



Te Tāhuhu o  
te Mātauranga  
Ministry of Education



Te Kāwanatanga  
o Aotearoa  
New Zealand Government

Discussion document

# Proposal to replace NCEA with new national qualifications

Priority 3: Smarter Assessment and Reporting

AUGUST 2025



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# How to use this document

The Government is seeking feedback on the structure and features of proposed new national senior secondary qualifications (the New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education) that would replace the current National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualifications. Feedback on the possible impact of the proposed changes and any considerations for implementation will support the Ministry of Education (Ministry) to plan for implementation.

To help you understand the possible impact of the proposed changes, this discussion document explains how NCEA currently works, and why improvements are needed in the 'case for change' section.

## How to submit

Submissions are open from now and until 15 September 2025.

For many people, the easiest way may be to complete our submission form online, which is available at:



<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

You can also email your submissions to [nceaconsultation@education.govt.nz](mailto:nceaconsultation@education.govt.nz) or send via post to:

**Education Consultation**  
Ministry of Education  
PO Box 1666  
Wellington 6140  
New Zealand

If you choose to email or post your submission, make sure you check the Ministry's website for a template that includes the complete list of submitter questions, and include with your submission:

- › Your name or organisation name, and
- › Which questions you are answering, and
- › Your email, or postal address.

Ideally, submitters will respond to all questions that are relevant to them. However, this may not always be possible, and some individuals may prefer to focus on specific areas. That's perfectly fine — the Ministry values your input.

## How your information will be used

Any feedback provided will be confidential to those involved in analysing the data. If you do provide identifying information in your response, it will be managed in accordance with the Privacy Act 2020. The Ministry will not identify any individuals in the final analysis or report writing unless you expressly give permission for this, and it is needed. However, submissions, including submitters' names, and documents associated with the consultation process may be subject to an Official Information Act 1982 request.

You can find more information about the process for making an Official Information Act 1982 request on the Ministry's website:

<https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/information-releases/official-information-act-requests/making-official-information-request>

If you have any further questions, wish to request or correct your personal information, or withdraw your submission, you can do so by emailing: [nceaconsultation@education.govt.nz](mailto:nceaconsultation@education.govt.nz)

If your submission is anonymous, please be aware the Ministry may not be able to identify or link you to your response. If you wish to withdraw your submission, we advise doing this as soon as possible.



# Message from the Minister

**I am pleased to share the Government's vision for a brighter future for our students. Our schools and kura play a crucial role in equipping young people with the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in further study and employment. Our national qualification for senior secondary education is a core part of this journey.**

Qualifications are more than just a piece of paper; they are a testament to what our students know and can do. They open doors to universities, apprenticeships, work, and further study, while also recognising the incredible achievements of our students and motivating them to stay engaged with their learning.

A national qualification is about having a set standard for kiwi students to aspire to, for teachers to teach to, and for New Zealanders across the country to recognise as an indicator of the skills and knowledge that high school graduates have obtained. A national qualification should be designed for our unique context; providing a single qualification pathway for academic and vocational learning, with students' pathways tailored to their strengths and interests, preparing them to thrive post school, whether this be in further study or work.

However, our current qualification system is not fully supporting all our young people. Some learners are leaving school without the knowledge and skills they need to thrive post-school, despite holding a qualification. Reports highlight that the flexibility of NCEA allows students to achieve it without mastering essential skills, undermining the purpose of a senior secondary education. Significant drops in numeracy and literacy skills are linked to reduced employability, lower earnings, and diminished workplace efficiency. While students may be attaining NCEA, having it does not mean our students are meeting the standards set in other comparable countries for high school qualifications.

I am proposing new NZ senior secondary qualifications that are easier to understand, with clearer vocational pathways, a focus on foundational skills, and more consistency in how we assess students. This will make sure that student success doesn't depend on where you're from, or which school you attend; they will set students up for success post-school while retaining the effective parts of NCEA, like assessing students against consistent standards and integrating vocational learning.

Our vision is for a vibrant, knowledge-rich curriculum that is internationally comparable and prepares our students for future success. The curriculum refresh process is well underway, featuring new tech and vocational subjects that prepare students for future jobs. Now, it is time to consider how we better accredit student learning in senior secondary years.

There will be plenty of lead-in time before changes are made, and further support will make sure all teachers can confidently deliver our qualifications.

Together, let's build a future of ambition, achievement, and success for our students. Your feedback is essential in shaping this future; you can help us create a system that truly supports our young people to reach their full potential. Thank you for being a part of this important journey.



**Hon Erica Stanford**  
Minister of Education



# Message from the Chair of the Professional Advisory Group

## Introduction to the Professional Advisory Group's Work

The opportunity to provide input into the future of New Zealand's national secondary education qualification has been a privilege enjoyed by the Professional Advisory Group (PAG). Principals and representatives have been drawn from a broad range of schools and kura from across Aotearoa, meeting multiple times over the course of 2024 and 2025.

With curriculum change finally leading assessment, we have been able to consider a desired future education system that esteems both academic and vocational pathways that are internationally comparable in their rigour while retaining the essence of a great New Zealand education.

We understand that our assessment system needs to promote progress and celebrate positive student outcomes, while ensuring integrity in a rapidly changing educational environment.

Through robust discussions and debate PAG members and Ministry of Education representatives have critically examined the current value of NCEA for our students. This collaborative effort has been crucial in navigating a path towards an assessment system that will elevate our national qualification and offer a coherent, well-understood framework. This new system will guide learners effectively through their schooling and prepare them for success in their lives beyond school.



**Patrick Gale**

Principal of Rangitoto College and Chair of the  
NCEA Professional Advisory Group





# Executive summary

## History of NCEA

NCEA was introduced in 2002 as a flexible, inclusive, and standards-based senior secondary national qualification. It was designed to recognise the value in both academic and vocational pathways, with both internal assessments and external exams contributing to final grades. It offers a very wide range of assessment opportunities, including those leading to vocational pathways like trades, hospitality, and tourism.

However, NCEA has faced criticism since its introduction, and been the focus of ongoing reforms and reviews that point to **a lack of consistency** and **too much flexibility** affecting the credibility of NCEA.



## What is the problem?

### **NCEA's flexibility means that not all teaching and learning is coherent and consistent.**

The flexibility of NCEA was designed to support student engagement. However, the flexibility has led to 'credit counting' and, for some students, disengagement from study once enough credits have been achieved. Some students aren't turning up for exams or attempting any external assessments at all. There are no rules around which standards need to be taken or achieved as part of a subject or the qualification. For students who wish to access vocational pathways post-school, there is even less clear guidance.

Some schools ensure their students receive coherent learning programmes that provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their next steps after school. In these cases, NCEA recognises what they know and can do, supporting them to follow their chosen post-school pathway.

However, this is not always the case; a lack of consistency is affecting the credibility of NCEA and making it difficult for parents to know how to support their child and ensure they are participating. There is declining participation by both schools and students in NCEA as a result:

- › 45 percent of students on vocational pathways say that NCEA Level 1 is not preparing them for their future and 26 percent say it isn't preparing them for NCEA Levels 2 and 3.
- › 60 percent of teachers and 45 percent of leaders find NCEA Level 1 to be an unreliable measure of knowledge and skills.
- › 39 percent of students say they don't know enough about NCEA Level 1 when making course decisions. 46 percent of parents and whānau say they don't understand what is required for NCEA Level 1 and 48 percent say they feel unable to help their child make the right choices.
- › Schools in high socio-economic communities with higher rates of NCEA achievement are less likely to offer NCEA Level 1.<sup>1</sup>

Where you live and which school you attend should not define the quality of your learning. All students deserve the chance to succeed and to gain a national qualification that is highly regarded both here in New Zealand and around the world. Students need to maximise their time at school and learn as much as possible. The qualification needs to be designed to encourage this and to recognise and reward student success.

Changes are needed to make sure this happens – and these changes need to be evidence-informed and work for our schools. The Government has engaged closely with a Professional Advisory Group (PAG), using them to test ideas and refine options. The PAG is a group of experienced and respected principals from across New Zealand, established to consider and advise on options for addressing the issues with NCEA, to make sure the system is working for all students, whānau, educators, and employers.



### **Assessment should be linked to the curriculum and post-school needs.**

Currently, the NCEA standards drive what is being taught in classrooms rather than teaching being driven by a strong national curriculum and this is not best practice. A strong curriculum should drive teaching and learning, and our national qualifications should assess against the national curriculum.

The national curriculum does not currently provide enough guidance on what a quality education looks like and, as reported by ERO in 2024,<sup>2</sup> there is too much flexibility in learning programmes and how students can achieve NCEA. Assessments made up of a range of standards that are not necessarily coherent means that employers and tertiary educators aren't always sure that an NCEA qualification reflects a readiness for post-school study or work. To address curriculum issues, the Government is part way through a complete update of the national curriculum, including for senior secondary. The secondary school qualifications will need to reflect that curriculum changes and support students towards post-school success.

***“NCEA Level 1 is not yet a fair and reliable measure of what students know and can do. There is too much flexibility regarding how courses can be designed, which results in substantial differences between subjects and between schools in the amount of work and difficulty students experience.”***

— ERO, *Set up to succeed*, 2024, (p.60)

**There needs to be:**

**consistent assessment** of what students know and can do, making it easier for employers and tertiary education providers to understand the value of the qualifications.

**coherent learning** that is assessed through valued qualifications, so that employers and tertiary education providers can be sure of students' readiness for post-school study and employment.

## What are the proposed changes and how will my feedback be used?

Parts of NCEA are valuable – so the proposals in this document will strengthen these good aspects, such as the ability to work towards a vocational pathway, while simplifying the structure and design of the qualifications, and increasing the international comparability. Key proposals are to:

- › work with industry to integrate clear, consistent vocational education and training (VET) learning, making sure it is of value to students, employers, and industry.
- › introduce:
  - a new Foundational Award in Year 11 that documents achievement in literacy and numeracy or te reo matatini and pāngarau
  - qualifications for Years 12 and 13 called the New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education.
- › establish a structured and subject approach to qualifications and introduce required curriculum subjects at Year 11.
- › strengthen the achievement requirements.

The proposed changes mean trading in some of the flexibility that NCEA was designed to provide, to address the credibility issues. For example, there will be required subjects that students need to participate in at Year 11, and so schools will need to make sure students are doing these subjects. Students will also generally be required to take at least five subjects.

Feedback is important to make sure the implications of reduced flexibility are understood, and so that the positive benefits of NCEA can be retained and strengthened.

### Curriculum changes are being introduced from 2026

Students, whānau, and teachers will need time to adjust to the curriculum changes before the new award and qualifications are introduced. For this reason, the first cohort for the new award and qualifications will be taught under the new curriculum from 2026, when they are Year 9 (*Figure 1*).

The new award and qualifications will then be phased in and sequenced in a way that does not disadvantage these students:















- › NCEA Level 1 will no longer be available from 2028, and a new Foundational Award will be introduced.
- › The New Zealand Certificate of Education (for Year 12) will be introduced in 2029, replacing NCEA Level 2.
- › The New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (for Year 13) will be introduced in 2030, replacing NCEA Level 3.

It is important that changes to the curriculum and the qualifications are aligned – so that students are being taught and assessed under either the current curriculum and NCEA, or the new curriculum and qualifications:

- › Students who are currently Year 9 (in 2025) will continue to receive secondary school learning under the old curriculum and will be assessed under NCEA Levels 1, 2, and 3.
- › Students who are currently Year 8 (in 2025) will begin to receive new curriculum learning from 2026 and will be assessed under the new award and qualifications.

This careful phasing will also give teachers plenty of time to implement the new curriculum and new national qualifications.

**Figure 1: Timeline of the curriculum and proposed qualification changes**

2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
<b>YEAR 8</b> (lead cohort)  Existing curricula	<b>YEAR 9</b>  Refreshed curricula (encouraged)	<b>YEAR 10</b>  Refreshed curricula	<b>YEAR 11</b>  Refreshed curricula  <b>Foundational Award</b> introduced	<b>YEAR 12</b>  Refreshed curricula  <b>New Zealand Certificate of Education</b> introduced	<b>YEAR 13</b>  Refreshed curricula  <b>New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education</b> introduced
<b>YEAR 9</b>  Existing curricula	<b>YEAR 10</b>  Existing curricula (Refreshed curricula available)	<b>YEAR 11</b>  Existing curricula ① Existing NCEA Level 1	<b>YEAR 12</b>  Existing curricula ② Existing NCEA Level 2	<b>YEAR 13</b>  Existing curricula ③ Existing NCEA Level 3	

Before the new qualifications are introduced, there will be a strong focus on quality implementation and making sure that teachers have the right resources and supports to make these changes confidently. The Ministry will work on any supports that teachers and students may need using the feedback received through this consultation.



# PART 1:

## The case for change

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The Government wants to achieve an education system where **all students** have access to an education that inspires and engages their learning, so they can achieve their best and gain skills and qualifications that support them into further study or employment.

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The quality of your education should not depend on where you live or which school you attend.



# Assessments should be linked to the curriculum and post-school needs

A strong curriculum should provide the foundation for deep and quality learning. For this reason, curriculum changes are underway which will make sure that students studying a subject are also covering the same learning, no matter which school or kura<sup>3</sup> they attend.

Currently, schools decide on the content of a subject, sometimes offering different versions of the same subjects. This inconsistency creates variability in the depth of students’ learning and understanding, making it difficult for employers and tertiary educators to understand the value of NCEA as an indicator of post-school readiness for work or further education.

The national curriculum is being updated, which will give teachers more direction about what needs to be taught each year. This means that, regardless of where a student lives or which school they attend, all students will receive a rich and meaningful education that is linked to the skills and knowledge needed post-school. As the **national curriculum** is finalised, the design of the secondary school qualifications will need to align with these changes. The national curriculum includes:

**The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC),**  
which is grouped in learning areas  
and subjects

**Te Marautanga o Aotearoa (TMOA)**  
which is grouped in wāhanga ako  
and subjects. <sup>4</sup>

QUESTIONS

**Section 1: Case for change**

*Do you agree that our national qualifications should assess against a national curriculum?*

To have your say complete the submission form online  
<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

# There are good things about NCEA that will remain

NCEA was introduced in 2002-2004 as new qualifications for senior secondary students in Years 11 to 13. The changes placed an emphasis on flexibility, giving students more options than had previously been available, including those leading to vocational pathways like trades, hospitality, and tourism. A key change also included accrediting students based on capability, rather than by comparing students against each other.

NCEA recognises that students have a range of different pathways after leaving school, including in industry training, employment and tertiary education. The assessments offered are designed to support students through a pathway that is specific to them.

**Feedback to the Government is that there are key parts of NCEA that should be retained:**

- › People appreciate that student achievement is determined against a set of **common standards**, not against other students.
- › The qualifications assess **a range of learning areas**, including areas that support students to move into industry-based jobs or training post-school.

*“NCEA’s standards-based approach is fairer and more equitable than the previous norm-referenced systems of School Certificate and Bursary. The standards-based approach reduces barriers for learners who face particular challenges in their learning or life circumstances...”*

— NZCER, *NCEA Review report*, 2018 (pg. 9)

The ability to tailor teaching and student learning to the skills and knowledge needed for different pathways means that students who might otherwise leave school early are staying for longer and working towards a qualification that supports them towards their chosen post-school pathway.

The Government is not proposing to change the approach to common standards or the ability to cater to a range of learning areas.

**Note that:**

- › **standards** are a way to assess learning under NCEA. Standards reflect groupings of key skills and knowledge in related areas and come as achievement, unit, and skill standards
- › **credits** are combined throughout the year, and from across standards. Students that gain at least 80 credits from across the standards they achieve (including 20 from the corequisite) can achieve NCEA
- › **standards are worth a certain number of credits, at a certain level.** The level and number of credits that a standard is worth depends on the total time expected for teaching, learning, and assessment required for students ready to study at the level of the standard. The level of a standard represents the demands of the standard, including level of knowledge and skill required.

## There are things about NCEA that need to change

Students achieve NCEA by combining 60 credits from across any standards and 20 credits from the NCEA co-requisite. Other than the NCEA co-requisite, there are no mandatory standards that students must achieve, and credits from a combination of completely different areas can be used by teachers to design subjects and NCEA qualifications. An example of what a current Record of Achievement could look like can be found on NZQA’s website: <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Qualifications-standards/Results/electronic-sample-NZROA-NCEA-results.pdf>

The level of flexibility means that not all students are experiencing coherent and consistently-designed teaching and learning programmes. Differences in the quality of programmes is concerning, because consistency is important to make sure **all students** have access to quality learning. A lack of consistency can reduce the credibility of the qualifications and affect students' post-school outcomes.

***“There is variation in how schools are designing their courses – only one in three schools (32 percent) are typically offering all four subject achievement standards”***

— ERO, *Set up to succeed*, 2024 (p.23)

Concerns around coherence and consistency are evidenced by data, which shows us that in 2024:

- › Excellence rates differed between students who achieved through internal assessments (25 percent) vs. external assessments (12 percent). This means that students are twice as likely to get an excellence grade in an internal assessment than an external assessment.
- › On average, students did not attempt 25 percent of the external assessments they were entered for. At NCEA Level 3, this was 34 percent.
- › There were more than 250,000 instances where students did not attempt external examinations and papers were left blank, largely because students already had sufficient credits to meet qualification requirements.
- › Only 54 percent of Year 12 students who achieved NCEA Level 2 did so with three or more achievement standard-based subjects. This number was higher for Year 13 students who achieved NCEA Level 3, at 65 percent (if we consider 14 or more credits to be in line with enough to make up a subject).<sup>5</sup>
- › Just over 30 percent of Year 12 and 13 students who achieved NCEA drew on unit standards to meet the minimum credit requirements.
- › Of the Year 13 students who needed to use unit standards, 42 percent required less than 15 credits of unit standards, suggesting these students are using unit standards to fill 'gaps' in credit requirements rather than accumulating unit standards that are part of well-developed VET learning.<sup>6</sup>

It can be difficult to find balance between coherence, consistency, and flexibility when it comes to designing a qualification.<sup>7</sup> While flexibility means that study can be tailored, the value of the qualification needs to be clear; qualifications that are coherent and credible help students to move into employment and further study.

#### **Note that:**

- › **coherence** means things work well together and make sense
- › coherent learning programmes make sure there are no gaps in student learning, and the learning helps to develop a set of skills, knowledge, and competencies that makes sense together
- › **the co-requisite** is awarded for literacy and numeracy or te reo matatini and pāngarau skills and was made mandatory for students achieving NCEA from 2024: <https://ncea.education.govt.nz/overview-NCEA-corequisite-standards>



## Learning programmes can be driven by the need to support students to gain a qualification

A strong focus on gaining credits means that some schools will choose standards that are easier for students to achieve and base their teaching on what is needed to achieve these standards. This is understandable, as schools want to support students to achieve a qualification, but the approach may be harmful:

- › **Closing off options:** teachers may sometimes encourage students who are struggling to attempt standards that they may find easier to achieve, but this also limits students' options post-school. For example, they may not be able to enrol in tertiary study if they have not completed the standards for entry.
- › **Not offering complete and meaningful subjects<sup>8</sup>:** Instead of offering all standards in a subject, some schools may offer a combination from different areas or only internally assessed standards. This results in students missing out on deep learning and introduces gaps in their skills and knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

***“If students can gain 10 credits towards their Level 2 certificate from doing a two-day course on Health and Safety (this is 1/6th of the credits they need to gain L2) then there is a bit of a problem (Teacher submission)”***

— NZCER, *NCEA Review report*, 2018 (p.21)

It can be difficult for students to understand how NCEA works and make decisions that support them post-school. It is too easy for students to choose subjects and base study around an approach that results in a mix of unrelated assessments, reducing opportunities for deep learning.

## We can see the negative impacts of too much flexibility

Coherence and credibility issues are affecting results and feedback from tertiary providers and employers:

- › **Tertiary education providers and employers** say that NCEA is not always a reliable measure of skills and experience. Many employers don't understand how NCEA works or think it does not work well, impacting on its credibility.<sup>10</sup> Some employers report that they do not value NCEA Level 1 and that students are not 'workforce-ready'.<sup>11</sup>
- › **Literacy and numeracy** levels in young adults aged 16-24 are below the OECD average<sup>12</sup> and over time results have gone down significantly in New Zealand. Having good literacy and numeracy skills is important for accessing employment and tertiary education, and for navigating life post-school. These skills are linked to higher levels of life satisfaction and wellbeing.
- › **The Education Review Office's (ERO) November 2024 report**<sup>13</sup> recommends reducing flexibility to strengthen NCEA Level 1 and enhance the credibility of NCEA. ERO noted that NCEA's approach to three years of high-stakes assessment is not internationally comparable.
- › **The quality of education is too much of a lottery.** The quality of an education depends on which school a student attends, with schools deciding what and how to teach, and which NCEA standards will be available. This flexibility exists for the standards on offer, and how subjects are taught and assessed.

### QUESTIONS

#### Section 1: Case for change

*Do you feel that you understand NCEA? For example, the credit requirements, how standards are graded, and what internal and external assessments are required?*

*Are there aspects of NCEA that you think support student learning and achievement? What are these aspects?*

*Do you agree that the senior secondary qualifications system needs to improve?*

To have your say complete the submission form online

<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>



## We need a valued qualification

Many students are receiving coherent learning programmes that provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their next steps after school. In these cases, NCEA recognises what they know and can do, supporting them to follow their chosen post-school pathway.

### But this is not always the case.

National curriculum changes will make sure the content that is covered in the classroom is knowledge-rich by providing teachers with more certainty about what needs to be taught, and when and how teaching should happen. However, the need to prepare for exams and achieve NCEA will always drive teaching and learning to some extent.

### On their own, national curriculum changes only address part of the key challenges of NCEA.

The current NCEA qualifications provide students with choice and the ability to specialise in areas of interest. This is a good thing, but too much flexibility in how students can achieve NCEA means that student learning does not always match the skills needed for their chosen post-school pathways.

*“Assessments should be driven by the curriculum (rather than the other way around) and should assess students’ understanding of the full curriculum.”*

— ERO, *Set up to succeed*, 2024 (p.183)

The proposed changes aim to support students to access future study or employment, by finding a better balance between a coherent and flexible qualification system:

- › **Increase credibility in the senior secondary qualification:** increase trust in the qualifications, in New Zealand and internationally, by making sure that it is: easier to understand; a more credible and reliable measure of skills and knowledge; and more internationally comparable.
- › **Support high quality, coherent learning programmes:** improve how the national senior secondary qualifications support all students to succeed post-school by making sure they have access to deep learning and can develop foundational skills in literacy and numeracy or te reo matatini and pāngarau.

## QUESTIONS

### Section 1: Case for change

*The Government wants the senior secondary qualifications to be coherent, consistent, and credible, with greater access to an enhanced vocational model. Do you think there are other opportunities for positive change with the new qualifications?*

To have your say complete the submission form online  
<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>



## PART 2:

# Proposals for change

The structure and features of the new senior secondary qualifications – the **New Zealand Certificate of Education** and the **New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education** need to be internationally comparable and assess students' key skills and knowledge. That way, these qualifications will signal to employers and tertiary providers that a school leaver has the right skills and experience to enter the workforce or continue with study.

### The new certificates will:

- › reflect what students know and can do by fairly and consistently recognising the skills and knowledge students need to successfully move into employment or further study
- › encourage schools to assess against the national curriculum, also giving them confidence around how to design good learning programmes
- › give employers confidence about a student's skills and knowledge, and what they can bring to a workplace
- › give tertiary education providers confidence that students' qualifications accurately reflect what they know and can do, to assess entry into further study and be confident that students will be able to engage.

## Proposal 1: Working with industry to integrate Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects into the senior secondary qualifications

### This section discusses:

- › creating valuable and credible Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects
- › using Industry Skills Boards (ISBs) or others to strengthen VET learning.

This section asks whether you support government working with industry to create new VET subjects for use in schools. If you're a teacher or principal, the Government also wants to understand the practical and operational considerations for making VET learning a success.

### Note that:

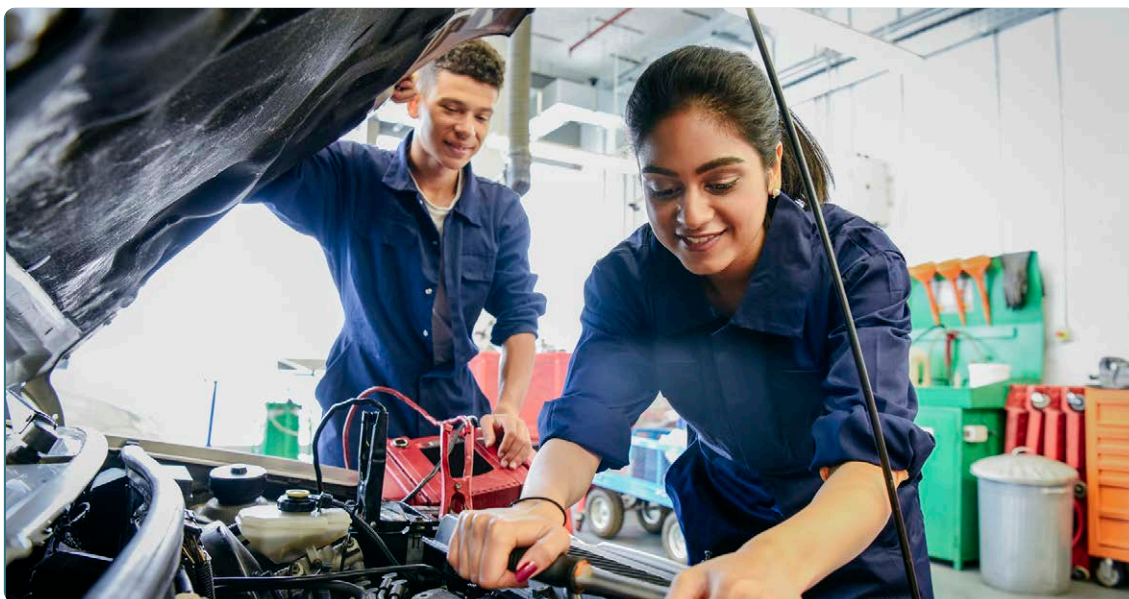
- › **VET learning** in this document means learning that is focused on developing skills and knowledge needed to work in a particular industry.

### Creating valuable and credible VET subjects

VET subjects that are made up of coherent sets of skill standards will be delivered to students in partnership with tertiary providers and employers. This change seeks to strengthen the value and credibility of VET learning, by introducing a framework with criteria that support Industry Skills Boards (ISBs) and others to develop high-quality VET subjects.

Unit and skill standards are already used to support learning in areas like building & construction and tourism. However, this learning is not always provided in line with a subject approach, and there are not always clear, consistent pathways for students wanting to move into industry qualifications or employment:

- › In 2024, just over 30 percent of Year 12 and 13 students who achieved NCEA Levels 2 and 3 used unit standards to meet the minimum credit requirements. Of the 9,788 students who achieved NCEA Level 3 with some unit standards, 42 percent drew on fewer than 15 credits from unit standards. This suggests that these credits are used to satisfy the minimum credit requirements of NCEA, rather than reflecting coherent VET learning.<sup>14</sup>
- › There are disparities in the use of unit standards by School Equity Index Group. In 2024, nearly 30 percent of credits gained in schools with 'More' Socio-Economic Barriers to Attainment were from unit standards, compared to just 8 percent in schools with 'Fewer' Socio-Economic Barriers. These figures suggest that incoherent learning programmes made up of unit standards may disproportionately impact on students in schools with 'More' Socio-Economic Barriers.<sup>15</sup>



VET subjects are an important part of the education system, offering students meaningful learning experiences that, in the long-term, lead to better employment outcomes. This change will provide clearer pathways for students who want to go on to industry study or employment, so that they have the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

### **Using Industry Skills Boards (or others) to strengthen VET learning**

ISBs will shape VET subjects that are connected to real post-school opportunities. They will have the flexibility to draw on existing content and standards or develop entirely new content for VET subjects, based on industry needs. For example, ISBs could decide to draw on the existing standards under the Building and Construction, and Allied Trades Skills (BCATS) programmes.<sup>16</sup>

The Ministry will support ISBs, to make sure that only high-quality VET subjects are part of the new qualifications. The learning that students are accredited with should provide a clear pathway to further industry qualifications, including being cross-credited where relevant. Aligning VET subjects with industry qualifications means that students will be able to work towards achieving the new senior secondary qualifications while potentially also making a meaningful start on a tertiary qualification.

For VET areas outside the role of an ISB, other industry organisations could work with the Ministry and NZQA to develop VET subjects, ensuring that all VET learning is credible, consistent, and connected to real industry need and post-school opportunities.

Similar to VET subjects, criteria will apply to non-VET subjects that are made up of skill and unit standards. This could include subjects with standards relevant to the Realm Nations, supporting diverse learners and communities. The Ministry will work with NZQA and the relevant partners to approve non-VET subjects that are made up of skill and unit standards.



## This approach means there will be fewer standards available

There are currently around 11,000 skill and unit standards of varying quality and relevance available for use in NCEA. This proposal will mean that ISBs can take the best of these, and create new ones, resulting in clear, consistent packages of learning that are highly relevant to industry and workforce, and provide pathways towards tertiary qualifications.

A framework with defined outcomes and criteria for VET subjects will mean that not all current standards will count towards the new qualifications.

There will also be practical things to consider for this proposal, such as students having access to high-quality VET learning. While data shows that programmes such as Trades Academies<sup>17</sup> result in better employment outcomes for participants, access to these programmes currently varies. Developing VET subjects would provide an opportunity to strengthen the approach to VET in schools and kura, including building on effective services like Trades Academy.

### Note that:

- › **a subject that consists of skill standards designed by industry** will be equivalent in size to other subjects

## QUESTIONS

### Proposal 1: Working with industry to better integrate VET learning into the senior secondary qualification system

*Do you support government working with industry to create Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects?*

To have your say complete the submission form online

<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>





## Proposal 2: Introducing a new Foundational Award and national senior secondary qualifications for Years 12 and 13

### This section discusses:

- › a new Foundational Award that accredits literacy and maths or te reo matatini and pāngarau
- › introducing two new national senior secondary qualifications – the New Zealand Certificate of Education (for Year 12) and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education (for Year 13)
- › removing NCEA Level 1, which means moving away from three years of high-stakes assessment.

This section asks whether you think the Foundational Award will prepare students with the basic skills needed to successfully engage with learning in Years 12 and 13. The Government also wants to hear what achievements you think the Award should highlight and how to ensure that all students have a chance to leave school with a Year 12 qualification.

### A new Foundational Award that accredits literacy and numeracy or te reo matatini and pāngarau

The Foundational Award will be introduced and replace the current co-requisite requirement in 2028. Students could achieve the Award in any year between Years 9 and 13, but most students would focus on achieving this in Year 11. The current corequisite is targeted at Years 8-9. Over time and gradually, the difficulty of the Award would be aligned to Year 11 of the curriculum.

***“Based on their experience of the previous NCEA Level 1 qualification, just over seven in 10 employers (71 percent) don’t think it is a reliable measure of student knowledge and skills, and nine in 10 (90 percent) don’t think it’s a reliable measure of attitude to hard work.”***

— ERO, *Set up to succeed*, 2024 (p.183)



While the intention is for students to leave school with at least the New Zealand Certificate of Education, the Award will be an award in its own right, appearing on a student's record. This means that students who leave before the end of Year 12 may still leave with an Award.

Students would need to achieve the Foundational Award to achieve the New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education.

The Award will provide potential employers with a sense of a school-leaver's knowledge in fundamental areas, including literacy and numeracy or te reo matatini and pāngarau. There may be other areas of achievement that the Award could document, including those that are not strictly academic.

## QUESTIONS

### **Proposal 2: Introducing a new Foundational Award.**

*Do you agree that replacing NCEA Level 1 with a Foundational Award in numeracy and literacy is a good way to prepare students with the basic skills needed to successfully engage with learning in Years 12 and 13?*

*Do you think any other areas of learning or achievement should be considered as part of the Foundational Award? For example, should a certain level of student attendance be required?*

To have your say complete the submission form online  
<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

## **Introducing the New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education for Years 12 and 13**

This change introduces new senior secondary qualifications that are designed for students completing Years 12 and 13 – New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education. There are currently three levels of NCEA; so this change also effectively reduces the number of national senior secondary qualifications from three levels to two.

This approach is consistent with that of comparable jurisdictions,<sup>18</sup> and will allow Year 11 students to focus on deep learning of foundational skills and knowledge before undertaking high stakes assessments in Years 12 and 13.

### **Removing NCEA Level 1**

After 2027, NCEA Level 1 will no longer be offered – Year 11 students will not have to undertake high-stakes assessment (other than the Foundational Award).

This change provides students with an additional year of preparation before they undertake the New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education from Years 12 and 13.

The removal of assessments at Year 11 also creates more time in the classroom because students will not require study leave in Term 4 and incentivises students to remain at school to complete a qualification at Year 12.

### **Removing a qualification at Year 11 creates new challenges to work through**

The proposed change means that students who do not complete Year 12 may leave school with only the Foundational Award. This creates similar issues to those in the current system, with employers reporting that NCEA Level 1 is not a valuable indicator of post-school readiness. This will have a greater impact on students who are more likely to finish school before the end of Year 12, such as disabled learners, those experiencing greater socioeconomic barriers, and those with disrupted learning due to health challenges.

Students should be supported to stay in school and complete Year 12 because full participation at school will reduce the risk that students unintentionally limit their post-school options.

The Ministry will carefully consider what is needed to make sure students are supported to complete at least the New Zealand Certificate of Education. Students will benefit from a newly designed and rich curriculum, but further, targeted support may be required, particularly in early years. The Ministry may also explore changes that ensure students are given every opportunity to gain a qualification. For example, there is an option to lift the school leaving age from 16 to 17.



## QUESTIONS

### **Proposal 2: Introducing two new national senior secondary certificates for Years 12 and 13.**

*Most students will complete the New Zealand Certificate of Education in Year 12. How important is it for the Government to consider ways to ensure more students stay at school until the end of Year 12?*

To have your say complete the submission form online  
<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

## Proposal 3: Shifting focus to a structured and subject approach and introducing required subjects in the curriculum

### This section discusses:

- › a subject approach, including subjects created with packages of skill standards designed by industry
- › required curriculum subjects for students at Year 11.

This section asks whether you support a subject approach to assessments and requiring Year 11 students to participate in some curriculum subjects. If you're a teacher or principal, the Government also wants to hear from you about the resources and supports you would need to support a subject approach.

### Introducing a subject approach

Achievement will focus on mastery across a whole subject. Currently, students may make up credits from a range of unrelated standards, making it difficult to understand a student's depth of knowledge, or how their learning is relevant to tertiary education or employment.

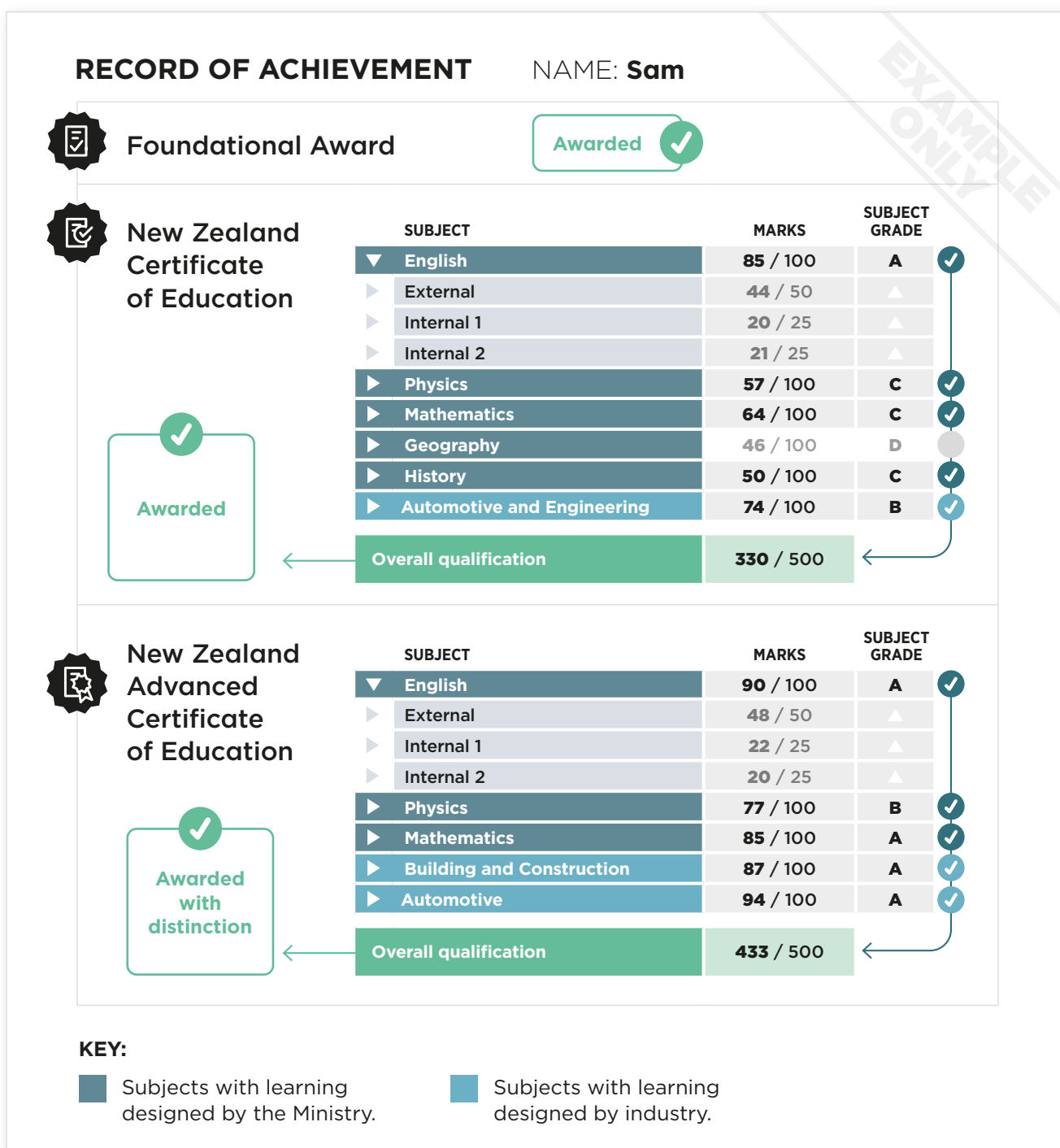
A subject approach means that students will focus on subjects rather than standards. External and internal assessments within a subject would be marked (and quality assured) consistently, and aggregated to an overall grade and scored out of 100. This would provide potential employers and tertiary educators with a better sense of students' knowledge and skills in key learning areas and wāhanga ako. For VET subjects, the assessments will be through skill standards.

A focus on subject achievement will incentivise students and teachers to consider the learning that is needed for a student's chosen pathway post-school.

Figure 2 is an example of what a student's Record of Achievement might look like under the proposed changes. By comparison, here is an example of a current Record of Achievement: [www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Qualifications-standards/Results/electronic-sample-NZROA-NCEA-results.pdf](http://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Qualifications-standards/Results/electronic-sample-NZROA-NCEA-results.pdf)



**Figure 2:** Example of what a student's record of achievement could look like under the New Zealand Certificate of Education and New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education. The make-up of English is expanded, demonstrating how it may be made up of 50 percent external assessments and 50 percent internal assessment.





### Introducing required subjects for students in Year 11

Students will generally be required to take five subjects, including some important curriculum subjects at Year 11. Specifically, teaching and learning programmes for Year 11 students will need to include either English and Mathematics or Te Reo Rangatira and Pāngarau. This ensures that all students can access foundational learning before working towards the New Zealand Certificate of Education in Year 12.

This change also reduces the chance that students will unintentionally cut themselves off from some post-school pathways too early. For example, by not taking the subjects needed to gain University Entrance (UE).<sup>19</sup>

#### QUESTIONS

#### **Proposal 3: Shifting focus to a structured and subject approach and introducing mandatory subjects**

*Do you support a subject approach to assessments at Years 12 and 13?*

*How important is it for students to engage with the full curriculum (rather than segments) for vocational and general subjects?*

To have your say complete the submission form online  
<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

## A subject approach will be carefully thought through for the Kaupapa Māori context

The Ministry will work closely with representatives of kaupapa Māori settings, including Kura Kaupapa Māori and Kura ā Iwi, to make sure the design of the new qualifications consider the unique context of kura from the start. This could include, for example, designing subjects specifically for these settings.

## A subject approach may be more difficult to achieve

Moving to a subject approach may make it challenging for some students to achieve the new senior secondary qualifications because students cannot rely on achieving individual and, at times, unrelated standards to achieve a qualification. A subject approach is meant to give a more accurate picture of a student's learning in a subject area, so there will no longer be an opportunity to use random standards from other subjects to improve results.

Schools will need to implement teaching and learning programmes that support the learning needed to achieve subjects. Schools will have less flexibility in the design of individual learning programmes because students will need to be offered 'whole' subjects. This means completing a range of assessments in the same subject, having studied the subject across the school year. These assessments will still be made up of a mixture of internal and external assessments, as is appropriate for each subject.

Schools and teachers will still have flexibility within the curriculum to make choices about the books, plays, creative works, projects, and research that is undertaken – as long as it meets the assessment requirements.

As is currently the case, there are potential operational challenges for schools. For example, there may be workforce implications if there are not enough specialist teachers within a school to offer full subjects to students.

### QUESTIONS

#### **Proposal 3: Shifting focus to a structured and subject-based approach and introducing mandatory subjects**

***For teachers and principals: Aside from additional funding, what practical resources and supports do you think will be important for learners and schools when shifting to a subject approach?***

To have your say complete the submission form online

<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

## Proposal 4: Strengthening the achievement requirements

### This section discusses:

- › introducing greater consistency in the way subjects are assessed
- › replacing terms like 'Excellence' and 'Achieved' with more straightforward subject marking
- › requiring students to achieve at least four subjects
- › exceptions and cross-crediting will be allowed in some cases.

This section asks whether you agree that the proposed achievement requirements are reasonable and easy to understand and, if you're a teacher or principal, for feedback on wider supports or changes that are needed to support this proposal.

### Introducing greater consistency in the way subjects are assessed

Students will be strongly incentivised to participate in external assessments where these are offered, with their subject grades based on the combined score across assessments. This will increase consistency in the way internal and external assessments count towards a fair assessment of a student, and in the way schools approach assessments.

The approach will also incentivise students to study and participate throughout the school year.

### Shifting away from terms like 'Excellence' and 'Achieved' and using more detailed subject marking

Students will receive a subject grade and be required to achieve a set score to achieve the subject.<sup>20</sup> This is consistent with other marking regimes, providing educators and employers with a better understanding of students' level of skill and knowledge. The change may also motivate high-achieving students, who sometimes become bored or demotivated.

### Requiring students to achieve at least four subjects

To achieve the new qualification, students will need to achieve:

- › a passing grade in at least four subjects
- › the new Foundational Award.



### **High achieving students will continue to receive an endorsement**

Students will receive an overall grade based on the combined scores of their five best subjects. This will show as a certificate endorsement on a student's record, to motivate high achievers and encourage students to continue engaging with all their subjects. For example, a score of 400 or more out of 500 could mean a student has their qualification endorsed with distinction.

### **Exceptions and cross-crediting will be allowed in some cases**

Students who need to take time away from school will be able to complete a qualification over multiple years. For example, a student could work towards the New Zealand Certificate of Education over Year 12 and Year 13 if needed. As is currently the case, Year 13 subjects would be able to count towards a Year 12 qualification.

The Ministry will also consider what exceptional circumstances policies may provide appropriate support for some students, to ensure they are not unnecessarily disadvantaged as a result. For example, students experiencing health issues.



**Strengthening the achievement requirements will require changes for schools**

Students are currently able to achieve NCEA by gaining 60 credits from any mix of standards at NCEA Levels 1, 2, and 3 (alongside the NCEA co-requisite). Under the changes, students will have to achieve at least:

- › four subjects at Year 12 or above to achieve the New Zealand Certificate of Education
- › four subjects at Year 13 to achieve the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education.

These changes may affect some students more than others, including:

- › people completing their qualifications after they leave school. For example, young people up to 24 years old who are accessing free further foundational education from tertiary providers and completing NCEA
- › students who are unable to do four or more subjects in a year, or who have missed out on a significant amount of learning in previous years.

With the additional curriculum changes, students should be better prepared for their high-stakes assessment years in the future, mitigating risks in the medium- to long-term that there will be a decline in student achievement rates.

Achievement of the qualifications is likely to decline in the short-term compared to NCEA, based on experiences in comparable countries that have made significant changes to their senior secondary education system. This includes Queensland in Australia, which introduced a new senior secondary qualification in 2019. The change was followed by an initial slight decline in achievement rates (about three percent) followed by an increase. In 2024, 94 percent of students who graduated had achieved the new senior secondary qualification.

QUESTIONS

**Proposal 4: Strengthening the achievement requirements**

- Do you find the proposed achievement requirements for the new qualifications easier to understand than NCEA? This includes that students must achieve a passing grade in at least four subjects and achieve the Foundational Award.*
- Do you think four subjects is a reasonable requirement to gain a secondary qualification?*
- For teachers and principals:** *Aside from additional funding, what other changes, supports, or mitigations do you think are needed to support strengthened achievement requirements?*

To have your say complete the submission form online  
<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>



## PART 3:

# Implications and next steps

### This section discusses:

- › managing the implications
- › taking the time we need to support the changes.

This section asks whether you agree the proposals will increase coherence, consistency, and credibility of the senior secondary qualifications, and for any other feedback you would like to provide.

## Managing the implications

The proposals discussed are intended to have a positive impact overall. They target some of the main challenges with NCEA, making sure the proposed New Zealand Certificate of Education and New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education are credible and support coherent learning of key skills and knowledge. However, the proposals may initially have impacts on the achievement rates, especially for students who are already disproportionately reflected in lower achievement results.















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. The Ministry will be working through options that can support everyone to successfully transition from the current curriculum and NCEA to the revised curriculum and new qualifications.

## Taking the time we need to support the changes

The diagram below outlines the overall proposed timeline for the changes:

**Figure 1: Timeline of the curriculum and proposed qualification changes**

2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	2030
<b>YEAR 8</b> (lead cohort)  Existing curricula	 Refreshed curricula (encouraged)	 Refreshed curricula	 Refreshed curricula  <b>Foundational Award</b> introduced	 Refreshed curricula  <b>New Zealand Certificate of Education</b> introduced	 Refreshed curricula  <b>New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education</b> introduced
<b>YEAR 9</b>  Existing curricula	<b>YEAR 10</b>  Existing curricula (Refreshed curricula available)	<b>YEAR 11</b>  Existing curricula ① Existing NCEA Level 1	<b>YEAR 12</b>  Existing curricula ② Existing NCEA Level 2	<b>YEAR 13</b>  Existing curricula ③ Existing NCEA Level 3	

A small number of foundational subjects in the updated curriculum will be introduced and required for use earlier for Years 0-10 from 2026 – Mathematics and English or Te Reo Rangatira and Pāngarau.

The goal of the timeline is to make sure that:

- the “lead cohort” (the first group of students who would undertake the New Zealand Certificate of Education and the New Zealand Advanced Certificate of Education) have as much time learning with the updated curriculum as possible before undertaking high-stakes assessment
- students generally should not get a mix of new and old – so students doing NCEA will be learning and assessed against the existing curriculum, and students doing the new qualifications will be learning and assessed against the updated curriculum. Likewise, students will either do NCEA Levels 1, 2, and 3, or the new qualifications and the Foundational Award – not a mix of both.

A lot will need to happen between now and 2028. We are inviting feedback on the current timeline, and what it means for preparing for any changes. Once consultation closes, the Ministry will take time to understand people's thoughts and opinions, before reporting back to Cabinet with a final set of proposals in November 2025.

## KEY DATES

**4 August to  
15 September 2025**

- › Public consultation where the sector and public provide their feedback on proposed changes

**September to  
October 2025**

- › Analysis and summary of feedback to identify where changes are needed.

**November 2025**

- › Cabinet will consider the final policy recommendations.

**2028/2029/2030**

- › Implementation of changes (subject to final Cabinet agreement)

## QUESTIONS

### Summary questions

*Do you agree that the proposed changes will improve the coherence, consistency, and credibility of the national senior secondary qualifications?*

*What other changes or supports do you think would be helpful to make sure students can successfully complete the new qualifications?*

*Is there anything else that you would like to say about the proposals?*

To have your say complete the submission form online

<https://www.education.govt.nz/consultation-ncea>

## Endnotes:

- 1 ERO reports that 45% of students on vocational pathways say that NCEA Level 1 is not preparing them for their future and 26% say its isn't preparing them for NCEA Levels 2 and 3.

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- 2 ERO (2024). Set up to succeed: How well is NCEA Level 1 working for our schools and students?

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- 3 In this document, schools will be used interchangeably for schools and kura, including Kura Kaupapa Māori, kura motuhake, and kura ā-iwi, except for where the document needs to specifically reference kura.

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- 4 These curricula are different. The NZC is used in most state and integrated schools, and TMOA is used in Māori-medium and state school schools. NZC includes English and mathematics and statistics, with TMOA including Te Reo Rangatira and Pāngarau.

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- 5 Data supplied to the Ministry of Education by the NZQA.

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- 6 Data supplied to the Ministry of Education by the NZQA.

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- 7 See page 4 of Managing choice, coherence, and specialisation in upper secondary education | OECD: [www.oecd.org/en/publications/managing-choice-coherence-and-specialisation-in-upper-secondary-education\\_4a278519-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/managing-choice-coherence-and-specialisation-in-upper-secondary-education_4a278519-en.html)

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- 8 Students are not always achieving at least 14 credits from the available credits within a subject across three subjects – an indicator of breadth and depth in a subject.

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- 9 Students are less likely to engage in learning that does not lead to credits and teachers are less likely to teach the skills and knowledge in areas that they do not assess.

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- 10 NZCER, *NCEA Review: Findings from the public engagement on the future of NCEA*, 2018, p. 6. Under 30% of employers believe that NCEA works well.

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- 11 See [https://concove.ac.nz/assets/ConCOVE\\_VET-in-Schools-Analysis\\_Discussion-document\\_Final-v1.2-002.pdf](https://concove.ac.nz/assets/ConCOVE_VET-in-Schools-Analysis_Discussion-document_Final-v1.2-002.pdf)

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- 12 In New Zealand, young adults aged 16-24 scored below the OECD average with 254 points in literacy and 247 points in numeracy. See <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=NZL&treshold=10&topic=EO>



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- 13 ERO (2024). Set up to succeed: How well is NCEA Level 1 working for our schools and students?
- 
- 14 Data supplied to the Ministry of Education by the NZQA.
- 
- 15 Data supplied to the Ministry of Education by the NZQA.
- 
- 16 Under BCATS, there are already a range of standards that assess specific skills that will support students seeking employment or training in trades areas, e.g., demonstrating safety. See the BCATS website for other examples of standards that could form a VET subject  
<https://bconstructive.co.nz/unit/24354-0>
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- 17 Trades Academies are existing partnerships between schools, kura, tertiary providers, and industry.
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- 18 For example, Australia's Northern Territory and Canada's British Columbia, which have two levels of senior secondary certificates to complete at New Zealand's Years 12 and 13 equivalents.
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- 19 For example, students can achieve Level 3 NCEA but this does not mean they meet the University Entrance requirements. In 2019, the most common reason for not achieving University Entrance was that the three-subject requirement was not met. See: <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/publications/insights-papers/university-entrance> for further detail.
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- 20 All internal and external assessments within the subject will add up to a total of 100 points.



**Te Tāhuhu o  
te Mātauranga**  
Ministry of Education



**Te Kāwanatanga  
o Aotearoa**  
New Zealand Government

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He mea tārai e mātou te mātaurangakia rangatira  
ai, kia mana taurite ai ōna huanga.

We shape an education system that delivers  
equitable and excellent outcomes.

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