

# Annual Conference 2025



## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES - NCEA TO NZCE AND NZACE

A PAPER FOR THE NZPPTA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2025



## CONTENTS

RECOMMENDATIONS .....	2
1. INTRODUCTION .....	3
2. AN EDUCATIONALLY VALID QUALIFICATION SYSTEM .....	3
3. WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM HISTORY? .....	4
4. ADVOCACY FOR CHANGE .....	5
5. EVER DECREASING CIRCLES .....	6
6. IS THE PROPOSAL EDUCATIONALLY VALID? .....	7
7. WHAT DO WE NEED? .....	9

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the report be received.
2. That PPTA reaffirms its support for a high-quality, publicly funded qualifications system that serves all New Zealand students equitably and effectively and reflects the values of public education.
3. That PPTA asserts that an educationally valid qualifications system must be:
  - a. Fair – ensuring equitable access and outcomes for all learners.
  - b. Inclusive – responsive to diverse learning needs, backgrounds, and pathways, especially for Māori and Pasifika students.
  - c. Cumulative – allowing students to build on prior learning in meaningful ways.
  - d. Clear – with transparent standards, expectations, and assessment criteria.
  - e. Motivating – encouraging engagement, aspiration, and achievement.
  - f. Coherent – aligned across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.
  - g. Constructive – supporting learning and development rather than punitive measures.
  - h. Manageable – feasible for schools, teachers, and students to implement and sustain.
4. That PPTA urges the Minister and Government to ensure that any changes to the qualifications system are:
  - a. Carefully planned with clear timelines and stakeholder engagement.
  - b. Thoughtfully implemented with attention to practical realities in schools.
  - c. Properly resourced to support teachers, students, and school systems in adapting to change.
5. That PPTA calls for the New Zealand Certificate of Education (NZCE) and New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (NZACE) be subject to an independent external review by recognised assessment and curriculum experts prior to implementation, to ensure educational validity, system coherence, and public confidence.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“More structure, less flexibility”<sup>1</sup>

- 1.1 The Government has proposed a major overhaul of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), aiming to replace it with a new national qualifications system. These changes are significant and will impact students, teachers, and schools across Aotearoa.
- 1.2 Qualifications are important to life outcomes. Leaving school with a qualification leads to better life outcomes,<sup>2</sup> so ensuring Aotearoa New Zealand’s qualifications work well is essential for the success of our young people. Papers on qualifications have been presented at PPTA Conferences almost annually since 1991, demonstrating the significance of qualifications issues in teachers’ lives.
- 1.3 Every young person in Aotearoa New Zealand deserves the chance to succeed in a qualifications and assessment system that meets their needs and keeps them at the centre. NCEA is not perfect, but evolution would produce the most settled environment and best outcomes for our learners.
- 1.4 In introducing the proposal, the current Minister of Education has made some large sweeping statements, including that NCEA is broken and must be scrapped, that the flexibility of the system has been overused, and that this means programmes of teaching and learning are not “coherent and consistent”.
- 1.5 Schools have worked hard to devise course offerings that meet the needs of their communities, and a wide range of achievements have been recognised on learners’ Records of Achievement by the NCEA. PPTA is concerned that the government’s proposals represent an overcorrection from the flexibility of the current system, which will disadvantage students.

## 2. AN EDUCATIONALLY VALID QUALIFICATION SYSTEM

- 2.1 New Zealand’s education system has used and discarded a number of qualifications since its legislative inception in 1877. This process reflects society’s changing needs and a gradually expanding education culture in this country.<sup>3</sup> The value of qualifications tends to diminish as more students achieve them, and this could certainly be a factor in the imminent demise of New Zealand’s National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).
- 2.2 In 1994, the Qualifications Framework Inquiry, Te Tiro Hou was commissioned by PPTA; it was independent from PPTA and its policies. Te Tiro Hou has proved to be a seminal piece of work that has stood the test of time and remains relevant today.<sup>4</sup> It established criteria on which to base the analysis of a qualifications system. An educationally valid qualifications system is:
  - Fair
  - Inclusive
  - Cumulative

<sup>1</sup> [NCEA is being scrapped - here is what will be replaced with](#)

<sup>2</sup> [School leavers with higher qualifications: The Social Report 2016 – Te pūrongo oranga tangata](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Te Tiro Hou - report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Te Tiro Hou - report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry](#)

- Clear
- Motivating
- Coherent
- Constructive
- Manageable

2.3 These eight criteria were confirmed by PPTA’s annual conference in 1997 as the basis for a qualifications system that could be endorsed by PPTA<sup>5</sup> and were reaffirmed by the 2024 Annual Conference. Further, these criteria were in alignment with the MOE’s Five Principles of the NCEA review (2020) - Wellbeing, Inclusion and Equity, Coherence, Pathways, and Credibility.<sup>6</sup> These were the result of widespread consultation and were endorsed by the PPTA. The “Inclusion and Equity” principle is:

- Ensuring fair access and outcomes for all learners, especially Māori and Pacific students.
- Recognising diverse identities, languages, and cultures—particularly mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori.

2.4 It is unclear what principles have been used to establish the new proposal for our national qualification, but the MOE advises that “this proposal responds to growing evidence that NCEA isn’t working as well as it could. Too much flexibility has led to inconsistency in what students learn and how they’re assessed, meaning that some students leave school without the preparation needed. The changes aim to ensure every qualification tells a clear and trustworthy story about what young people know and can do.”<sup>7</sup>

2.5 The Te Tiro Hou criteria provide a sound framework by which to consider the Government’s current change proposal.

### 3. WHAT DO WE KNOW FROM HISTORY?

*“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” - George Santayana*

3.1 This quote serves as a reminder of the critical role that history plays in shaping our understanding and decision-making, urging us to reflect on past events to inform our future actions.

3.2 Te Tiro Hou includes a chapter on the *History of examinations and awards in New Zealand*, which highlights that the most noticeable trend in our history is the phenomenon of credentials inflation, whereby the value of each credential fell as more and more students achieved it.

3.3 Between 1886 and 1945, the general school leaving certificate sought by most New Zealand school pupils rose from a pass in the Standard Four Examination to a pass in the Form Five award of School Certificate. By the 1980s, most students were aiming for an award in Form Six, the University Entrance examination, although it was not a realistic goal for many of them. By the late 1990s, many students were expected to complete a Seventh Form year and attempt the Bursary examination.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [NCEA-Review-2018-FINAL.docx](#)

<sup>6</sup> [What is the NCEA Change Programme | NCEA](#)

<sup>7</sup> [School Leaders Bulletin · Issue: 198, 5 August 2025 - Ministry of Education](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Te Tiro Hou - report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry](#)

- 3.4 In late 1997, the New Zealand government announced a policy called ‘Achievement 2001’. Te Tiro Hou heavily influenced this, and although a series of compromises, it was at least a multi-partisan position. The policy involved a complete overhaul of the secondary school qualifications system, to shift it from a mishmash of norm-referenced qualifications to a completely standards-based system. Under the new system, students would be assessed at three levels of the same qualification, to be called the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA).
- 3.5 In 2002, the first group of students and teachers began to experience the new qualification, at Level 1 (Year 11), and over 2003 and 2004, Levels 2 and 3 were successively introduced, along with the separate Scholarship examination. The changes were intended to create a more equitable and effective education system that better prepared students for further education, employment, and life. NCEA has, however, rarely been free of controversy, and its implementation was not smooth.
- 3.6 Past conference papers remind us that “significant opposition to the NCEA arose early in 2001 from the National Party, which had designed and championed the qualification, clearly without understanding it. They promised to relegate it to a **second-tier qualification** for non-academic students if returned to power.”<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, the National Party continues this rhetoric in seeking to justify their current proposal for a change to our national qualifications.

## 4. ADVOCACY FOR CHANGE

- 4.1 Teachers had advocated during the 1970s and 80s that the qualification structures in the senior secondary school be rationalised, to better recognise actual achievement and further reduce the disparity between the “academic” and the “vocational.”
- 4.2 There were several issues with the School Certificate; it had a limited scope, as it was primarily focused on academic subjects,<sup>10</sup> and it relied heavily on final exams, so it was high stakes for students. This high-stakes environment often did not reflect a student’s overall abilities or learning throughout the year.<sup>11</sup>
- 4.3 Inequity was a major concern, as the norm-referenced grading system meant only a certain percentage of students could achieve each grade. This approach did not account for individual student progress and could disadvantage those who did not perform well under exam conditions.<sup>12</sup> The Sixth Form Certificate was seen as unfair because the spread of results was determined by each school’s School Certificate results of the previous year.
- 4.4 Teachers considered that assessing students against a standard rather than against each other was fairer, and that standards-based assessment delivered more useful information about a student’s strengths and was more valid because skills that do not lend themselves to assessment in a written exam could be assessed more appropriately.

---

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Massey%20News/1999/Documents/education\\_reform\\_in\\_nz1.pdf](https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Massey%20News/1999/Documents/education_reform_in_nz1.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://redbow.org.nz/blog/key-issues-education-new-zealand>

<sup>11</sup> [Save-our-schools-solutions-for-new-zealands-education-crisis/](https://www.saveourschools.org.nz/solutions-for-new-zealands-education-crisis/)

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School\\_Certificate\\_%28New\\_Zealand%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_Certificate_%28New_Zealand%29)

- 4.5 The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) aimed to address these issues – it better reflected contemporary educational practices and skills required in the modern world<sup>13</sup> and provided more flexibility in terms of subject choices and assessment methods, allowing students to tailor their education to their interests and strengths.
- 4.6 NCEA incorporates continuous assessment throughout the year, rather than relying solely on final exams, and it recognises a broader range of skills and competencies, including practical and vocational skills, which are important for many career paths.<sup>14</sup>
- 4.7 NCEA is a multi-field qualification; the content is not prescribed, only the level and the number of credits. It is a more inclusive qualification, providing multiple pathways for students with different learning preferences and abilities, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.<sup>15</sup> Over its 23-year span, NCEA has, however, seldom been free of controversy.
- 4.8 In 2025, we are being told that” NCEA’s built-in flexibility is being 'overused', allowing students to skip exams and assemble credits from easier or disconnected subjects instead of following a coherent learning path.”<sup>16</sup>
- 4.9 The Te Tiro Hou report warned that it takes time for society to acknowledge educational shifts, noting that credentials that outgrow their purposes are eventually dispensed with.<sup>17</sup> It would appear that this is now the fate of NCEA.

## 5. EVER DECREASING CIRCLES

- 5.1 The new proposal for our national qualification would replace NCEA Level 1 with a foundational award and change the assessment system for Levels 2 and 3. The proposal has a focus on structured learning, with compulsory English and Mathematics subjects at Year 11. For the Year 12 and 13 qualifications, students would receive subject marks out of 100, with a letter grade from A to E. Vocational education and training subjects would be designed by Industry Skills Boards or other industry organisations with support from the Ministry of Education.<sup>18</sup>
- 5.2 The proposal is a move to lockstep by year and level. This is a fundamental shift away from any flexible approach yet not acknowledged in the discussion paper at all. For many, the proposed new qualification pathway has retrospective elements; the return of high-stakes assessment, a preference for external assessment, a return to grading by percentage, limited subject choice, and more ‘must-haves’ to attain the qualification.
- 5.3 We do need to be cautious that we are not moving backwards. School Certificate lacked flexibility in terms of subject choices and assessment methods, which did not cater to the diverse needs and interests of all students, and the curriculum was often fragmented.<sup>19</sup> The new proposal appears to be advocating for methods and systems that we already know do not work for all.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.aqi.org.uk/timelines/qualification-reform-in-england-since-1950/>

<sup>14</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School\\_Certificate\\_%28United\\_Kingdom%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_Certificate_%28United_Kingdom%29)

<sup>15</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GCE\\_Ordinary\\_Level\\_%28United\\_Kingdom%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GCE_Ordinary_Level_%28United_Kingdom%29)

<sup>16</sup> [Stanford signals major NCEA overhaul as internal assessments, credit-chasing erode credibility](#) | CENTRIST

<sup>17</sup> [Te Tiro Hou - report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Consultation on proposal to replace NCEA - Ministry of Education](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Save-our-schools-solutions-for-new-zealands-education-crisis/](#)

5.4 There has been much commentary on the proposed change, and there is undoubtedly a variety of differing opinions within the PPTA membership. Deerness (2025) suggests influential NZ schools hastened the demise of NCEA and proposes that “it’s worth remembering the loudest voices calling for educational change don’t always represent what all students need.”<sup>20</sup>

## 6. IS THE PROPOSAL EDUCATIONALLY VALID?

6.1 We need a national qualification that is educationally valid. It should ensure fair access and outcomes for all learners, and should recognise diverse identities, languages, and cultures—particularly mātauranga Māori and te reo Māori.

6.2 The Government has indicated that externally assessed components will be compulsory in every subject. This position is based on the unfounded assumption that exams are more dependable than other forms of assessment. Exams are undoubtedly quite successful in evaluating how well learners cope with exams. In this way, they tend to favour learners from more advantaged backgrounds. Is this fair?

6.3 The proposal is to replace the “Excellence and Achieved” (sic) grades currently used with “more straightforward subject marking”, identified as a mark out of 100 and a letter grade of A-E. The Government’s proposal shows a 46% (D) grade as a fail and a 50% (C) grade as a pass. As far as the public sees it, one of these is ‘better’ than the other.

6.4 PPTA is concerned that this is a return to a way of thinking that meant if individuals were second-language learners, less comfortable in a school environment, disabled, or neurodivergent, as examples, they were set up for failure. This is not inclusive.

6.5 There are questions of coherence. The Government says it’s not proposing to change the approach to common standards. A standard, however, clearly expresses what an individual must know or be able to do. Assessment against the standard identifies whether the individual knows it or can do it. By contrast, the proposal to report learner outcomes by a 100-point scale leaves it to the general public to interpret what (say) 72 marks means. This is not very clear.

6.6 Regardless of the Government’s stated intention not to change the approach, the use of a 100-point scale is a concern. This is a fundamental part of the proposal that there is not enough information on, so we cannot say that the proposed change is clear, or how constructive the feedback to learners of this system will be.

6.7 The Government says that some skills and knowledge “shouldn’t count” towards a school qualification. An underlying philosophy of a standards-based qualification regime is that achievement is recognised and every student is provided the opportunity to succeed. A strength of the NCEA is that it can encourage creativity and individual expression and formally recognise diverse experiences. The proposed change is neither constructive nor motivating.

6.8 The Government proposal is that learners will have to “take five subjects and achieve at least four” to be granted the Year 12 and Year 13 certificates. This rationing of success is exactly what abandoning School Certificate and the other ranking devices was intended to overcome. This is a significant change in philosophy from qualifications recording

<sup>20</sup> [The Cambridge factor: how influential NZ schools hastened the demise of NCEA](#)

achievement to rewarding a much smaller, often more advantaged group. Every parent wants their children to succeed. This system will reduce achievement in our most disadvantaged communities, and this is not fair or inclusive.

- 6.9 One of the implications of this proposal, identified in the government’s documentation, is the likely drop in results, “especially for students who are already disproportionately reflected in lower achievement results.”<sup>21</sup> This means that our students with ‘less advantage’, predominantly Māori and Pasifika learners, and students with diverse learning needs, will struggle to achieve success with the proposed new qualification.
- 6.10 The Ministry claims that “the curriculum changes will go some way towards making sure there is a smooth transition between NCEA and the new qualifications, but it is unlikely that this will entirely prevent a drop in the achievement rate. Extra support will need to be provided for these groups to manage this risk.” PPTA does not have trust that the curriculum changes are going to meet the needs of these students and is certainly unconvinced that suitable resourcing and support will be available to meet student needs.
- 6.11 Wylie’s research on the Tomorrow’s School reform found that “schools in low socio-economic areas and with high Māori enrolment were likely to have gained least from the reforms and may even have gone backwards.”<sup>22</sup> PPTA has concerns that the current proposal will have the same outcome, and it does not support educational reform that does not meet the needs of all learners.
- 6.12 The Government proposal is for a list of “required subjects” to contribute to the NZCE/NZACE and for a number of vocational ‘subjects’ to be included on the approved subjects list. There are concerns here of fairness (who decides what makes the list) and coherence in the alignment of vocational and academic pathways. The Government plans that the Industry Skills Boards (ISBs) will “work with industry” to devise these ‘subjects’, which are currently no more than political ideas.
- 6.13 The Government proposal is that L1 NCEA will be abolished and replaced by a Foundational Skills Award at Year 11 to recognise literacy and numeracy skills. The extremely poor support for the implementation of both the new Level 1 standards and the literacy/numeracy corequisites created an enormous amount of frustration in schools. Any replacement of level one will need to be done with far more resources. This would ensure any change is manageable.
- 6.14 Unfortunately, the history of education in New Zealand is littered with examples of change that was poorly conceived, lacked an evidence base, were inadequately resourced, not properly evaluated, and eventually turned out to be of no benefit to students, and sometimes even damaging to students, despite enormous efforts being put into the change by well-intentioned teachers and school leaders. PPTA does not wish to see this continue in any future change to our qualification system.
- 6.15 After studying school reforms since their beginning, Wylie (1997) considered that “It is the growing gap between schools and government that is one of the saddest features of the reforms.” (Wylie, 1997a, p. 180).<sup>23</sup> It would seem that the gap between schools and government continues to grow.

---

<sup>21</sup> [Discussion Document: Proposal to replace NCEA with new national qualifications](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Impact of education reforms](#) | New Zealand Council for Educational Research

<sup>23</sup> Wylie, C. (1997a). Self managing schools seven years on: what have we learnt? Wellington: NZCER.

6.16 For decades, teachers have had the flexibility to design meaningful programmes at the local level and have them recognised within the NCEA. Now, the Government wants to take over and decide what's acceptable and "approved". The curriculum is being rewritten into subjects, but this work has not been completed or embedded, and so it is concerning that such a big jump is being announced for assessment.

## 7. WHAT DO WE NEED?

7.1 We need to ask the right questions first. The goal should always be thoughtful and coherent change. When change is proposed, it is valid and professionally responsible for teachers to ask questions such as:

- What are the objectives of this change?
- Where is the evidence suggesting that this is likely to be a valuable change?
- Is there genuine engagement with schools, whānau, and communities (especially those who have been historically underserved) to ensure this change proposal serves *all* ākonga?
- How well resourced is the change, in terms of time, money, and resources?
- What professional learning and development is being provided to support teachers?
- How will time be found to implement the change effectively?
- Will the benefits and/ or deficits of the proposed change be equally felt?

7.2 In their unofficial briefing paper, *EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN NEW ZEALAND 1989-1999: Is there any evidence of success?* Snook et al. (1999, p.41) concluded that "Despite a decade of market liberal reforms, continual classroom change and constantly shifting central government priorities, there is little evidence of success."<sup>24</sup>

7.3 Snook et al. identified that "a feature of the reforms has been a demand for clearly specified objectives, objective measurement of results, and strict accountability. In these terms, the zealous reformers of the 1990's have failed to measure up to their professed standards: the aims of the educational reforms were far from clear and have fluctuated wildly; few clear measures of key variables have been stated by the agencies concerned; as a consequence, though they demand accountability of others, they do not provide the means of securing it of themselves."<sup>25</sup>

7.4 In 2025, we need to ensure that rigorous research is done to ensure that the proposed changes lead to improvements in student learning. We need to clearly understand:

- What are the aims of the proposed educational reform?
- What are the clear measures of success for this proposal?
- Is there an inquiry cycle in place to monitor that the objectives of the change are being achieved?

<sup>24</sup> [Educational reform in New Zealand, 19...](#) | Items | National Library of NZ | National Library of NZ

<sup>25</sup> [Educational reform in New Zealand, 19...](#) | Items | National Library of NZ | National Library of NZ

- 7.5 There have been calls for a radical overhaul of the school system, expressed by a variety of interest groups, over a number of years. Brown (2021) warned that “You can't separate educational practice and policy from social welfare policy, from health policy, you can't even separate it from employment policy, so you can't solve educational achievement problems by just looking at schools and teachers and saying all we need is better teachers working in a better way.”<sup>26</sup> It is certainly not clear that the current government understands this.
- 7.6 The stated aim of this proposal for changes to our national qualification is that the changes “ensure every qualification tells a clear and trustworthy story about what young people know and can do.”<sup>27</sup> These changes will reshape how we teach, assess, and support our students. Teachers and other education professionals must be heard in this process.

---

<sup>26</sup> [Experts urge overhaul of school system following falling student achievement | RNZ News](#)

<sup>27</sup> [School Leaders Bulletin · Issue: 198, 5 August 2025 - Ministry of Education](#)