience working in education. About two-fifths of the Māori respondents (41.6%) had more than 21 years of working experience in education.

Table 4. Distributions by Experience (Māori Survey) (N = 113)

Experience	Māori n (%)
21 + years	47 (41.6)
11–20 years	34 (30.1)
6–10 years	20 (17.7)
0–5 years	12 (10.6)

4. Analysis Procedure

4.1 Missing Response Screening

Participants with more than 10% missing responses of items of perspectives on the proposed NCEA qualification reforms were removed to improve the quality and reliability of the dataset (Little & Rubin, 2020). 13 Māori respondents were excluded, resulting in 103 participants as the Māori analytical sample for the following analysis. 36 Pasifika respondents were excluded, resulting in 75 participants as the Pasifika sample. While missing value imputation could have been done, we have instead opted to retain only participants with minimal missing data.

4.2 Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted within Jamovi (Version 2.7) to establish the psychometric and content validity of the proposed factor structures. Maximum likelihood extraction with oblique minimisation was used (Costello & Osborne, 2005). Items were kept with factor loadings of $>.40$ and excluded with cross loadings on another factor of $>.30$ (Bandalos & Finney, 2018). Conceptual themes were also considered for items in a factor.

Once a logically coherent model had been found with EFA, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to ensure that the model has acceptable to good fit. Generally, multiple fit indices were used to evaluate how well a model was fitted to the data (Fan & Sivo, 2007; Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). The values used in this report were:

- ratio of χ^2 to df (χ^2/df) has $p > .05$,
- comparative fit index (CFI) $> .90$,

- Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) > .90,
- gamma hat > .90,
- root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) < .08, and
- standardised root mean residual (SRMR) < .08

Scale robustness was estimated using Hancock and Mueller's coefficient H with values > .80 indicating a factor that will consistently replicate (Hancock & Mueller, 2001).

Inspection of modification indices (MI) allowed identification of items that potentially violated key requirements including independence of residuals (i.e., no correlations among residuals; Barker & Shaw, 2015) or simple structure (i.e., each item belongs to only one factor; Revelle & Rocklin, 1979). Items with high misspecification (MI>20) were sequentially trimmed until an acceptable fit was achieved while preserving the hypothesized structure (Bandalos & Finney, 2018).

4.3 Analysis of Variance against Demographic Characteristics

Following the CFA, scale scores were calculated by averaging the retained items within each scale. Averaging item scores preserves the original response metric and provides a single score representing each construct, making the results straightforward to interpret and appropriate for subsequent statistical analyses when each item loads on only one factor (DiStefano et al., 2009). These scale scores were used in the analyses of variance (ANOVA) to examine whether there were statistically significant differences across participant groups.

For the multiple-response demographic items (role, setting, and language-medium), the ANOVA was conducted as selected versus not selected while a conventional ANOVA was conducted for the single-response demographic item (experience). If a statistically significant result was found, inspection of the effect size partial eta-squared (η^2_p) revealed whether the size of the difference. Values <.06 were small.

5. Results Māori Survey

5.1 CFA Model

EFA and CFA resulted in a four-factor interrelated CFA model (Figure 1) that provided an excellent representation of educators' responses to the survey. The model had excellent fit to the data (χ^2/df (p) = 1.29 (.26); CFI = .99; TLI = .99; SRMR = .05; RMSEA [90%CI] = .04 [.00, .07]; Gamma hat = .91). The model consisted of four constructs: (1) Benefit for te ao Māori, reflecting educators' understanding of changes that the proposed reforms would bring to overall Māori; (2) Benefit for Māori students, reflecting understanding of changes that the proposed reforms would bring to Māori students; (3) Reforms Manageable, reflecting the manageability and resourcing of implementing the proposed reforms; and (4) Benefit for Māori teachers, reflecting the perceived changes of workload of implementing the proposed reforms.

Figure 1. Path Diagram of The Four-factor Interrelated CFA Model (Māori survey)

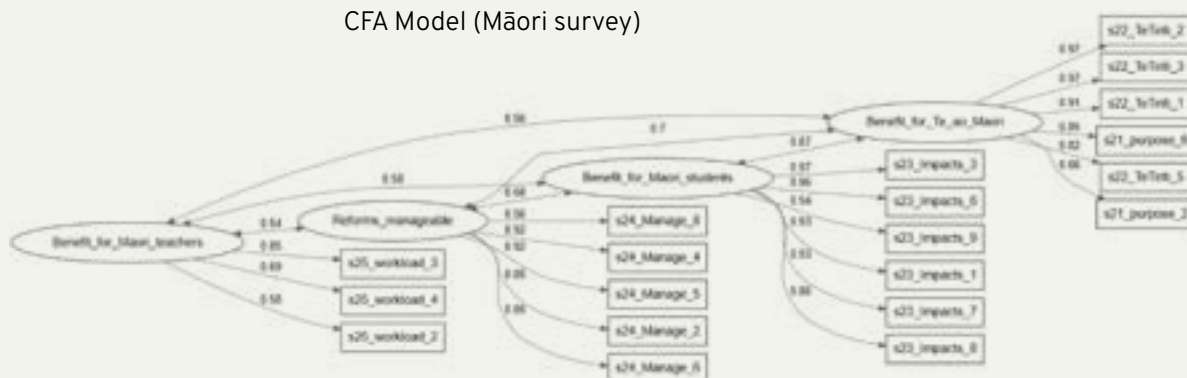


Table 5 shows the items of each factor and the standardised loadings of each factor. The values of coefficient H (.80 - .98) suggested that all scale were robust and likely to replicate in future research. All items were statistically significant and most had strong loadings (> .80), indicating the factors extracted sufficient variance from those measurements.

Table 4. Item Wording and Standardised Loading by Factor (Māori survey)

Indicators	Item expression	Loading
<i>Benefit_for_Te_ao_Māori (Coefficient H = .98)</i>		
s22_TeTiriti_3	The reforms enable Māori decision-making in matters affecting ākonga Māori.	.97
s22_TeTiriti_2	The reforms uphold the Crown's active protection obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.	.97
s22_TeTiriti_1	The reforms give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi in practice.	.91
s21_purpose_6	The reforms reflect Māori aspirations for educational success.	.85
s22_TeTiriti_5	The reforms strengthen mātauranga Māori, and te reo Māori.	.82
s21_purpose_2	The intended benefits of the reforms for Māori are clear.	.66
<i>Benefit_for_Māori_students (Coefficient H = .98)</i>		
s23_Impacts_3	The reforms will create more equitable opportunities for Māori learners.	.97
s23_Impacts_6	The reforms will improve wellbeing and belonging for ākonga Māori within the education system.	.96
s23_Impacts_9	The reforms will improve equity within the assessment and qualification system.	.94
s23_Impacts_7	The reforms will support stronger relationships between schools, whānau, and Māori communities.	.93
s23_Impacts_1	The reforms will improve outcomes for ākonga Māori.	.93
s23_Impacts_8	The reforms will better prepare ākonga Māori for future education, training, and employment pathways.	.86
<i>Reforms_manageable (Coefficient H = .94)</i>		
s24_Manage_5	The pace of change associated with the reforms is manageable.	.92
s24_Manage_4	The reforms are achievable within existing workload demands.	.92
s24_Manage_6	The reforms are practical to implement across different learning areas and educational contexts.	.85
s24_Manage_2	The timeframe for implementation is realistic.	.85
s24_Manage_8	My kura/school will have access to the resources needed to implement the reforms effectively.	.57
<i>Benefit_for_Māori_teachers (Coefficient H = .80)</i>		
s25_workload_3	Kaiako Māori are likely to receive adequate support for additional responsibilities associated with the reforms.	.85
s25_workload_4	The reforms are likely to create opportunities for Māori knowledge, expertise and leadership to be recognised within kura/schools.	.69
s25_workload_2	Responsibility for implementing Māori-focused aspects of the reforms is likely to be shared across all staff, rather than falling primarily on Māori educators.	.58

Note. Coefficient H indicates scale robustness.

Table 6 shows the intercorrelations between these four factors. All correlations were statistically significant and moderate to strong, indicating that these factors mutually impacted each other and elicited similar responding.

Table 6. Factor Intercorrelations

Factor	I	II	III	IV
I. Benefit for Te ao Māori	1.00			
II. Benefit for Māori students	.88	1.00		
III. Reforms manageable	.70	.68	1.00	
IV. Benefit for Māori teachers	.56	.58	.54	1.00

5.1.2 Scale Scores and Differences between Demographic Groups

Table 7 shows the descriptive statistics for the four scales. The mean score for Benefit for Te Ao Māori was 1.38, indicating that responses were close to “strongly disagree”. Māori educators therefore expressed very low confidence that the reforms would give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, enable Māori decision-making, reflect Māori aspirations, or strengthen mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori.

Similarly, the mean score for Benefit for Māori Students ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .71$), suggested that Māori educators expressed very low expectations that the reforms would improve outcomes, equity, wellbeing, belonging, relationships, or future pathways for ākonga Māori.

The mean score for Reforms Manageable was 1.54, falling between “strongly disagree” and “mostly disagree”. This indicated that Māori educators generally perceived the reforms as difficult to implement. In particular, they expressed concerns about the pace and timeframe of implementation, the feasibility of implementing the reforms within existing workload demands and across different educational contexts, and access to the resources required for effective implementation.

Māori responses to the items measuring Benefit for Teachers were generally close to “mostly disagree” ($M = 1.73$, $SD = .85$). This indicated that respondents had low expectations that Māori educators would receive adequate support for additional responsibilities, that the reforms would create opportunities for Māori knowledge, expertise, and leadership to be recognised, or that responsibility for Māori-focused aspects of implementation would be shared across all staff.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Final Scales (Māori survey; $N = 103$)

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Benefit for Te ao Māori	1.38	.61
Benefit for Māori students	1.39	.71
Reforms manageable	1.54	.75
Benefit for Māori teachers	1.73	.85

Note. *SD* = standard deviation. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of each construct.

5.1.3 Differences between Demographic Groups

ANOVAs were not conducted when one comparison group was too small to provide a meaningful and stable estimate. Therefore, Support Staff ($n = 0$ selected), Kura Hourua ($n = 1$ selected), Ngā Kura ā-Iwi setting ($n = 5$ selected), and Other language-medium ($n = 3$ selected) were excluded from ANOVA.

Table 8 shows the ANOVA results. The effect size partial eta-square (η^2_p) was calculated to determine the size of the differences. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences among most of the demographic groups, except for respondents who worked or did not work in a Māori medium rumaki setting only for the factor Benefit for Māori teachers ($p = .033$). However, the effect size for the differences revealed that the actual effects were small ($\eta^2_p = .05$), which may be attributable to the very small group size for the Māori medium rumaki setting ($n = 10$). Therefore, it is defensible to conclude there were no differences in factor endorsement by their role, experience, or employment setting.

Overall, perceptions of Benefit for Pasifika and Reforms Manageable varied significantly with large effect sizes by teaching experience.

Table 8. Analysis of Variances by Teaching Role, Experience, and Employment Setting (Māori survey)

Indicators	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	n ²	n ² p
<i>Benefit for Te ao Māori</i>							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.03	1	0.03	0.07	.794	0.00	0.00
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	0.03	1	0.03	0.08	.783	0.00	0.00
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	0.30	1	0.30	0.76	.387	0.01	0.01
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	0.27	1	0.27	0.67	.414	0.01	0.01
q1_role_Others_selected	0.64	1	0.64	1.61	.208	0.02	0.02
q2a_setting_Wharekura_selected	0.21	1	0.21	0.53	.469	0.01	0.01
q2a_setting_EnglishSecondary_selected	0.01	1	0.01	0.01	.904	0.00	0.00
q2a_setting_Others_selected	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	.957	0.00	0.00
q2b_medium_MaoriRumaki_selected	0.15	1	0.15	0.37	.543	0.00	0.00
q2b_medium_MaoriBilingual_selected	0.22	1	0.22	0.56	.456	0.01	0.01
q2b_medium_English_selected	0.67	1	0.67	1.70	.196	0.02	0.02
q3_experience	0.12	3	0.04	0.10	.959	0.00	0.00
Residuals	34.38	87	0.40				
<i>Benefit for Māori students</i>							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.06	1	0.06	0.10	.747	0.00	0.00
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	0.16	1	0.16	0.30	.585	0.00	0.00
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	0.10	1	0.10	0.18	.670	0.00	0.00
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	1.17	1	1.17	2.19	.142	0.02	0.02
q1_role_Others_selected	0.72	1	0.72	1.35	.248	0.01	0.02
q2a_setting_Wharekura_selected	0.33	1	0.33	0.61	.437	0.01	0.01
q2a_setting_EnglishSecondary_selected	0.37	1	0.37	0.69	.407	0.01	0.01
q2a_setting_Others_selected	0.06	1	0.06	0.11	.747	0.00	0.00
q2b_medium_MaoriRumaki_selected	0.47	1	0.47	0.87	.353	0.01	0.01
q2b_medium_MaoriBilingual_selected	0.24	1	0.24	0.45	.502	0.00	0.01
q2b_medium_English_selected	0.07	1	0.07	0.13	.719	0.00	0.00
q3_experience	0.50	3	0.17	0.31	.819	0.01	0.01
Residuals	46.58	87	0.54				
<i>Reforms manageable</i>							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.27	1	0.27	0.43	.513	0.00	0.00
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	0.02	1	0.02	0.03	.874	0.00	0.00
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	0.47	1	0.47	0.75	.387	0.01	0.01
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	0.01	1	0.01	0.01	.920	0.00	0.00
q1_role_Others_selected	0.05	1	0.05	0.08	.778	0.00	0.00
q2a_setting_Wharekura_selected	0.48	1	0.48	0.77	.383	0.01	0.01
q2a_setting_EnglishSecondary_selected	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	.982	0.00	0.00
q2a_setting_Others_selected	0.03	1	0.03	0.04	.837	0.00	0.00
q2b_medium_MaoriRumaki_selected	0.03	1	0.03	0.05	.828	0.00	0.00
q2b_medium_MaoriBilingual_selected	0.39	1	0.39	0.63	.430	0.01	0.01

Indicators	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p	n ²	n ² p
q2b_medium_English_selected	0.29	1	0.29	0.46	.499	0.01	0.01
q3_experience	0.25	3	0.08	0.14	.938	0.00	0.00
Residuals	54.05	87	0.62				
Benefit for Māori teachers							
q1_role_Teacher_selected	0.15	1	0.15	0.21	.649	0.00	0.00
q1_role_MiddleLeader_selected	0.00	1	0.00	0.01	.936	0.00	0.00
q1_role_PastoralEtc_selected	2.00	1	2.00	2.76	.100	0.03	0.03
q1_role_SeniorLeader_selected	0.20	1	0.20	0.28	.601	0.00	0.00
q1_role_Others_selected	0.01	1	0.01	0.01	.931	0.00	0.00
q2a_setting_Wharekura_selected	0.59	1	0.59	0.81	.369	0.01	0.01
q2a_setting_EnglishSecondary_selected	2.12	1	2.12	2.93	.091	0.03	0.03
q2a_setting_Others_selected	0.56	1	0.56	0.78	.380	0.01	0.01
q2b_medium_MaoriRumaki_selected	3.42	1	3.42	4.71	.033	0.05	0.05
q2b_medium_MaoriBilingual_selected	1.39	1	1.39	1.92	.170	0.02	0.02
q2b_medium_English_selected	0.03	1	0.03	0.04	.834	0.00	0.00
q3_experience	1.75	3	0.58	0.80	.496	0.02	0.03
Residuals	63.06	87	0.72				

Note. Values in red are statistically significant

6. Conclusion

Overall, Māori educator respondents expressed strongly negative views of the proposed reforms across all four dimensions. They had little confidence that the reforms would benefit Te Ao Māori, ākongā Māori, or Māori educators, and generally considered their implementation difficult to manage within current timeframes, workloads, and resources. Perspectives of the proposed reforms of educators from different demographic groups were not found to be meaningfully unique.

References (for both Pasifika and Māori analyses)

- Bandalos, D. L., & Finney, S. J. (2018). Factor analysis. *The Reviewer's Guide to Quantitative Methods in the Social Sciences* (pp. 98–122). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315755649-8>
- Barker, L. E., & Shaw, K. M. (2015). Best (but oft-forgotten) practices: Checking assumptions concerning regression residuals. *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 102(3), 533–539. <https://doi.org/10.3945/ajcn.115.113498>
- DiStefano, C., Zhu, M., & Mîndrilă, D. (2009). Understanding and using factor scores: Considerations for the applied researcher. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 14, 20.
- Hancock, G., & Mueller, R. O. (2001). Rethinking construct reliability within latent variable systems. In R. Cudeck, S. du Toit, & D. Sörbom (Eds.), *Structural Equation Modeling: Present and Future* (pp. 195–216).
- Hu, L.-T., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 6(1), 1–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10705519909540118>
- Little, R. J. A., & Rubin, D. B. (2020). *Statistical Analysis with Missing Data* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Marsh, H. W., Hau, K.-T., & Wen, Z. (2004). In search of golden rules: Comment on hypothesis-testing approaches to setting cutoff values for fit indexes and dangers in overgeneralizing Hu and Bentler's (1999) findings. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 11, 320–341. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15328007sem1103_2
- Revelle, W., & Rocklin, T. (1979). Very simple structure: An alternative procedure For estimating the optimal number of interpretable factors. *Multivariate Behavioral Research*, 14(4), 403–414. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327906mbr1404_2
- The jamovi project (2025). *jamovi*. (Version 2.7) [Computer Software]. Retrieved from <https://www.jamovi.org>.

