Experiences of NCEA: The Challenges and Limitations

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ABSTRACT

Aotearoa New Zealand is not exempt from the prevailing issue of student disengagement in education that has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic. Failure to adequately engage in schooling can prove harmful as it increases the risk of an individual becoming NEET. Youth not in Employment, Education and Training (NEET) is a policy concern, as it demonstrates disengagement in both education and the community which can be detrimental to the economy and society. An engaging curriculum, relevant to the 21st century, is necessary to retain student interest in school. In 2002, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was introduced as Aotearoa's main senior secondary school qualification system. The standards-based qualification attempted to address educational inequalities and respond to the need for a dynamic and engaging curriculum. Specifically, NCEA intended to improve accessibility and achievement for marginalised students, providing all individuals, regardless of ethnicity or social standing, the equal opportunity to achieve a senior secondary school qualification. NCEA's objectives are to prepare students for further training, education, the labour market and to equip them with the skills necessary to actively participate in wider society. This thesis carried out a study on NCEA. The aim of this thesis was to investigate the establishment, implementation, and reform of NCEA policy and practice, to better understand experiences, challenges and limitations encountered by students. The research questions included: How have education policies changed over time in Aotearoa?; What are some of the issues and problems associated with NCEA in practice?; According to academic commentary and past student views, to what extent has NCEA achieved its purposes and objectives? How do some past students view their experience of NCEA? This study utilised a mixed methods approach, examined relevant literature and conducted a survey of past NCEA students. The online survey was designed to evoke insights on student engagement; views on NCEA's capacity to provide access to relevant 21st century learning; fairness in assessment practices; the extent to which students felt prepared for the workplace and civic duties, school implementation of the qualification system and the NCEA Change Programmes' policy refinements. The survey was an opportunity to enhance past student voice in policy discussion. Findings revealed that the majority of participants were engaged in their learning in some capacity. However, the survey also revealed there was widespread dissatisfaction with NCEA. The literature demonstrated that although NCEA was founded on egalitarian principles and implemented to alleviate educational disparities, it continues to perpetuate pre-existing inequalities. Disengagement and NEET youth remain an ongoing issue. Participants who attended higher decile schools generally had a better NCEA experience. Participants who attended lower decile schools were dissatisfied, in part due to

the lack of available educational opportunities. This thesis argues past student experiences highlight engagement and relevance issues in the education system. Additionally, NCEA's flexible design which enables interschool variation can negatively affect marginalised individuals such as Māori, Pacific Peoples and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, this thesis argues there are historical and contemporary systemic barriers to achieving educational equality.

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List of Abbreviations

- **DE:** Department of Education
- **DPMC:** Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
- **ERO:** Education Review Office
- **EQI:** Equity Index
- **HCT:** Human Capital Theory
- **MBIE:** Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
- **MCH:** Ministry for Culture and Heritage
- **MOE:** Ministry of Education
- **NCEA:** National Certificate of Educational Achievement
- **NQF:** National Qualifications Framework
- **NZAGC:** New Zealand Association for Gifted Children
- **NZCER:** New Zealand Council for Educational Research
- **NZP:** New Zealand Parliament
- **NZQA:** New Zealand Qualifications Authority
- **NZQCF:** New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework
- **NZQF:** New Zealand National Qualifications Framework
- **OECD:** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- **OTL:** Opportunity to Learn
- **PPTA:** The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association
- **QDF:** Qualifications Development Group
- **SES:** Socioeconomic Status
- **STEM:** Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics
- **UE:** University Entrance

1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the scope and direction of my research. First, this chapter discusses the context and significance of the research. Second, provides a brief overview of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). Third, describes my positionality and research purpose. Fourth, lists the research aim and questions. Fifth, presents an historical analysis as this investigations' analytical lens. Sixth, summarises this thesis' central arguments. Seventh, this chapter concludes with a thesis outline.

Research Context and Significance

In an era of unprecedented technological advancements and change, the 21st century's competitive constantly evolving global economy presents dynamic challenges for society (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Goggin et al., 2019). There is growing demand for workers to be equipped with certain competencies and skills to thrive in the labour market and society. Education policy has become increasingly focused on the teaching of 21st century 'soft' or 'transversal' skills that are necessary to keep pace with societal changes (Chu et al., 2017). Common skills include; lifelong learning, problem solving, critical thinking, research and communication skills and digital proficiency (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Geisinger, 2016). The salience of functional literacy and numeracy is also realised. Wood and Hughson (2024) note the importance of acquiring a foundation of knowledge to allow for the proper development of skills.

Gaining an educational qualification is essential for individuals to constructively participate in society (OECD, 2021). Failure to do so can impact the likelihood of individuals becoming NEET youth, a category of young people aged 15-24 who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (MBIE, 2013; OECD, 2021).[1] The importance of gaining a secondary school qualification is evident in NEET and child poverty literature (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet [DPMC], 2020; MBIE, 2013; OECD, 2021; WEAG, 2019). "Individuals with the highest school qualifications have the lowest rates of long-term NEET" (MBIE, 2013, p. 31). Throughout Aotearoa, 60% of unqualified school leavers become long-term NEET (MBIE, 2013). The NEET rate for Aotearoa in the December 2023 quarter had increased by 3,000 individuals and sat at 10.9% for males and 14.0% for females (Stats NZ, 2024a).

[1] 'NEET' includes both the unemployed and those who are considered 'inactive' and are not seeking an occupation (OECD, 2022).

NEET youth is evidence of the disengagement occurring throughout secondary school and wider society (OECD, 2021; Strathdee, 2013). Strathdee (2013) notes, it “represents a loss of labour power, or a waste of talent that might otherwise be utilised in the economy” and is a significant policy issue (p. 30). The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) (2013), considers long-term NEET (those who are NEET for over six months) to be an immediate cause for concern (MBIE, 2013). MBIE argues there is a pattern between NEET youth and parental occupation that suggests a cycle of “intergenerational benefit dependency” (MBIE, 2019, p. 28). Māori are overrepresented in statistics, as 40% become long-term NEET (MBIE, 2013). In Aotearoa, recent data shows that individuals receiving the Jobseeker benefit are forecasted, on average, to continue to receive a benefit for 13 years (Spence, 2024). Current predictions show that long-term NEET youth may continue to be unemployed and receive financial support for almost the entirety of their working-age lives. The future cost is estimated at nearly $1 million for each individual (Spence, 2024).

Other social, economic and cultural elements can affect youth participation in education and the community (Graham et al., 2010). Several factors increase the likelihood of long-term NEET and include; becoming a teenage mother or father, having a parent beneficiary, living in a high deprivation community, attending a low decile school, being an early unqualified school-leaver and having a negative experience of school (MBIE, 2013; MBIE, 2019). Specifically in regard to education, low educational attainment increases the risk of poverty (DPMC, 2020). Failing to adequately engage students has a direct social and economic impact on society (WEAG, 2019). There is a clear connection between low socioeconomic status (SES) and student disengagement (Rata, 2009).

Student engagement is defined as; "How involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (Axelson & Flick, 2010, p. 38). There is a clear pattern between high levels of motivation, coinciding with high levels of achievement and vice versa (Lipson, 2018; Meyer et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2009; Webber et al., 2018). Useful strategies to improve engagement include enhancing student wellbeing, creating a welcoming school community, developing good relationships between schools and students, improving communication between families and catering for individual learning needs (ERO, 2021; Kiro et al., 2016; Madjar et al., 2010; Webber et al., 2018). Taking student voice into account, high expectations from teachers, parental involvement and raising self esteem are also good strategies (Kiro et al., 2016; Madjar et al., 2010; Webber et al., 2018).

Overall, students who have a positive school experience are more likely to succeed in society upon leaving school (Johnson, 2015).

Increased engagement and motivation can be seen among students when schools instil a sense of belonging within the school community, the curriculum takes culture into consideration, student education is treated seriously by the school, there are positive teacher-student relationships and student wellbeing and individual learning needs are taken into account (Axelson & Flick, 2010; ERO, 2019; Houghton, 2015; Johnson, 2015; Wylie, 2022). Parental, peer and community support also affects engagement. In contrast, disengagement directly relates to low motivation and negative attitudes towards school (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Willms, 2000). Students who attend low decile schools are more likely to become "lost to education" and reportedly feel more alienated (Seymour et al., 2020, p. 243; Willms, 2000). Inhibitors of engagement for marginalised students include "health, housing, employment, and income sufficiency" and "youth gangs, drugs, and violence" (Jensen et al., 2010, p. 57; Wylie, 2022, p. 590). These factors can be detrimental to student wellbeing, causing truancy, loss of focus in the classroom and failure to complete academic tasks.

In Aotearoa, student disengagement is particularly prevalent in Māori and Pacific students and those who live in low-income communities (Madjar et al., 2009). Engagement may be impacted by; NCEA's complexity, a curriculum that is culturally irrelevant to marginalised ethnic groups and attitudes of low decile schools towards teaching and student potential (Graham et al., 2010; Jensen et al., 2010; NZCER, 2018; PPTA, 2018; Shulruf et al., 2010). Disengagement can negatively affect an individual's achievement rates, jeopardise future opportunities and increase the risk of becoming NEET (ERO, 2021). Barriers to success include low expectations from schools, teachers, whānau and the wider community, absenteeism and lower levels of literacy (Kiro et al., 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused engagement issues, particularly for vulnerable students (ERO, 2021; Seymour et al., 2020). "Wellbeing, engagement and learning are strongly connected," so added stresses such as the difficulties of forced online learning, family financial hardship and isolation proved detrimental for students (ERO, 2021, p. 6; Seymour et al., 2020). Student attendance before COVID-19 averaged 72.8% but dropped significantly during lockdown with some reports revealing regular attendance reaching a low of 39.8% (Neilson, 2022a; Wiggins, 2023b). Attendance continues to be a problem post-pandemic. The Sixth National Government is attempting to "address the truancy crisis" and initiatives requiring weekly reporting on attendance and a campaign to convey the importance of

education are being implemented (Seymour, 2024, para. 1). The potential long-term consequences of frequent absenteeism include being "less able to work, less able to participate in society, more likely to be on benefits" (para. 3). Seymour (2024) is concerned this could create "an 80-year long shadow of people who missed out on education" (para. 3).

Another significant issue in policy debates has been the difficulties in both teaching and in assessing transversal skills (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Chu et al., 2017). Aotearoa was noted as a country taking steps to develop lifelong learning and transversal skills, but with no definitive assessments to provide a measure, they may not be a priority in the classroom (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). In NCEA's early years there was some discussion of NCEA preparing students for the global economy by assisting in 21st century lifelong learning (Hipkins, 2005; Maharey, 2007). Hipkins (2005) analysed NCEA in the context of the global knowledge society and supported strategies to encourage lifelong learning and curriculum that adjusts to the changing labour market. NCEA gives students the opportunity to pursue both a tertiary and vocational pathway and this was noted as a strength (Hipkins, 2005). However, there is a lack of recent research reporting on NCEA's level of success in helping students to develop the skills necessary to successfully navigate the 21st century.

NCEA Overview

In 2002, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) was introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand (Hipkins et al., 2016). Approximately 160,000 senior students sit NCEA annually (NZQA, 2023a). NCEA's purpose is to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve a senior secondary school qualification (Agnew, 2010; NZQA, 2022c; Shulruf et al., 2009; Shulruf et al., 2010). NCEA was implemented to alleviate systemic issues in the education system. Founded on the notion of inclusivity, NCEA aims to increase educational equality by improving accessibility and achievement, particularly for marginalised students (Agnew, 2010; Hipkins et al., 2016; Houghton, 2015; OECD, 2004; Shulruf et al., 2010). NCEA's objective is to create a pathway to enter "further study, training and employment" (MOE, n.d.-a; NZQA, n.d.-d; NZQA, 2022c, p. 3). Additional focuses include, encouraging lifelong learning, ensuring high rates of labour force participation and equipping students with the skills necessary to successfully navigate the 21st century (Agnew, 2010; Maharey, 2007; Mallard, 2000; Shulruf et al., 2010).

Research Positionality and Purpose

My own discontentment with NCEA inspired me to undertake this research. I was extremely disengaged throughout school and grew particularly resentful towards NCEA. My research motivation stems from a desire to understand if my negative experience is unique, or if it is a widespread issue. NCEA did not provide me with a good education, did not challenge me academically and was not designed to encourage creativity or critical and innovative thinking. There was no incentive to achieve, it held no relevance to the real world, and it ruined my love of learning, the latter of which I only regained at university. My anger with NCEA throughout secondary school was also due to what I saw around me. NCEA's flexibility meant that students at the same school were given a vastly different education.[2] They were treated according to their level of motivation and to the extent that teachers favoured them or believed in their ability. Consequently, this was damaging to some individual's self esteem. Students I knew had great potential became disengaged and frustrated towards their education which had a negative impact on their future.

My experience has made me passionate about trying to improve the education system. Initially, my research focused on student engagement, but the direction changed upon employing an historical analytical lens as my mode of investigation. Student engagement remains a feature of this investigation, but to a lesser extent. Conducting an historical analysis of education policy in Aotearoa led to the discovery of recurring themes throughout the country's educational history. Recognising the role that political ideology plays in shaping education policy, gaining an understanding of NCEA's system and undertaking the literature review, influenced my research direction.[3] Queries arose from exploring the literature and informed my research aim and questions. I wished to better understand how and why NCEA was created and if it is achieving its goals. The context and significance of my research focuses on 21st century relevance, NEET youth, student engagement and systemic barriers affecting educational equality. I believe contemporary education policy needs to better address these issues.

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[2] For the purposes of my thesis, the concept of flexibility is applied in two ways. First, relates to the facilitation of student subject choice and learning pathways. Second, relates to interschool variation, that is, NCEA's implementation at school level in terms of assessment methods, standards and subject choice available to students.
[3] Due to the narrow scope of this study, the majority of research was mainly confined to Aotearoa New Zealand. There is little international literature and no comparisons to different education systems overseas.

My unique position as a researcher and ex-NCEA student meant that I noticed a gap in the literature relating to past student voice in NCEA discussion. If present, it is often overshadowed by other stakeholders, for example, the 2018 Review (NZCER, 2018). Both myself and my peers' opinions are largely absent from the NCEA policy sphere and this seems an unusual phenomenon. Conner et al. (2022) states, "It is incumbent on anyone who wants to improve students' educational experiences to attend to their perspectives, solicit their ideas, and take their feedback seriously" (p. 755). In my opinion, past students can be of great assistance to policymakers, not only for their first hand experience of NCEA as students, but also because they have entered society as school-leavers and built a foundation of real-life experiences to compare NCEA to. Thus, the idea of conducting a survey specifically for past students came to mind. The survey is an important part of my investigation because it offers a new perspective for policymakers and an original contribution to NCEA literature.

Due to my personal bias towards NCEA, my position as a researcher has at times proved a limitation. The survey helped me in realising my own bias and to see that my negative experience of NCEA was not necessarily the status quo. Acknowledging personal bias is important because it has the potential to "impinge on the research at different times" (Bryman, 2016, p. 37). Reverting to existing research and drawing on the literature allowed me to critically reflect and challenge my own views.

The purpose of this thesis is to carry out an investigation of NCEA to better understand experiences, challenges and limitations. NCEA past student experiences are shared via the survey, challenges are discovered in the literature review and limitations are evident in the discussion. This thesis is relevant because there have been continuous efforts and recent policy initiatives seeking to strengthen NCEA.

Research Aim and Questions

Aim: Investigate the establishment, implementation and reform of NCEA policy and practice. The following research questions were designed to achieve this objective.

- How have education policies changed over time in Aotearoa?

- What are some of the issues and problems associated with NCEA in practice?

- According to academic commentary and past student views, to what extent has NCEA achieved its purposes and objectives?

- How do some past students view their experience of NCEA?

Analytical Lens: Historical Analysis

Openshaw (2009) warns against disregarding history in the creation, implementation and study of education policy. Historical perspectives offer valuable information for policymakers today, but such methods are not widely used, or indeed welcome in policy sectors. To better understand educational structures, it is essential to consider the external social, cultural, economic and political factors that affect education (Freire, 1998; Hipkins et al., 2016; Openshaw, 2009; Ray, 2009; Shuker, 1987b). Education policy is impacted by outside influences and does not exist in total isolation. Historical analysis emphasises how values, issues, dominant ideas and an awareness of history are necessary to progress (Lowe, 2002; McCulloch, 2011; McCulloch & Richardson, 2000; Openshaw, 2009). Historical analysis can be of service to policymakers by helping to generate new policy solutions for recurring issues. As Lowe (2002) suggests, theorists would do well to consider what is now "largely forgotten earlier work" (p. 501). McCulloch (2011) also recognises the importance of historical analysis, to not repeat the same policy errors of the past.

This form of investigation is the most appropriate analytical lens for my research because of its ability to interpret information, expose systemic issues and offer new perspectives for education policy. My thesis is located within the paradigm of historical analysis; its principles have influenced my research direction and design. Applying historical analysis results in the formation of an original study that offers a unique perspective to the field of NCEA. My historical analysis is also informed by reflections on political ideologies, including social democracy, neoliberalism and the third way. These ideologies are defined in full in the second chapter. Understanding political ideology is core to interpreting policy shifts and aids in developing an understanding of the purpose and critique of NCEA. The theoretical framework is interwoven in the historical analysis of education policy in Aotearoa and sets the foundation for understanding NCEA's establishment, implementation and policy reform.

In addition, considerations of inequality have also briefly been informed by a Marxist critique of education. Marxism provides important insights into the capitalist structure of unavoidable societal

inequality (Greaves et al., 2013; Hill, 2022; Klees, 2017; Rata, 2009). The Marxist view claims education is merely an instrument that reproduces inequality to serve capitalisms' interest (Klees, 2017; Rata, 2009). In a revolutionary sense, Marxists would support an education system that has the capacity to transform society (Hill, 2022). However, as it functions; education "conditions the child for a career of exploitation, inequality and differentials, conformity and passivity…Education prepares and cultivates future workers to become both useful and productive and obedient and docile" (Greaves et al., 2013, p. 155).

Central Arguments

The central arguments are listed below:

1. This thesis argues that past student experiences highlight engagement and relevance issues in the education system. Based on survey responses and critical literature, NCEA's capacity to engage students whilst delivering its objectives of preparation and relevance to the 21st century, is called into question.

2. This thesis argues NCEA's flexible design causes interschool variation. Dissimilarities in how NCEA is implemented across schools can negatively impact marginalised individuals, specifically Māori, Pacific and low decile students. Policy initiatives such as the Equity Index (EQI) may fail to sufficiently address prevailing educational inequalities.

3. This thesis argues that there are historical and contemporary systemic barriers to achieving educational equality. Enduring structural challenges influence persistent socioeconomic inequities in Aotearoa's education system. The pervasive nature of capitalism and neoliberalism may restrict policy attempts aimed at improving equality.

Thesis Outline

The following section briefly summarises the nine chapters that structure this thesis.

Chapter Two, *'Education Policy in Aotearoa and Theoretical Framework'* draws attention to the importance of historical analysis. The theoretical framework underpinning this research examines social

democracy, neoliberalism, Human Capital Theory (HCT) and the third way, in relation to relevant historical periods. Marxist views are briefly considered. Policy events, chronologically analysed until NCEA's inception, reveal recurring themes and prevalent issues.

Chapter Three provides a brief overview of NCEA's system, explaining when the qualification was introduced, how it functions and its evolution. This chapter reviews relevant policy documents, briefly considers consecutive Governments' political ideologies and operates as a bridge between the historical policy context of education in Aotearoa and the literature review.

Chapter Four provides a comprehensive review of literature and commentary on NCEA. Information is gathered from numerous domains, including but not limited to, primary and secondary sources, grey literature and white papers. *'NCEA: the Critique'* analyses commentary on NCEA and outlines dominant ideas, compares differing views, connects research similarities and lastly, creates a space to develop this thesis' original research.

Chapter Five details this thesis' methodology. The research approach, survey design, recruitment process, participant demographics, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations and research limitations are discussed.

Chapter Six presents the findings of the online survey. Although the survey can in no way be considered generalisable, patterns are still evident. This chapter explores the data and is categorised by survey questions.

Chapter Seven discusses the findings of the survey in relation to the literature. The discussion puts forward three central arguments (described above), based on the survey findings, historical analysis and literature review. Finally, this chapter makes a series of NCEA policy recommendations.

Chapter Eight forms this thesis' conclusion. The final chapter examines this thesis' aim, briefly summarises the research process and answers each research question. Limitations are mentioned and recommendations made for future research.

2. Education Policy in Aotearoa and Theoretical Framework

This substantial chapter presents a historical analysis of education policy trends and key decisions in Aotearoa. The theoretical framework underpins this research and examines social democracy, neoliberalism, Human Capital Theory (HCT) and the third way, in relation to relevant historical periods. Policy events are chronologically analysed until NCEA's inception. First, this chapter considers Māori approaches towards education. Second, outlines education practices in early Aotearoa. Third, details 20th century educational policies, social democracy and Pacific Peoples' education. Fourth, discusses neoliberalism's onset, HCT and resulting policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Fifth, explores the third way and early 21st century pressures instrumental in NCEA's establishment.

Education Policy Historical Analysis

Education policy is not neutral and does not exist in an independent reality, therefore, to gain insight into educational structures, it is essential to consider impactful external factors (Freire, 1998; Hipkins et al., 2016; Openshaw, 2009; Ray, 2009; Shuker, 1987b). Lowe (2002) warns that lacking core historical foundations of knowledge creates contention and uncertainty in the field of education theory. My historical analysis draws attention to prevailing ideals, issues and practices in Aotearoa's education policy environment and provides the context for NCEA. Historical analysis is important because it offers valuable insight into prevailing issues and can generate policy solutions to avoid repeating errors of the past (McCulloch, 2011; McCulloch & Richardson, 2000; Openshaw, 2009).

My analysis reveals five recurring themes; cultural assimilation, the egalitarian principle of equality of opportunity, education's contribution to maintaining democracy, labour force preparation and traditional academia's elitism over vocational subjects. These themes can be both harmonious and in tension with one another. My historical analysis is also informed by reflections on political ideologies that have influenced education policy, including social democracy, neoliberalism and the third way. Influential ideas from these ideologies are defined throughout the chapter with descriptions of key policy decisions. My analysis is also informed by Marxist ideas of education and the wider system (Greaves et al., 2013; Hill,

2022; Klees, 2017). The oppressive function of class is evident throughout the education sector—it is not neutral so serves to both mirror and perpetuate capitalist processes (Greaves et al., 2013).

Early Education

Māori Education

Māori who occupied Aotearoa centuries before British colonisation had developed effective educational approaches which focused on survival strategies and cultural, spiritual and historical dimensions that varied between iwi and hapū (Edwards et al., 2007; Hemara, 2000; Wood et al., 2021).[4] Lessons on ancestral traditions and stories were presented to students through speech (Stephenson, 2009; Swarbrick, 2012a; Wood et al., 2021). Māori considered education a 'social good' because bequeathing vital information to younger generations ensured both physical survival and the continuation of values and traditions (Edwards et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2021).

Assimilation Foundation

Early 19th century Māori considered European education an opportunity to strengthen ties between Pākehā and improve social standing (Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009; Wood et al., 2021). Māori were curious of Western technology, but missionaries claimed these advancements and subsequent material wealth were rewards from God (Binney, 1969; Simon, 2000). Consequently, some Māori abandoned their spiritual beliefs and adopted Christianity (Binney, 1969). Fear of disease also influenced religious conversion. Māori were susceptible to European illnesses which furthered missionaries' claim of Western superiority. Schooling also served as an instrument to promote the British notion of supremacy (Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009). Attempts to assimilate Māori were not yet seen in full force, but foundations had been laid by early statesmen and settlers' to "civilise" Māori through education and religion (Simon, 2000, p. 39). Missionary schools preluded implementation of national assimilatory policy.

[4] Iwi (tribe), hapū (sub-tribe).

Following the Treaty of Waitangi

In 1840, Aotearoa became a British colony under Crown sovereignty, following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009). In subsequent years, Māori educational engagement decreased due to the limitations of teaching only in Te Reo (Simon, 2000). This proved detrimental for Māori as English was vital to communicate with new settlers. In 1867, Māori education practices were reversed when the Native Schools Act enforced the teaching of Māori in English (Calman, 2012; Simon, 2000; Tearney, 2016). Initially, this policy aligned with Māori interest but eventually Te Reo was prohibited in schools altogether; assimilation was now discernible at a policy level. The Native Schools Act contradicted the country's founding egalitarian principle of racial equality (Simon, 2000).

1877 Education Act

In the late 19th century, Aotearoa's appeal as a democratic utopia attracted many English and Scottish settlers, but the country was not immune to class division and experienced rising inequality (Ministry for Culture and Heritage [MCH], 2020; Shuker, 1987a; Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009; Wood et al., 2021). The 1877 Education Act perpetuated pre-existing inequality in practice, despite the British universal schooling model serving as inspiration (Shuker 1987a; Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009; Wood et al., 2021). The Act established a Department of Education (DE) and attempted to control neglected youth running riot by making school mandatory for children aged seven to 13 (MCH, 2020; Shuker, 1987a; Simon, 2000; Swarbrick, 2012a; Tearney, 2016).

Numerous schools opened, teaching basic literacy, numeracy and gender specific subjects, but educational quality and opportunity depended on available funding, resources and school location (Simon, 2000; Tearney, 2016). Post-primary elitist schooling reserved for high achievers only, proved a false regulation as social hierarchy allowed the wealthy but not academically inclined to pay entry into further education (Shuker, 1987b; Simon, 2000). Furthermore, cultural assimilation was evident as the Act only applied to Pākehā youth (Calman, 2012; MCH, 2020; Simon, 2000). Māori education was made mandatory two decades later in 1894. The 1877 Education Act attempted to preserve democracy in the face of rising inequality, but educational opportunity was dependent on socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location and ethnicity (Calman, 2012; Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009).

1900-1970s and Social Democracy

Hogben's Influence

Inspector-General of Schools George Hogben's ideas related to egalitarianism; a principle that promotes individual and collective equality (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Hogben's values influenced education policy, evident in 1901 when the school leaving age increased to 14 and the 1903 Secondary Schools act authorising fees-free secondary school for Proficiency Examination qualifiers (Ewing, 1970; Roth, 1952; Simon, 2000; Swarbrick, 2012a; Tearney, 2016). Hogben also attempted to better connect primary and secondary curricula by rewriting the primary syllabus to include traditional subjects and 20th century practical skills (Ewing, 1970; NZ History, 2017; Stephenson, 2009; Tearney, 2016).[5] In the 1912 Cohen Commission Report, Hogben argued for secondary school vocational training as only 5% of students undertook tertiary study (Ewing, 1970; Openshaw et al., 1993; Roth, 1952; Tearney, 2016). Hogben maintained, if students were to become valuable citizens, curricula needed to meet labour force demands by teaching practical skills over academia. The working class and rural communities disagreed and argued for equality of opportunity, regardless of geographic location or potential future occupation (Openshaw et al., 1993; Roth, 1952; Tearney, 2016).

Tensions between equality of opportunity, labour force preparation, maintaining a functioning democracy and vocational subject's' conflict with academia, were evident throughout Hogben's era. Although Education Minister Josiah Hanan shared Hogben's revolutionary views, their ideas were absent from policy such as the 1914 Education Amendment Act (Lee, 2006; Openshaw et al., 1993; Tearney, 2016). Resource scarcity and an overly flexible system prohibited Hogben from solving the divide between primary and post-primary curricula (Openshaw et al., 1993; Roth, 1952). The beginning of World War I further hindered changes as education policy was overshadowed by more pressing issues (Lee, 2006).

The Great Depression and World War II

In the 1920s, vocational subjects were introduced to better link primary and post-primary curriculum (Tearney, 2016). The 1930 Atmore Report emulated the United States (US) three-tier school structure and proposed intermediate schools to facilitate connection (Swarbrick, 2012a; Swarbrick, 2012b; Tearney,

[5] 20th century practical skills transformed into 'soft skills' as the era progressed. They later developed into '21st century' and 'transversal skills' (Bolstad et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2021).

2016). In 1931, the Native Schools policy gave Māori students an opportunity to learn about their culture (Ewing, 1970; Openshaw et al., 1993; Stephenson, 2009; Tearney, 2016). The Proficiency Examination's difficulty increased—a reform later criticised for serving an agenda because academics had argued to safeguard secondary schools' prestigious status by reducing students to an elite few (McCulloch, 1990; McKenzie, 1985; Shuker, 1987a). The Great Depression restricted further policy change as resources were diverted towards urgent social and economic matters (Rata, 2009; Simon, 2000; Swarbrick, 2012b). Extreme economic hardship caused public opinion to shift, and education was progressively viewed as a nonsensical pursuit, irrelevant to societal demands (McKenzie, 1985).

In 1935, the elected social democratic First Labour Government committed to alleviating the Great Depression's impact through its centre-left policies (Simon, 2000; Swarbrick, 2012b). Aligning with egalitarianism, social democrats recognise the essential role education plays in maintaining a functioning democratic society (Greaves et al., 2013; Taylor, 2007). Therefore, attempts to minimise capitalism's inequality is also reflected in efforts to reduce educational disparity. Education Minister and future Prime Minister Peter Fraser drastically reformed the education system to restore it to pre-Depression levels (New Zealand Parliament [NZP], 2023; Tearney, 2016). Clarence Beeby, a leading architect of Fraser's changes, attributes the 1937 international conference New Education Fellowship (NEF) as the pivotal shift in Aotearoa's education policy (Beeby, 1992; Renwick, 2000; Tearney, 2016). Educational equality was discussed, and the conference confirmed to policymakers that education was indeed vital to developing and uplifting society (Beeby, 1992). In 1939, despite the education sector facing public scrutiny for unrealistic ideas, Fraser proclaimed the right to "free education" for all (Fraser, 1939, p. 3).

Due to the emergence of totalitarian regimes throughout parts of Europe and Asia in the 1930s and 1940s, Labour was wary of exhibiting what could be perceived as excessive control over the education system (Openshaw et al., 1993). Displays of fascism internationally emphasised the importance of equality in education policy and thus remained Labour's focus as it was anxious to continue to align to democratic principles (Openshaw et al., 1993; Renwick, 2000; Simon, 2000). The 1944 Thomas Report, an influential contemporary secondary school system review, argued education's purpose in preparing students for civic duties in a democracy and highlighted concerns surrounding rural schools and Māori (Codd, 2005; DE, 1944; Simon, 2000; Stephenson, 2009; Tearney, 2016).[6] University Entrance (UE) and Sixth Form Certificate were introduced and the school leaving age increased to 15 (Swarbrick, 2012c). The

[6] The 1944 Thomas Report is the Post Primary School Curriculum Report

Proficiency Examination was discontinued which improved primary curriculum flexibility and enabled all students to freely attend secondary school (Ewing, 1970; Renwick, 2000; Swarbrick, 2012b; Swarbrick, 2012c; Tearney, 2016).

At the end of his career, Beeby criticised the system for falsifying the concept of equality in education, a notion that he considered a 'myth' (Beeby, 1992; Codd et al., 2004; Openshaw, 1987; Renwick, 2000; Simon, 2000). Under Fraser, some education policy reforms proved relatively ineffectual, particularly for rural students and Māori (Simon, 2000). However, the First Labour Government was committed to upholding egalitarian social democratic ideals. Their belief in education's crucial role in maintaining democracy and efforts to offer students equality of educational opportunity were evidence of this. These themes worked harmoniously with one another during this era.

Keynesian Welfare State

Towards the end of World War II, Allied countries developed a political framework to mitigate impending social and economic struggles (Skidelsky, 2010). The 1944 Bretton Woods conference prognosis presupposed that countries could avoid potentially devastating post-war ramifications by establishing itself as a Keynesian welfare state (Codd et al., 2004; Jahan et al., n.d.; Keynes, 1931; Mullard & Spicker, 1998). John Keynes' system aimed to rescue capitalism's damaging effects by increasing state control over the labour market and implementing strategies to achieve full employment and high rates of social security.

After the Second World War, social democracy gained traction worldwide as its egalitarian values, social security strategies and opposition towards capitalism aligned with Keynesian principles (Codd et al., 2004; Manwaring et al., 2024; Taylor, 2007). Specifically, social democrats "are primarily interested in finding ways to reform capitalism out of existence" (Manwaring et al., 2024, p. 52; Taylor 2007). Both social democrats and Marxists acknowledge that class is a self-perpetuating cycle with some opportunities (including educational opportunities), only accessible to individuals in certain social positions (Hill, 2022). Regarding education, social democrats are committed to improving inequality through equality of opportunity.

In Aotearoa, Keynesian ideals were already emulated by social democratic, Fraser-led policies but Labour increased control over domestic social and economic sectors (Codd et al., 2004; Hipkins et al., 2016;

Wood et al., 2021). As a Keynesian welfare state, New Zealand committed towards achieving full employment, community wellbeing and thus, entered into a position of relative security (Hipkins et al., 2016, Taylor, 2007; Wood et al., 2021). In 1946, following a Thomas Report suggestion, School Certificate was introduced as a norms-based qualification for Form 5 (Year 11) students to test proficiency in specific subjects through end of year exams (DE, 1944; Swarbrick, 2012c).[7]

In December 1949, the First National Government came into power when the post-war recovery had transformed into an economic 'boom' (NZP, 2023; Ray, 2009). Many New Zealanders worked in agriculture as the industry dominated Aotearoa's export market (Hipkins et al., 2016). The Korean War caused the United States (US) to purchase greater quantities of wool to meet wartime demands (Ray, 2009). National financed the building of more schools with export funds to accommodate a rising population and student retention rate (Hipkins et al., 2016; Tearney, 2016). In 1952, the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) was established to support schools' and teachers with the amalgamated technical and academic subjects in the new secondary school curriculum (Beeby, 1992; Tearney, 2016).

The 1962 Currie Report advocated for continued state control over the education system and affirmed New Zealand's commitment to egalitarianism, evident through policymakers' dedication towards achieving educational equality (DE, 1962; Ray, 2009; Simon, 2000).[8] The Report also identified students such as Māori, individuals with disabilities, those living rurally or in newly established working-class suburbs as at-risk of responding negatively to education. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the growing need for a labour workforce led to the development of urban areas, housing mainly blue-collar workers and many Māori and Pacific Peoples moved to these suburbs for job prospects (Ray, 2009; Simon, 2000). The Native Schools Act was subsequently disbanded as more Māori shifted away from the rural sector (Ray, 2009). Growing diversity in urban areas created disparities between Māori, Pacific Peoples and Pākehā (Ray, 2009).

The 1901 Pacific Islands Annexation Act involved Aotearoa in Pacific education (Coxon & Mara, 2000). Traditionally, like Māori, learning had a strong social aspect and Pacific knowledge was passed to younger generations through demonstration and speech (Thomas, 1993). Pacific Peoples welcomed the introduction of text-based literacy, but educational quality was disappointing and did not reflect student

[7] Norms-based assessment results are determined by cross-student comparison (Te Kete Ipurangi [TKI], n.d.).
[8] The Currie Report is the *Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand* (DE, 1962).

academic ability as learning proved an isolating experience (Coxon & Mara, 2000; Thomas, 1993). Pacific leaders' objections were ignored by policy administrators and the false assumption that higher education was unwelcome prevailed. Restricting education was an assimilatory strategy to protect Aotearoa's authority in the Pacific (Coxon & Mara, 2000). Positive change only transpired post-war when Peter Fraser recognised the necessity to improve education in the Pacific (Beeby, 1992).

The 1960s and 1970s placed great strain on Aotearoa's welfare state (Ray, 2009). In 1966, the plummeting price of wool affected the export market. The Vietnam War, nuclear testing dissent and Māori land protests caused social unrest (Hipkins et al., 2016; Ray, 2009). In 1973, the rising cost of living worsened when Britain decided to join the European Economic Community. Aotearoa lost its largest trade partner and in that same year, the Yom Kippur war created an oil crisis after dramatic price increases (NZ History, 2018; Ray, 2009). The economic shocks caused "growing unemployment, social unrest, and financial insecurity" (Hipkins et al., 2016, p. 13). Egalitarian principles; so crucial in preserving Aotearoa as a social democracy, were placed under pressure and the Keynesian state started to disintegrate (Ray, 2009).

Education's purpose in the Keynesian welfare state was to ensure economic stability through labour market contribution and upholding social democratic ideals (Codd, 2005). Citizens continued to view education as a means of preparation for the labour force and this was strongly reflected in the curriculum (Shuker, 1987b; Simon, 2000). The cultural assimilation of Māori and Pacific Peoples was also evident throughout this era. Widening ethnic and socioeconomic division caused worsening educational disparities. In 1974, the Educational Development Conference raised concerns over the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational opportunity (Ray, 2009). The challenges Aotearoa faced during these decades caused both the Third Labour Government (1972-1975) and Third National Government (1975-1984) to increase borrowing at the cost of rising national debt (Hipkins et al., 2016; MCH, 2015; NZP, 2023; Wood et al., 2021). Economic shocks, felt domestically and globally, challenged the viability of the Keynesian welfare state (Codd, 2005).

Neoliberalism's Rise and Human Capital Theory

Born out of liberalist ideals from the 17th to 19th centuries, neoliberalism gained traction when the Keynesian welfare state was challenged by economic crises in the 1970s (Hipkins et al., 2016; Lauder, 1990; Olssen, 2001; Ray, 2009). Neoliberalism can be defined as a right-wing political and economic

ideology that supports individual freedom, active citizenship, the privatisation of assets and labour market deregulation (Alcock et al., 2012; Davies & Bansel, 2007). Neoliberals were averse to market restrictions during this time and advocated for an ungoverned free market. As the Marxist view espouses, the labour market is a commodity in itself (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). Under neoliberalism, the oppressive nature of capitalism was evident in the increasingly unequal education system (Greaves et al., 2013).

Neoliberalism's dominance throughout the 1980s and 1990s was apparent through the growing individualism of states and an increasingly competitive international market (Auerbach, 2007). Early 1980s policies struggled to rectify rising inflation and economic stagnation (Ray, 2009). In 1984, the Fourth Labour Government implemented 'New Right' neoliberal policies to deregulate the economy (Hipkins et al., 2016; Lauder, 1990; Ray, 2009). Neoliberals reasoned that social, political and educational domains situated in competitive environments would generate greater labour market profit (Fitzsimons, 2006). Aotearoa acknowledged the necessity for sweeping educational reforms to engage in an increasingly competitive environment (Philips, 2003). Education in a neoliberal context is considered a private good; a marketable product where stakeholders become "consumers" (Davies & Bansel, 2007; McKenzie et al., 1996, p. 11; Openshaw, 2009, p. Vi; Wood et al., 2021). Economic prosperity was thought to be achieved by "transforming education into a product that can be bought and sold like anything else" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254; Shuker, 1987b).

Education as capital relates to Human Capital Theory which recognises that investing in education advances economic growth (Olssen, 2001). HCT was founded in the 1960s and was developed by Schultz and Becker and sees humans as generators of capital (Gillies, 2017; Olssen, 2001). Under HCT, individual productivity increases when intellectual capital improves—in other words, the labour market benefits if a society is an educated 'knowledge economy' (Olssen, 2001). HCT "treats education and training as an investment and emphasises the direct impact of skill creation on productivity" (Olssen, 2001, p. 10). Education is viewed as both a private and public good; 'private' due to its capacity to generate profit and improve individual circumstances, 'public' because it can uplift society by advancing the economy (Gillies, 2017; Olssen, 2001).

HCT is particularly relevant to the diverse 21st century workforce and can significantly impact education policy with ideas involving the 'knowledge economy'. The shifting nature of labour from physical to cognitive work has placed more emphasis on the importance of education. Investing in education is key to a thriving economy able to keep pace with a dynamic global arena (Gillies, 2017). The concept of humans

as capital aligns with the Marxist view of the masses' function in labour production (Greaves et al., 2013). However, HCT entertains the notion that any individual can rise to the ruling capitalist class (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). Bowles and Gintis (1975) argue that this cannot be achieved due to the nature of supply, demand and production in a capitalist society.

Neoliberal Influence on Education Policy

The 1986 *Learning and Achieving* report evaluated future education, curriculum flexibility and advocated for achievement-based internal assessment (Philips, 2003). At the time the report was published, approximately one third of school leavers did not procure an official qualification (OECD, 2004). In 1987, Education Minister Russell Marshall enacted a nationwide review of the education system that garnered 21,000 responses, but ultimately proved ineffectual within the policymaking sphere (DE, 1987; Simon, 2000). Public feedback showed a general outcry against the current system with pleas to better cater for different cultures and improve equality of educational opportunity. However, neoconservatives voiced their dissent towards culturally diverse curriculums, viewing "equality of opportunity with a lowering of standards" (Simon, 2000, p. 61).

Neoliberalism's influence was clear in Government reports such as The Treasury's 1987 *Brief to the Incoming Government* in which the 294-page Volume II focused solely on education (Olssen, 2001; Ray, 2009; Treasury, 1987). The Treasury (1987) alleged "education is not in fact a 'public good'" and it "shares the main characteristics of other commodities traded in the marketplace" (pp. 32-33). A year later, the National Curriculum Statement discussed 'school-based curriculum development' (Tearney, 2016). In 1988, *Administering for Excellence* supported the complete overhaul of educational structures and advised greater authority should be given to individual schools (Picot Report, 1988; Ray, 2009; Simon, 2000).[9]

The 1989 Education Act and Tomorrow's Schools disbanded the DE in favour of a scaled-down Ministry of Education (MOE) and Boards of Trustees to oversee the running of individual schools was also introduced (Gordon, 1992; Hipkins et al., 2016; Ray, 2009; Simon, 2000). The MOE assigned administerial responsibility of schools to local communities, represented by a Board of Trustees and schools would receive bulk funding to manage yearly costs (Gordon, 1992; Ray, 2009; Wood et al., 2021).

[9] *Administering for Excellence* or *The Picot Report* (New Zealand Taskforce to Review Education Administration, 1988).

This individualistic approach to school governance contradicts the Marxist view that supports state control of institutions (Hill, 2022). Likewise, Marxists also oppose school privatisation.

In 1989, the Education Review Office (ERO) was also established to investigate and measure school performance (ERO, 2016; MOE, 1989). The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was created the same year to administer secondary school qualifications and assist students and school leavers (Philips, 2003; MOE, 1989; NZQA, 2023b).[10] During neoliberalism's early years, Māori recognised national educational structures were not empowering Māori students (Tearney, 2016; Wood et al., 2021). In an attempt to improve educational outcomes for Māori students, Māori-medium schools were introduced. The neoliberal agenda was reflected in numerous education reports and resulting policies, particularly by decentralising schools and handing responsibility to communities (Ray, 2009; Wood et al., 2021).

The 1990s

The 1990s political environment influenced the education system (Crooks, 2002; PPTA, 2015; Wood et al., 2021). Global economic fluctuations caused rising unemployment, yielding a revision of the state's role in education and students were encouraged to remain in school for longer to increase their economic value (Crooks, 2002; Hipkins et al., 2016; Strathdee, 2013). Labour market competitiveness had particularly impacted youth as occupations now needed a proven degree of skill (Hipkins et al., 2016). In 1989, the school-leaving age was raised to 16 and a year later, as per neoliberal ideals, university fees were introduced so tertiary education became a commodity that students had to pay for (Swarbrick, 2012b; Tearney, 2016; Wood et al., 2021). These policy changes were a result of the growing emphasis on education to prepare for a progressively competitive workforce (Swarbrick, 2012b; Tearney, 2016). The neoliberal objective of preparation aligns with Marxist critiques on educations' purpose to ready individuals for the production of capital (Greaves et al., 2013).

In November 1990, a conservative Fourth National Government came into power and announced a series of educational strategies furthering competitiveness between educational institutions (Gordon, 1992; MOE, 1990; NZP, 2023). The Sexton Report (1990) tried to persuade the MOE to relinquish all decision making power to schools so that its only function was fund distribution (Gordon, 1992). Furthermore, it argued against improving educational outcomes for marginalised groups such as women and Māori and

[10] NZQA was first called the National Education Qualifications Authority.

advocated for increased competition between students (Gordon, 1992; Sexton, 1990). The 1991 Budget claimed that education in Aotearoa focused too much on societal inequalities when it needed to better prepare students for an increasingly competitive labour force (Gordon, 1992). Thus, equality and labour force preparation were themes in tension with one another.

Neoliberal educational policies continued to disadvantage minority groups and those in lower socioeconomic positions. Gordon (1992) argues that due to its competitive nature, Tomorrow's Schools contradicted itself by seemingly advocating for equity. The policy gave no forethought to pre-existing statuses of schools upon policy enactment. The decile system was introduced in 1995 as a funding tool for schools in different socioeconomic areas (MOE, n.d.-e; Ray, 2009). Ray (2009) opposes policy initiatives based on neoliberal approaches that only provide funding as a stand-alone solution to societal issues. The decile system did not improve persisting educational inequalities. Throughout history, New Zealand's prevailing ideology in education was one of egalitarianism and the 'equality of opportunity' (Codd et al., 2004). Under neoliberalism, education became about 'equity' but this could easily be considered a strategy to avoid addressing perpetuating inequalities (Simon, 2000).

In the 1990s, NZQA introduced the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which was considered revolutionary due to its unorthodox use of 'standards' as learning categories and 'credits' to measure 'standard' achievement that would go towards their overall qualification (OECD, 2004; Philips, 2003).[11] NQF endeavoured to provide a comprehensive curriculum and assessment structure that gave users a degree of flexibility (Hipkins et al., 2016; Philip, 2003). The standards-based approach and the increased use of internal assessments would later become the format for NCEA, replacing norms-based examinations such as New Zealand Bursary and School Certificate (Hipkins et al., 2016).[12] Changes were in part inspired by Australia's education structure, but also by Scotland's approach to vocational education that focused on "units of study building towards a single national certificate" (OECD, 2004, p. 6). Scotland's learner-centred educational framework was taught and tested through specific curricula and assessment requirements (OECD, 2004).

In the contemporary neoliberal era, educational attainment became increasingly important for individuals to be considered employable in a competitive labour market (Hipkins et al., 2016). The MOE recognised

[11] NQF was unified in 2010 and became the New Zealand National Qualifications Framework (NZQF) (NZQA, 2023c). In 2022, it became the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF).
[12] Standards-based assessment tests students against predetermined exemplars and criteria (TKI, n.d.).

the need for a comprehensive academic qualification for school leavers that would benefit them in attaining employment or entering further study and training (Hipkins et al., 2016). Throughout the neoliberal era, labour force preparation and equality of educational opportunity were constantly in tension with one another.

21st Century: NCEA as a Solution? The Third Way

As the world entered the 21st century, globalisation's expansion created an increasingly aggressive international labour market (Hipkins et al., 2016). The workforce evolved as consumer demand shifted and the formation of new sectors forced pre-existing fields to better utilise technological advancements. British political economist Anthony Giddens devised the third way political ideology to deal with contemporary pressures by providing a balance between left-wing state regulation and right-wing neoliberal market-oriented policies (Fitzsimons, 2006; Piercy et al., 2017; Ray, 2009). The third way attempts to stabilise societal needs with economic needs by supporting social democracy and neoliberalism's positive characteristics, whilst minimising their negative aspects (Fitzsimons, 2006; Piercy et al., 2017). Supported ideals include "equality of opportunity and social cohesion" (social democratic) and the commitment to success achieved through individualism and labour productivity (neoliberalism) (Piercy et al., 2017, p. 54). The third way rejects the stagnation of social democracy and neoliberalism's potential to fracture society (Giddens, 1998; Piercy et al., 2017).

The growing necessity for social and structural change led the Fifth Labour Government (1999-2008) to consider balancing "economic competitiveness with social justice" (Piercy et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2021, p. 278). Prime Minister Helen Clark diverged from radical neoliberal reforms by adopting the third way (Codd, 2005; Fitzsimons, 2006; Ray, 2009). Although influenced by Tony Blair's third way in the United Kingdom (UK), Labour introduced the ideology as its own original adaption, specific to Aotearoa (Fitzsimons, 2006; Piercy et al., 2017). The third way intended to engender both a prospering society and competitive economy (Fitzsimons, 2006). However, Piercy et al. (2017) note that the third way in Aotearoa was ultimately unsuccessful in improving outcomes for all marginalised individuals and failed to adequately bridge between social equality and a successful labour market.

As Aotearoa was not exempt from contemporary global challenges, policymakers realised education policy development was necessary (Codd et al., 2004; Hipkins et al., 2016). Education's prominent role in third way ideology involved maintaining a functioning democracy while expanding state competitiveness

at a transnational level (Codd et al., 2004; Fitzsimons, 2006). Despite efforts to provide students with equal opportunities, debates emerged over the creation of a 'knowledge economy' to better manage against competitive labour markets (Ray, 2009). Labour's third way educational approach aligned with historical egalitarian underpinnings while operating in a neoliberal framework (Ray, 2009).

Neoliberal strategies were found to disadvantage students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Hipkins et al., 2016; Ray, 2009). The Tomorrow's Schools reforms were subsequently disbanded, and Labour introduced the Education Amendment Act 2000 (MOE, 2000; Wood et al., 2021). The Achievement 2001 initiative established the Qualifications Development Group (QDG), tasked with creating curriculum standards and marking criteria for what was to become the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) (Philips, 2003; PPTA, 2015). NCEA emerged as a contemporary education policy influenced by the third way. Senior student qualifications such as New Zealand Bursary, School Certificate and Sixth Form Certificate were replaced as they were unable to meet rapidly changing environments and were no longer fit for purpose (Hipkins et al., 2016; NZQA, n.d.-a). Policymakers recognised the need to give marginalised and historically disadvantaged students a chance to achieve a senior secondary school qualification. Therefore, NCEA was designed with the objective in mind of improving achievement rates for Māori, Pacific Peoples and those from high deprivation communities (Hipkins et al., 2016; Houghton, 2015). NCEA was expected to align all prevailing themes in Aotearoa's educational history such as cultural assimilation, maintaining democracy, preparation for the workforce, balancing vocational and academic subjects and equality of opportunity.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a theoretical framework and historical policy context of Aotearoa's education system. Historical analysis is important to reveal how external factors and political ideology influence education policy. Examining key events and resulting policies led to the discovery of five recurring themes; cultural assimilation, equality of opportunity, maintaining democracy, labour force preparation and traditional academia's elitism over vocational subjects. The following chapter will present an overview of the NCEA system, explaining when the qualification was introduced, how it operates and its evolution.

3. NCEA: THE SYSTEM

This chapter provides a brief overview of NCEA's system, explaining when the qualification was introduced, how it operates and its evolution. *'NCEA: the System'* reviews relevant policy documents and operates as a bridge between the historical policy context of education in Aotearoa and the literature review. First, the chapter outlines NCEA's structure. Second, explores NCEA's purpose and objectives. Third, considers the implementation, design and reform of NCEA, influenced by respective Fifth National and Sixth Labour Governments. Fourth, describes recent policy reforms including the 2018 Review, 2024 Change Programme and new Equity Index. These reforms are evidence of the continued commitment to improving NCEA and confirms this thesis' relevance.

NCEA'S STRUCTURE

In 2002, NCEA was introduced as Aotearoa's main senior student standards-based qualification and was implemented nationwide by 2004 (Hipkins et al., 2016; OECD, 2004). NCEA generally takes three years to complete with Level 1 Year 11 students progressing to Level 2 in Year 12 and Level 3 in Year 13 (MOE, n.d.-a). Students select from a variety of subjects and are required to sit specific assessments known as standards. Achievement standards use a four-point grading system with one fail grade; Not Achieved and three pass grades in ranked order; Achieved, Merit and Excellence (NAME). Teachers assess internal Achievement standards, whereas external moderators assess end of year exams, portfolios and reports (NZQA, 2022b).[13] In contrast, Unit standards are marked internally by the school and Achieved is the only awarded pass grade (NZQA, n.d.-b). In 2023, there were 166 subjects on offer, consisting of 448 external and 6,835 internal standards (NZQA, personal communication, July 21, 2023).

When students pass a standard, they receive credits. Obtaining a relevant NCEA Level certificate requires a 60 credit minimum (MOE, n.d.-a; MOE, n.d.-f). In 2007, certificate endorsements were introduced to better recognise achievement (NZQA, 2014; NZQA, 2024a). Prior to this, Achieved was the only pass grade, but Merit and Excellence were added for variation (Downes, 2015). To receive a certificate endorsement, students need to acquire a minimum of 50 Merit or Excellence credits (NZQA, 2024a). In 2011, course endorsements for specific subjects were introduced with the intention of increasing student

[13] Exams are not mandatory but can assess a total of three standards for each subject, so it is an opportunity for bulk credit attainment (NZQA, n.d.-b).

motivation and engagement (Downes, 2015; Graham et al., 2010; ERO, 2019; NZQA, 2014). Students must acquire a minimum of 14 credits in a particular subject at any pass grade to be awarded a relevant course endorsement (NZQA, 2024a).

In 2024, as part of the Change Programme (discussed below), students must now meet the 20 credit literacy and numeracy co-requisite requirements before being awarded an NCEA qualification (MOE, n.d.-f; NQA, 2024b). The 10 credits from literacy or Te Reo Matatini and 10 from Numeracy or Pāngarau standards are compulsory but exist outside the NCEA qualification. University Entrance (UE) is still required as a prerequisite for tertiary study (NZQA, 2023d; OECD, 2004). UE is awarded to students who pass Level 3 and accumulate 14 credits in three UE-approved subjects (NZQA, 2023d). A total of 10 Numeracy credits from Level 1 or higher and 10 Literacy credits from Level 2 or higher are also required.

Purpose and Objectives

NCEA was introduced to alleviate systemic issues in Aotearoa's education system. Previous education qualifications disadvantaged marginalised groups including Māori, Pacific Peoples and those from lower socioeconomic communities and NCEA was designed to improve achievement rates for these students (Hipkins et al., 2016; Houghton, 2015; Shulruf et al., 2010). As well as reducing educational disparities, it was intended that NCEA would increase the number of students attaining a formal qualification (Agnew, 2010; Alison, 2018; Graham et al., 2010; Hipkins et al., 2016; Shulruf et al., 2009; Shulruf et al., 2010). NCEA endeavoured to "offer a qualification that is fit for purpose for all school leavers" (NZCER, 2018, p. 14). NCEA's purpose is to ensure that all students, despite their ethnicity or social standing, have an equal opportunity to achieve a senior secondary school qualification (Agnew, 2010; NZQA, 2022c; Shulruf et al., 2009; Shulruf et al., 2010).

The NCEA qualification responded to the changing demands for knowledge in the 21st century and was part of a broader shift in education policy. Education's focus became centred around helping students develop necessary skills to successfully navigate the 21st century, whilst also improving inequality (Maharey, 2003). NCEA aims to prepare students for the 21st century by giving them the skills necessary to participate in the labour market and to take an active place in a changing society (Maharey, 2007; Mallard, 2000; Shulruf et al., 2010). The necessity for students to be proficient in literacy and numeracy was also realised in order to prepare them for lifelong learning. NCEA's objective is to create a pathway to enter "further study, training and employment" (MOE, n.d.-a; NZQA, n.d.-d; NZQA, 2022c, p. 3).

Other objectives include promoting lifelong learners and enabling high rates of participation in the workforce (Agnew, 2010; Shulruf et al., 2009; Shulruf et al., 2010). NCEA was expected to promote lifelong learning as its comprehensive curriculum included both academic and less orthodox vocational subjects (Nusche et al., 2012; OECD, 2004). The pertinence of historic systems had been questioned, so it was necessary for NCEA to deliver a comprehensive curriculum (Lipson, 2018). NCEA allows students to pursue both traditional and more unconventional learning pathways (Hipkins, et al., 2016). NCEA also aimed to enhance engagement as students are able to select their direction of study (Meyer et al., 2006).

Fifth National Government

The right-wing Fifth National Government (2008-2017) was known for its business approach to policy and governorship (Wood et al., 2021). Financial compensation for "high-performing teachers and principals" was a policy enacted during National's era (p. 276). Aotearoa's overarching neoliberal framework remained firmly in place, evident in adjustments to the education sector. There were two policy decisions of note that affected NCEA. Firstly, in 2012, as part of the Better Public Services initiatives, National set an 85% pass rate target for NCEA Level 2, 3 and Scholarship (MOE, 2012). Secondly, changes to UE requirements were phased into practice between 2012 and 2014 in an attempt to better prepare students for tertiary study (New Zealand Government [NZG], n.d.). The literacy credit amount increased and students needed to attain 14 credits from three UE-approved subjects instead of the previous two (NZG, n.d.; RNZ, 2015).

Sixth Labour Government

The social democratic Sixth Labour Government (2017-2023) attempted to shift away from previous neoliberal policies (Manwaring et al., 2024). Social democrats have evolved to match the 21st century globalised world by adopting new policy initiatives, but values remained traditional for Jacinda Ardern's Labour, including social justice, security and equality. However, despite promoting ideals and policies to alleviate structural inequalities, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and forthcoming recession meant Labour failed to achieve these aims (Manwaring et al., 2024; Wood et al., 2021). Regarding education, Labour enacted a national review of NCEA in 2018 and introduced policy reforms including the NCEA Change Programme and new Equity Index.

2018 Review

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) undertook a 2018 Review, aiming to shed light on concerns such as student and teacher workload, over-assessment, curriculum confusion and doubts that necessary skills were being taught for lifelong learning (NZCER, 2018). As part of the Education Conversation, thousands across Aotearoa gave their opinion on NCEA.[14] The Review reported; "37% of people agree that NCEA works well" and a third agreed in some capacity that "NCEA helps good teaching and learning to happen" (p. 5-6). However, 33% and 38% respectively, disagreed but this was not pointed out. 84% agreed they understood the NCEA system. 51% valued NCEA as a qualification, believing it to be credible at a national and international level. The refugee families focus group stated NCEA "is the best system ever — one of the best systems in the world" (p. 10).

NCEA was considered a fairer qualification than historic systems as every student has the opportunity to succeed. An NCEA graduate stated; "It is achievable for everyone" (p. 9). Flexibility was a particular strength as students can pursue their own interests and academic pathways. Participants supported internal assessments, as working towards credits throughout the year decreased external exam pressure. NCEA was found to "prepare students for further study, life, and work" as "Students can learn things as part of their NCEA programmes that provide clear pathways into further education, training, and employment" (p. 10).

According to participants, areas in need of improvement included; teacher and student workload, over-assessment, credit accumulation and credit value. The finding that NCEA prepares students for the future is contradicted within the Review, for example, schools with insufficient resources are unable to offer students the same academic choices as other schools. Likewise, academic pathways created by NCEA's flexibility can restrict future opportunities. Participants supported strengthening NCEA through increasing support, structural changes, improving inclusivity and pathway opportunities, less assessment focus, more "real-world learning" and altering credit value to reflect assessment difficulty (NZCER, 2018, p. 19). The Review presented '6 Big Opportunities' that became the basis for the NCEA Change Programme (NZCER, 2018).

[14] Responses were collected from NCEA students, graduates, teachers, parents, principals, employers, universities and focus groups (NZCER, 2018).

NCEA Change Programme

The NCEA Change Programme is a proposed policy that has taken the 2018 NCEA Review into account and has attempted to refine NCEA (MOE, n.d.-g; NZCER, 2018). The policy is invested in "making a series of changes to improve well-being, equity, coherence, pathways and credibility — for students and teachers alike" (MOE, n.d.-g, para. 1).

The reform proposes seven changes:

1. NCEA Accessibility: Removing barriers to learning, particularly for students with disabilities
2. Equality for mātauranga Māori: More resources and support for teachers, and Māori learners
3. Literacy and numeracy levels: Compulsory standards to improve student capability
4. Fewer, larger standards: New standards created in place of existing ones
5. Structure simplification: Changes to resubmissions criteria and credit amount
6. Vocational Pathways Award: Clarity over transitions into higher level education
7. Level 1: NCEA Level 1 as an optional qualification (MOE, n.d.-g; NZCER, 2019).

Improving equity for Māori is a central focus but the Change Programme makes no mention of better supporting Pacific or low decile students (Kenny, 2021; NZCER, 2019). To prepare students for their future, the new compulsory literacy and numeracy standards aim to strengthen functional reading, writing and mathematics (NZCER, 2019). Initially, the standards were meant as prerequisites for NCEA study, but can now be undertaken from Year 7 through to Year 13. The number of credits required to pass NCEA Levels has reduced from 80 to 60. The Change Programme also intends to streamline NCEA's design by disallowing credit carry over between levels. An even split between internal and external assessments is now required to better balance Achievement standards. The Vocational Pathways (VP) award offers students an alternative to UE (NZCER, 2019).

New Equity Index

The new Equity Index (EQI) is a systematic change to replace the decile system and allocate a more equitable level of funding for students (MOE, n.d.-e). In 1995, the decile system was introduced and was measured using Census socioeconomic status data. Operating on a ten-point scale, low decile schools had a higher ratio of high-deprivation students and vice versa (Jones & Singh, 2014). The decile system was

considered outdated as it inaccurately measured school equity and quality levels (Milne, 2022; Venuto, 2022). Deciles also "led to a bit of stigma towards schools. People were misinterpreting it as a measure of educational quality" (Venuto, 2022, para. 9; also see MOE, n.d.-e, p. 3).

The motive behind the EQI is to provide the most at-risk students and schools with equitable funding (MOE, n.d.-e). The EQI will operate on a 226 point variation, ranging from 344-569, which will remove funding cliffs that existed between decile bands.[15] Schools that fall between 344-379 points receive no funding (MOE, 2023a; MOE, 2023b). Schools that reach the 380 point threshold are eligible for funding to the value of $1.00 per student, upwards of $1,029.30 per student per annum for schools listed as a 569 rating (MOE, 2023a; MOE, 2023b). The EQI factors in a total of 37 weighted socioeconomic and educational variables in an effort to "allocate resources where they are most needed" (MOE, n.d.-d; MOE, 2023b; Williams, 2022, para. 3). The EQI separates students by ethnicity, then funding is applied based on weighted factors, such as parental income level, beneficiary status, incarceration and number of children. Other factors include Youth Justice, Care and Protection and Oranga Tamariki involvement, immigration status and frequency of moving areas (MOE, n.d.-d).

Based on ethnic groups, Māori who make up 22% of the school population receive the highest level of funding, followed by New Zealand European, Pacific, Asian, MELAA and Other consecutively (MOE, n.d.-b; MOE, n.d.-c).[16] Under the decile system, Pacific learners had the highest proportion of allocated funding as a high percentage live in poverty (MOE, n.d.-c; Stats NZ, 2023). Child poverty statistics show between 19.4% and 25.6% of Pacific children live in poverty and between 14.5% and 18.8% of Māori children live in poverty (Stats NZ, 2023). The Pasifika Principals Association has been investigating the potential consequences for the schools within its organisation that face the loss of large amounts of funding (Milne, 2022).[17] Under the EQI, funding will decrease for some schools, equivalent to six decile ratings. The EQI significantly increases the average funding for Māori students by 57% (MOE, n.d.-b).

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the NCEA system and provides a bridge between the historical policy context and the literature review. NCEA's structure, purposes and objectives, Government

[15] 'Funding cliffs' define the stark differences in funding between consecutive deciles (MOE, n.d.-e).
[16] MELAA stands for Middle Eastern/Latin American/African.
[17] "Some [member schools] are losing six figures in annual operational funding, and some are losing as many as five full time-equivalent teaching positions" (Milne, 2022, para. 10).

influence and recent policies were outlined. Policies aimed at improving NCEA's efficacy and credibility demonstrate governments' continued commitment to the education system. Policy efforts to refine NCEA confirms this thesis' relevance. The following chapter analyses critical commentary on NCEA. Notable reports, studies, publications and debates will be examined as part of the literature review.

4. NCEA: THE CRITIQUE

This chapter critically analyses commentary on NCEA since its introduction in 2002. Specifically, this literature review outlines dominant ideas, compares differing views, connects research similarities and lastly, creates a space to develop this thesis' original research. NCEA's documented strengths; robustness, credibility, flexibility and inclusivity are discussed. Unit and Achievement standards and Internal and External assessments are examined in more detail than the previous chapter. Cultural considerations into underachievement are identified. Other themes explored include the 85% pass rate target, credit farming, issues for teachers and transitioning to tertiary study. The purpose of this chapter is to examine and explore existing scholarship to gain a thorough understanding of NCEA.

DOCUMENTED STRENGTHS OF NCEA

The Ministry of Education's (MOE) investment in NCEA's success and efficacy is evident through continued efforts seeking to refine it as an education qualification (Nusche et al., 2012; OECD, 2004). Introducing endorsements, changing UE requirements, conducting a public review and introducing the recent NCEA Change Programme are policies aimed at improving NCEA (see Chapter Three). NCEA's purpose is based on the egalitarian principle of equality of opportunity, while its objective is one of preparation for active participation in the labour market and society (see Chapter Three). The wide array of subjects and standards on offer are indicative of a detailed, comprehensive curriculum. NCEA's flexible design is a well-documented strength allowing students to create their own tertiary and vocational academic pathways according to their chosen interests (ERO, 2019; Hipkins, 2005; NZCER, 2018).

Teachers recognise the benefit of NCEA compared to historic norm-referenced systems because it allows unlimited passes if academic criteria is met in assessments (PPTA, 2015). NCEA is seen as inclusive, giving all students the opportunity to achieve. As a result, students are staying in secondary school longer than they had historically and there are higher rates of school leavers attaining a senior secondary school qualification (Hipkins et al., 2016; Lipson, 2018). However, NCEA's documented strengths are often critiqued by commentators in the literature. For example, Hipkins et al. (2016) argues NCEA's story is complex and "has only been partially successful in its attempt to address the challenges and practices of the past" (p. 199). Research may make note of NCEA's attributes, but it is common for publications to focus on areas in need of improvement.

"Robust" and "Credible" — International Perspectives?

Education agencies consider NCEA a 'robust' and 'credible' qualification system at a domestic and international level (Hipkins, 2019; MOE, n.d.-a; MOE, n.d.-g; NZCER, 2018; NZQA, 2012; NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2015; NZQA, 2022a; NZQA, 2023a). In recent Annual Reports, NZQA state; "NCEA is widely considered credible and robust, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and overseas" (NZQA, 2022a, para. 1; NZQA, 2023a, para. 1). However, the 2010 OECD report this claim is based on *(Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education)*, does not explicitly provide an international analysis of NCEA (Nusche et al., 2012). Rather, perspectives regarding NCEA within the context of Aotearoa are presented to an international audience. Although the OECD undertook the review, this fact alone does not endorse the claim that; 'NCEA is widely regarded by other countries for its robustness and credibility.' The OECD review did not provide a comparison to education systems overseas or evaluate international perspectives on NCEA (Nusche et al., 2012). Yet, government agencies continue to promote NCEA using the same rhetoric from a report over a decade old. The MOE has not participated in another OECD education evaluation of this style since.

Flexibility

NCEA was created to provide students with a 'flexible' and 'inclusive' education system (Hipkins, et al., 2016; Lipson, 2018). Schools can select an array of standards and subjects, essentially designing a unique curriculum within the broader NCEA framework. Curriculum design versatility and resulting varied approaches employed to gain a qualification is the reason why NCEA is considered 'flexible' (Lipson, 2018). "The success of NCEA is the flexibility of courses. We can customise courses for interests and abilities." (ERO, 2019; p. 7). NCEA's flexibility is traditionally presented as its greatest strength and is thought to provide students with an engaging learning experience (Johnston, 2016a; NZCER, 2018).

Flexibility, however, has been criticised as NCEA's "greatest weakness" (Johnson, 2016a**,** para. 22; Lipson, 2018, para. 7). In particular, right-wing commentators from the New Zealand Initiative (NZI) argue that flexibility may not enable inclusivity for all students and can negatively impact the high-risk students NCEA was specifically designed for (Johnson, 2016a; Lipson, 2018). Flexibility can restrict opportunities, particularly for marginalised students from low decile schools who do not have the same

OTL (Opportunity to Learn) that higher decile schools have (Johnston, 2016b; Lipson, 2018).[18] Moreover, flexibility is restricted by factors such as timetable clashes and meeting necessary requirements for entry into some subjects (Jensen et al., 2010). School individuality in curriculum design undermines the capacity of the NCEA system to deliver consistent core national standards (Jensen et al., 2010; Lipson, 2018). While NCEA is a national qualification, it does not deliver the same education to students nationwide.

Inclusivity: Decile Differences

NZQA's Annual Reports show a distinct disparity between decile pass rates (See Appendix A for annual pass rates) (NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a). Decile 1-3 schools consistently produce the lowest results, Decile 4-7 schools sit mid-range and Decile 8-10 schools are the highest achievers. These trends remain the same nearly every year, across all NCEA levels, UE and endorsement rate results.[19] Wilson et al. (2016) note, "There is a persistent gap in achievement between students in low socio-economic status (SES) schools in which there is an over-representation of Māori and Pasifika students" (p. 204).

As Māori and Pacific students are more likely to live in high-deprivation areas and attend low decile schools, this has created ethnic disparities in achievement (Graham et al., 2010; Hook, 2006; Jensen et al., 2010; NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a; PPTA, 2018; Shulruf et al., 2010). There has been no marked improvement in ethnic and socioeconomic achievement disparities since NCEA's implementation (Gordon, 2013; NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a; Yuan et al., 2010). NCEA is meant to be inclusive for all students, regardless of culture or socioeconomic status, however there are long-standing concerns over Māori and Pacific achievement (Agnew, 2010; Hipkins et al., 2016; NZQA, 2023b). Some Māori and Pacific students have different learning styles and values, so a Westernised school system needs to take this into account (Graham et al., 2010; Houghton, 2015). Culturally relevant curriculums may better engage marginalised groups who feel disconnected from Westernised systems (Graham et al., 2010; Jensen et al., 2010; Webber et al., 2018).

[18] Opportunity to Learn (OTL) can be defined as the "exposure to subject content in school" (OECD, 2013, p. 88, as cited in Wilson et al., 2016). OTL is influenced by numerous factors including, school resourcing, teacher proficiency and classroom experience.

[19] There have been few statistical anomalies throughout the two decades; achievement for Level 1 for Decile 4-7 schools has been higher than 8-10 schools for the past 3 years (See Appendix A).

Although NCEA is considered fairer than historic qualifications, it is still not equitable (Graham et al., 2010; Kenny, 2021; NZQA, 2023b). The over-representation of Māori, Pacific and low decile students not achieving in senior education is one of NCEA's fundamental flaws (Graham et al., 2010; Hook, 2006; Houghton, 2015; Wilson et al., 2016). NCEA can be considered as "too inclusive" because it has caused marginalised students to consistently sit on the lowest scale of pass rates, endorsements and UE attainment (Jensen et al., 2010; NZQA, 2023a; PPTA, 2017, p. 8; PPTA, 2018; Shulruf et al., 2010).

Unit and Achievement Standards

NCEA's flexible design allows variations between schools and in OTL that perpetuate pre-existing inequalities within the education system (Jensen et al., 2010; Lipson, 2018; Wilson et al., 2016). School subject choice and normative and criterion-referenced standards have been discussed in the literature. There are

> few mandated requirements … Teachers and students have high levels of autonomy in selecting topics and forms of assessment that suit their interests and preferences. The end result has been high levels of choice and a looseness around required knowledge and expectations. (Wood & Hughson, 2024, para. 12-13)

In an effort to offer all students a chance of success, NCEA has been criticised for failing its most disadvantaged students by not requiring them to learn necessary academic skills, in favour of less challenging subjects and Unit standards (NZI, 2018). Criticism has also emerged regarding the differences in learning difficulty between Achievement and Unit standards (Lipson, 2018; PPTA, 2017). "The open-ended nature of the national curriculum and NCEA potentially leads to less challenging material being provided for students in lower socioeconomic areas, and for Māori and Pasifika learners" (Wood & Hughson, 2024, para. 16; Wilson et al., 2016). The 2019 *NCEA Observational Studies* reported a disparity between deciles in regard to available standards and assessment (ERO, 2019).[20] Higher decile schools offer more Achievement standards, while lower decile schools, who have greater numbers of Māori and Pacific students, sit more Unit standards and are less likely to take UE-approved subjects (Jensen et al., 2010; Johnston, 2016b; Lipson, 2018; Meyer et al., 2006).

[20] NCEA Observational Studies Report by the Education Review Office in collaboration with the Ministry investigated NCEA's effectiveness (ERO, 2019).

There is a clear pattern between decile level, UE attainment and Unit standards on offer (NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a; NZQA, 2022d). High proportions of Unit standards at low decile schools have had a detrimental impact on students failing to meet UE requirements (NZQA, 2022d). In 2022, only 27.9% of Decile 1-3 students attained UE, compared to 67.6% of Decile 8-10 students—a 39.7% difference (NZQA, 2023a). Research reveals patterns of UE attainment generally increased relative to decile rating (Yuan et al., 2010).[21]

Students may pass NCEA but fail to attain UE because they do not achieve the necessary credit requirements for literacy, numeracy and UE-approved subjects (NZQA, 2022d; Shulruf et al., 2010). "46% of all credits assessed for Year 13 students who achieve NCEA Level 3, but not UE are comprised of Unit standards" (NZQA, 2022d, p. 3). In contrast, only 7% of credits assessed from students who meet both requirements are Unit standards (NZQA, 2022d). These inequities negatively affect Māori and Pacific students in particular, as they are "awarded University Entrance at half the rate of other students" (NZQA, 2022d, p. 1). In 2022, Māori UE attainment was 30.9%, Pacific students were 28.7%, while New Zealand European were 56.0% and Asian were 61.3% (NZQA, 2023a). "Māori and Pasifika students are achieving a 'different kind' of NCEA" and are "being streamed out of academic subjects" (NZCER, 2018, p. 32).

The notion that Māori and Pacific students are not as academically oriented was viewed by some students in the Starpath Project as a harmful consequence of the false stigmatisation credit farming has created (Kiro et al., 2016).[22] This point is reflected in the study conducted by Wilson et al. (2016), that draws attention to the self-perpetuating cycle of low expectations in the classroom whereby,

> particular groups of students are not expected to be able to pass high-stakes assessments, receive limited exposure to learning relevant to those assessments, and therefore do not demonstrate their capacity to learn, thus reinforcing teachers' (and policymakers') low expectations of their potential to learn. (p. 224)

[21] The number of Achievement standards offered by schools "increases by about 10 (on average) for each increment in decile" which equates to 5-6% (Turner et al., 2010, p. 25; Yuan et al., 2010).

[22] The Starpath Project was established in 2005 and research was undertaken by the University of Auckland (See: Kiro et al., 2016; Madjar et al., 2009; Madjar et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2010; Webber et al., 2018; Yuan et al., 2010). The studies and subsequent publications spanned over a decade with the final Phase 3 Report published in 2018. The purpose of the Starpath Project was to examine the barriers facing low decile students, particularly Māori and Pacific students and the reasoning behind low UE rates. Starpath gathered data from Decile 1-5 schools across New Zealand with later phases building upon initial research and working with a smaller number of schools in Northland and Auckland. Starpath created strategies and gave recommendations to improve UE attainment and tertiary retainment for marginalised students.

The Starpath Project evaluated obstacles facing Māori, Pacific and low decile students from educational success, particularly regarding UE attainment (Turner et al., 2010; Yuan et al., 2010). The number of Achievement standards on offer may be indicative of school attitude and commitment to their students' academic success (Turner et al., 2010). For students deemed academically capable, increasing the number of Achievement standards on offer to them is akin to increasing the likelihood of achieving UE. High numbers of Unit standards, low expectations and minimal effort from schools decreases student motivation (Crooks, 2002; PPTA, 2015; PPTA, 2018; Shulruf et al., 2010). Often, the prospect of only gaining an 'Achieved' grade in Unit standards assessments is not enough of an incentive to properly engage in learning.

The differences in the assessment of internal Achievement standards should also be considered. Only 19% of Achievement standards are internally assessed within Decile 8-10 schools (ERO, 2019). In contrast, 88% are internally assessed in Decile 1-3 schools (ERO, 2019). Potential reasons for these differences identified by Jones and Singh (2014) include; a school's selection of standards, the supportive nature of internals where guidance is given by teachers, students can resubmit their work and may not meet the required level of literacy necessary for exams (Jones & Singh, 2014). Wilson et al. (2016) considers whether the decision of low decile schools to not assess and teach certain standards, "may be legitimate, rational, strategic, and evidence based" (p. 223). For example, the 85% pass rate target and media's league tables have pressured schools to be results-driven, so teachers may resort to certain standards (Wilson et al., 2016). ERO (2019) recognises the need to conduct more research in this area, to determine the implications of different approaches to assessment styles.

Change Programme Pilots

A large proportion of students failed to achieve the required functional literacy and numeracy standards in the NCEA Change Programme pilots (See Appendix B) (Evaluations Associates 2022; Evaluation Associates 2023; Neilson, 2022b; Wiggins, 2023a). These externally assessed co-requisite standards are predicted to negatively affect Māori and Pacific achievement (NZCER, 2019; Ruru, 2022). In June 2022, 98% of Decile 1 students failed the writing standard in the first pilot (Evaluation Associates, 2022; Neilson, 2022b). Decile 10 students achieved the highest results. Aside from two outliers, pass rates increased by each increment in decile. In the September 2022 pilot, Decile 9 achieved higher than Decile 10 in all standards, but most notably in writing by a 16% margin (Evaluation Associates, 2023; Wiggins,

2023a). Results show a 15% decrease in Decile 10 reading, 26% increase in Decile 9 writing and finally, an 18% and 20% increase in Decile 1 writing and numeracy consecutively.

Table 1

Functional Literacy and Numeracy Pilots

	Pilot 1 (%)			Pilot 2 (%)		
	Reading	Writing	Numeracy	Reading	Writing	Numeracy
Decile 1	24	2	10	26	20	30
Decile 9	81	43	74	76	69	77
Decile 10	85	62	78	70	53	73

Note. (Evaluations Associates 2022; Evaluation Associates 2023; Neilson, 2022b; Wiggins, 2023a).

Internal and External Assessments

NCEA is widely considered a complicated qualification system (Hipkins et al., 2016; Lipson, 2018; Madjar et al., 2010; NZCER, 2018; PPTA, 2018; Shulruf et al., 2010). The complex design can cause confusion among stakeholders, including high-risk students and future employers (Lipson, 2018). In NCEA's early days, the PPTA (2015) expressed doubts over assessment credibility, design, workload, and the qualifications' capacity to motivate students. In particular, criticisms have emerged regarding the credibility of internal assessments (ERO, 2019; NZCER, 2018). University lecturers have also raised their concerns relating to the educational differences between internal and external assessments with some tertiary institutions making external assessments prerequisites for specified courses. A professor stated, "In essence, we do not trust the internal assessment anywhere near as much as the external" (Jones & Singh, 2014, para. 9).

A moderation system was created to provide quality assurance for internal assessment, as a way to ensure that internal assessments are a valid and effective way to evaluate student capability (NZQA; n.d.-b). In an early response to concerns that internal assessments are not a valid way to evaluate students' capabilities, NZQA (n.d.-b) ensured that 10% of internal assessments would be moderated by external markers (Maharey, 2007; NZQA, 2014). More recently, NZQA requires teachers to submit a selection of assessments to another colleague who specialises in the subject matter to ensure fairness of awarded grades (NZQA, n.d.-b). Schools must also send six internally marked assessments from each standard

(including a range of different grades) to be reviewed by an NZQA moderator (NZQA, 2022b). However, teachers select the assessments to send and from 2022 NZQA ceased selecting random samples to review. Furthermore, external moderation of Level 1 internal standards is no longer mandatory (NZQA, 2022b).

Jones & Singh (2014) draw attention to pass rate differences between internal and external assessments, with a specific emphasis on low deciles. In 2022, 38.9% of students from Decile 1-3 schools who sat external exams did not pass (NZQA, 2023a). Since the introduction of internal assessment-based qualifications there have been conflicting views from schools and other commentators over external examination-based assessment (Collins, 2018). Exams can be considered an inaccurate portrayal of critical thinking and schools do not wish to put their students under unnecessary pressure. For example, exams were labelled by Ōtara Kia Aroha College as a "colonial system" (Collins, 2018, para. 5). In contrast, some high decile schools continue to require external examinations for most subjects as they are thought to better prepare students for their academic futures (Collins, 2018). There is less dissimilarity between internal and external pass rates in higher deciles (Jones & Singh, 2014). Auckland Grammar's headmaster Tim O'Connor opposes internal assessment, stating; "we are not killing ours [students] with kindness" (Collins, 2018, para. 20).

Students generally support undertaking internal assessments throughout the year and consider it to be a useful strategy to stay motivated (Madjar et al., 2010; NZCER, 2018). However, the 2006 study on motivation, Starpath Project and 2018 Review, discovered some students opposed NCEA's grading system, advocating instead for more variation achieved through percentage-based marks (Madjar et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2006; NZCER, 2018). Furthermore, the strict requirements for passing assessments could see a student fail "despite passing Merit and Excellence questions" (Meyer et al., 2006, p. 4). The focus on accumulating credits is argued to cause a lack of motivation for some students to aim for endorsements. Students may also lose motivation after attaining the required credits to pass because there is no real incentive to continue to achieve (NZCER, 2018).

Cultural Considerations into Underachievement

Māori-centric Curriculum

Eurocentric education "remains an archetype for teaching what to think, as opposed to how to think" (Edwards et al., 2007, p. 145). The controlled structure of Westernised curriculum and emphasis on rote-learning leaves little space for students to develop critical and creative thinking. Edwards et al. (2007) assessed Eurocentric education systems' impact on indigenous communities in Australia, the US and Canada. Findings initiate the need for greater support and acknowledgement of indigenous cultures in curriculum design and implementation. Recognising similarities between indigenous educational experiences globally can help produce recommendations to better cater for Māori in Aotearoa. The majority of Māori support the idea of an education that equips students with the skills needed for a developing world (Edwards et al., 2007). Likewise, Māori are more engaged if subjects include Māori values of manaakitanga (kindness/hospitality), whakawhanaungatanga (relationship-building) and whanaungatanga (relations) between teachers, students and whānau (The Education Hub, 2019; Graham et al., 2010: MOE, 2010). Ways in which Aotearoa can acknowledge Māori teachings include; reciprocal learning between educators and students, small class sizes, recognising students' aptitudes, considering historic teachings to honour ancestral traditions and a curriculum relevant to external environments (Hemara, 2000).

Parental Support

Although Māori and Pacific student engagement improves when shown parental support, lacking an understanding of NCEA can cause parents to give misguided educational advice to their child (ERO, 2019; Graham et al., 2010; Kay, 2008). Generally, Māori and Pacific parents favour NCEA over historic qualifications and view internal assessments as motivational strategy (Graham et al., 2010; NZCER, 2018). However, parents have raised concerns over schools insufficiently explaining NCEA's design (Hipkins, 2007; Madjar et al., 2010). Better communication between parents and schools could improve student engagement as well informed parents will help students to feel more supported (Hipkins, 2007; Madjar et al., 2010). Flavell (2017) emphasises the importance of parent-teacher relationships for student success.

Spiller (2012) examined Pacific student-teacher relationships. The study revealed a breakdown in communication between Pacific students, their parents and teachers, regarding effective teaching methods, curriculum understanding and parental support. For example, as Pacific adults show respect by listening instead of questioning, teachers might mistake respect for silent indifference (Flavell, 2017; Spiller, 2012). A potential solution to cultural differences and current educational structures is for students to act as a catalyst between their parents and teachers (Flavell, 2017). Student-led meetings might create environments where respect can be shown but questions can also be asked. Encouraging Pacific students to be instrumental in improving liaisons between parents and teachers may have a positive impact on engagement (Flavell, 2017; Graham et al., 2010).

85% Pass Rate Target: Grade Inflation?

The Fifth National Governments' 2012 *Statement of Intent*, set a national pass rate target of 85% for those aged 18 to attain NCEA Level 2, 3 or Scholarship (MOE, 2012). Instead of implementing policies to improve educational quality, the MOE instead became concerned with increasing pass rates. The rationale behind the 85% target strongly aligns with aims to improve achievement for Māori, Pacific and high-deprivation students. As the Statement posits, "Stronger ownership of these targets will be required by each school and community if we are to accelerate achievement for Māori learners, Pasifika learners and also learners from low socio-economic backgrounds" (MOE, 2012, p. 19). Pacific students appear to have benefited from this policy and have the greatest overall increase in achievement (See Appendix C detailing 85% pass rate variations) (NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a). Significantly, compared to 2012, Asian, New Zealand European and Māori achievement rates have decreased every year, over all NCEA Levels. Largest decreases include, 17.1% in Level 1 for Asian students, 18% and 18.1% for New Zealand European and Māori consecutively, for UE (NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a).

Researchers are concerned that the rise in achievement rates nationwide does not correspond to a higher quality of education (Hipkins et al., 2016; PPTA, 2015). The target undermines the benefits from NCEA's flexibility because the resulting focus on assessment and credit accumulation has had a detrimental impact on student motivation and engagement (Rawlins, 2010; Wylie, 2022). Pressure on schools to meet predetermined 85% pass rate targets have caused situations where "students are being awarded literacy and numeracy at Level 1 NCEA when in fact they do not have adequate skills for success at Levels 2 and 3, or subsequently at university." (NZCER, 2018, p. 51). Teachers have also reported progressing Level 2 students through to Level 3 and granting UE to those they believe do not meet the academic threshold

(Emerson et al., 2014). In 2014, findings from a study reflected this by revealing that out of a group of "Year 12 students with NCEA Level 2, 40% could not read functionally, and 42% had not grasped the basics of maths" (NZI, 2018, para. 5).

Achievement rates have increased exponentially, since the introduction of endorsements, most notably for Māori and Pacific students and lower decile schools (Johnston, 2016b). Concerns of grade inflation emerged after specific schools achieved grossly different pass rates (Downes, 2015b). In 2015, the media drew attention to burgeoning numbers of students achieving Merit and Excellence endorsements (Downes, 2015a; Downes, 2015b). The overall trajectory of NCEA's pass rates throughout Aotearoa was deemed unrealistic without coordinated funding increases to match (Downes, 2015b). NZQA reasoned, NCEA's pass rates vary, unlike the norm-referenced assessments such as Bursary and School Certificate with predetermined achievement levels (Downes, 2015a; Hipkins et al., 2016).

Ex-president of NZAGC Rose Blackett was somewhat dubious of results and questioned both NCEA's credibility and the intelligence of senior students (Downes, 2015a). In contrast, Victoria University's Michael Johnston believed rising pass rates resulted from internal assessments and that such improvements were necessary for the economy. Additionally, previous Education Minister Hekia Parata disagreed that endorsement increases meant a decrease in education quality (Downes, 2015a). The rise in pass rates in internal assessment does not automatically correspond to a better-quality education but, expectations to meet predetermined targets may have influenced schools to opt for internal assessments over exams (Hipkins et al., 2016; Jones & Singh, 2014).

Over the past two decades, the academic proficiency of students entering into NCEA has consistently worsened according to PISA's international indicators (Lipson, 2018). OECD testing reveals that fewer Aotearoa students are reaching the highest tested academic levels, while more students are falling into the lowest international categories. Previous Education Minister Chris Hipkins stated, internationally Aotearoa's literacy and numeracy rates have steadily declined since the start of the 21st century (Kenny, 2021; O'Dwyer, 2022). "Only 64.6% of 15 year olds in Aotearoa have basic proficiency in reading and maths" (UNICEF, n.d. para. 2). Taking into account both declining academic levels of new NCEA students and the pressured passing of students, the overall quality of NCEA may appear to be diminishing (Emerson et al., 2014; Hipkins et al., 2016; Lipson, 2018). The 85% target reduces NCEA's credibility

because forcing achievement does not necessarily equate to an improvement in a students' academic ability (PPTA, 2015).[23]

Credit Farming

A major flaw of NCEA is the focus on assessment and credit attainment over quality learning (ERO, 2019; Hipkins et al., 2016; O'Dwyer, 2022). In NCEA's early years, issues regarding the possibility of standards causing national inconsistencies in subject matter, regurgitating information for assignments and rote learning were heavily discussed (ERO, 2019; OECD, 2004). NCEA has been criticised for being too assessment driven, resulting in common trends of credit farming, rote learning and teaching to the test (Alison, 2018; Crooks, 2002; Hipkins et al., 2016; Madjar et al., 2009; Lipson, 2018; NZCER, 2018; PPTA, 2017; Wood et al., 2021). Teaching to the test entails curriculum centred on expected assessment topics which impairs learning (ERO, 2019; Lipson, 2018). Teachers generally oppose over-assessment because it can prove detrimental to in-school and lifelong learning (Madjar et al., 2010). Furthermore, the pressure on schools to perform can influence curriculum design and negatively affect educational quality (ERO, 2019). 'Credit farming' occurs when schools choose easier standards to teach and actively shift students to specific safe subjects to guarantee pass rates (PPTA, 2018, p. 7). Credit farming is the result of over-assessment and forcing schools to be results-driven. The 85% target has only exacerbated this issue (Lipson, 2018; PPTA, 2017).

Issues for Teachers

NCEA has created workload issues for teachers (Crooks, 2002; Lipson, 2018; NCER, 2018; PPTA, 2015). Reasonings behind this include; the increase in assessment (particularly internal assessments), teachers' role in curriculum design and the strict assessment criteria they must adhere to (Lipson, 2018). The heavy burden is worsened by large class sizes (above the OECD average), resulting in teachers prone to burnout (Alison, 2018; Crossan & Scott, 2016; Hipkins et al., 2016). Additionally, teachers are offered little support and resources (Alison, 2018; Crooks, 2018; Hipkins et al., 2016; PPTA, 2015; PPTA, 2018). The PPTA (2015) states, "NCEA would have collapsed under its own weight long ago if it had not been for the massive efforts of teachers" (p. 15). Teacher's lack of adequate support prevents shifting away from

[23] In 2018, the Ardern Government announced that the 85% pass rate target "would not continue in this form" (Public Service Commission, 2022, p. 1).

heavy assessment focus because there is no space for innovative curriculum approaches (Alison, 2018; Hipkins et al., 2016). Teachers are concerned that recent policy directions will not sufficiently address workload issues and resourcing constraints in some schools (PPTA, 2018). Wood and Hughson (2024) emphasise the importance of adequate teacher support because without it, curriculum and policy changes will fail to meet expectations.

Transition to University

A third of 18 year olds in Aotearoa enter into tertiary study — vastly different from the 18% OECD average (Crossan & Scott, 2016; OECD, 2016; OECD, 2022).[24] The high university enrolment rate appears to be a success of NCEA. However, some tertiary institutions are concerned students are ill prepared for the academic requirements of university study (Emerson et al., 2014; Emerson et al., 2015; Hipkins et al., 2016; Tapaleao, 2013). NCEA is blamed by universities for failing to prepare students (Hipkins et al., 2016). First year students' inability to keep pace with course expectations can be attributed to feeling entitled to individual attention, expecting learning support, assessment resources, opportunities for assignment resubmission and ambivalent attitudes towards failing (Hipkins et al., 2016).

In light of reports examining student motivation and school-leaver skill level, Emerson et al. (2014; 2015) investigated the disparity between NCEA and tertiary literacy (Meyer et al., 2006; Meyer et al., 2009). NCEA was considered "a barrier rather than an enabler of academic literacy" (Emerson et al., 2014, p. 106). Researchers discovered secondary students' failure to recognise the value of literacy and noted a communication breakdown between tertiary providers and teachers (Emerson et al., 2014; Emerson et al., 2015). Improving communication between sectors, increasing teacher support and decreasing the emphasis on credit attainment, may give teachers an opportunity to create lessons centred around developing literacy skills for tertiary study (Emerson et al., 2014; Emerson et al., 2015; Hipkins et al., 2016). Universities have adapted to the changing environment of a globalised world by implementing innovative strategies to obtain and utilise information (Hipkins et al., 2016). On this basis, NCEA needs to display its flexibility by moving in pace with universities to present a dynamic and relevant curriculum.

[24] There are high proportions of undergraduate international students in New Zealand and it should also be noted that in some countries, particularly in Europe, students do not tend to transition to tertiary education immediately from secondary school (Crossan & Scott, 2016; OECD, 2022; Rawstron, 2021). New Zealand's level of educational attainment in comparison to relative earnings is less than all other OECD countries bar Estonia (OECD, 2022). Tertiary attainment in New Zealand does not equate to a marked increase in income.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed literature on NCEA. Documented strengths, standards and assessment were analysed. Other themes examined include cultural considerations, the 85% pass rate target, credit farming, issues for teachers and tertiary study preparation. The review exposed a gap in the literature whereby past student voice has not been given due consideration in NCEA conversation. As a result of this literature review, I decided to undertake a survey inviting past students to share their views and experiences of NCEA. The following Methodology chapter details this thesis' research design.

5. Methodology

The following chapter presents this thesis' research design. First, the chapter states the research aim and questions. Second, details the research approach and survey design. Third, outlines the recruitment process and participant demographics. Fourth, reviews techniques applied in the survey data analysis. Fifth, discusses ethical considerations. Sixth, examines the research limitations.

Research Aim and Questions

As stated in Chapter One, this thesis investigates the establishment, implementation, and reform of NCEA policy and practice and addresses the following questions:

- How have education policies changed over time in Aotearoa?
- What are some of the issues and problems associated with NCEA in practice?
- According to academic commentary and past student views, to what extent has NCEA achieved its purposes and objectives?
- How do some past students view their experience of NCEA?

Research Approach

The mixed methods approach guided the research process. Mixed methods utilise qualitative and quantitative techniques to design methods of testing, collect data and display human phenomena (Bryman, 2016; Johnson et al., 2007). This was the most practical approach because incorporating both qualitative and quantitative techniques provides a more complete picture (Bryman, 2016). I administered mixed methods procedures via the online survey and utilised the embedded design that "can have either quantitative or qualitative research as the priority approach but draws on the other approach as well within the context of the study" (Bryman, 2016, p. 640). All questions bar one were quantitative for ease of use and data gathering purposes. Although there was an emphasis on quantitative research, the last open-ended question was qualitative and collected additional information on NCEA. The written question gave more detail, helping develop a richer understanding of past student experience. Including this question was important because quantitative questions alone are "insufficient for understanding the phenomenon of interest" (Bryman, 2016, p. 640). Past students were invited to share their views and

experiences of NCEA to offer the policy sphere a student-informed perspective on the opportunities, challenges and limitations of the qualification system.

The practicality of a survey for the nature of my research, outweighed other forms of data collection such as conducting interviews. An online survey has greater scope than interviews and can garner a much higher response rate. Additionally, I could reach individuals unknown to myself, meaning data would encompass a wider range of social groups, differing perspectives and form clearer trends. Survey participants are more likely "to report sensitive information" which is perhaps why I received such thoughtful responses in the written question (Bryman, 2016, p. 222). Surveys also avoid some of the risks of interviewing. For example, interviews tend to be more emotionally and mentally draining for participants (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, the face-to-face nature of interviews may pressure individuals to "exhibit social desirability bias" and alter their answers to be more agreeable (Bryman, 2016, p. 222).

I used the software Qualtrics to create and administer the survey because of its visual appeal, user-friendly design and ability to code data which reduced the likelihood of error. The self-administered questionnaire was estimated to take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The time frame allowed for completion of the *'Survey Information for Participants'* section, *'Participant Consent Form'*, demographic questions and survey itself (See Appendix D).[25] The demographic questions used the 2018 Census layout for best practice purposes and asked; Name, Age, Gender, Ethnicity, School, Current Occupation (Stats NZ, 2018). Every question in the survey was optional.

To reduce participant fatigue, the survey consisted of eleven close-ended Likert-style questions and one open-ended short answer question. Close-ended questions are easily recorded and processed, so are preferable in online surveys (Bryman, 2016). Questions needed to be straightforward and easily understood to reduce confusion and misinterpretation. I specifically placed the open-ended question last in the hopes that previous questions would encourage further reflection. I had to carefully consider what I needed to find out as a researcher and ensure that the Likert answer options (Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neutral, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree) covered all possible avenues. The survey design was influenced by a range of factors with some questions categorised into sub-questions and subtopics (See Appendix D for Survey Questions).

[25] *'The Success and Relevance of NCEA'* was this thesis' original title

Question One and **Two** focused on engagement and motivation. After reading the media's documentation of COVID-19's impact on non-attendance and engagement, I recalled my NCEA experience as a disengaged and unmotivated student (established in Chapter One) (Neilson, 2022a; Wiggins, 2023b). I was curious to discover if my experience was shared. The second question; 'I tried to achieve the best results I could' was inspired by the 2006 study on motivation (Meyer et al., 2006).

Question Three was my interpretation of what an NCEA qualification should deliver in regard to learning. NCEA did not help me to understand my 'interests, strengths and attributes, academic potential, or direction I wanted to go in upon leaving school.' This question stemmed from curiosity and a wish to discover if my experience was shared.

Question Four relates to confidence in 21st century skills. Transversal and 21st century skills can be categorised into 'personal skills, thinking and learning skills, social skills and life skills' and are "necessary for fully integrating and participating in the labour market, education and training, and social and civic life" (Chu et al., 2017; Goggin et al., 2019, p. 2513). This question applied the above four skill categories to focus on NCEA's ability to prepare students for their future in the 21st century.

Question Five (a., b., c., sub questions) drew attention to NCEA's objective to create lifelong learners and prepare students for further training, education, the changing workforce and society (Agnew, 2010; Maharey, 2007; Mallard, 2000; MOE, n.d.-a; NZQA, n.d.-d; NZQA, 2022c; Shulruf et al., 2009; Shulruf et al., 2010). The questions asked; if NCEA (a.) 'inspired lifelong learning', (b.) 'prepared individuals for further training and education and the changing workforce', and (c.) NCEA's relevance to 'current occupation' and 'future career aspirations'.

Question Six focused on school experience and how NCEA's framework was implemented at participants' schools. My literature review informed me of the disparity in educational opportunity in some schools (see Chapter Four). Therefore, the egalitarian principle, equality of OTL (Opportunity to Learn) formed the basis of this question that asked if individuals were given the 'same academic opportunities as other students' and offered 'an array of subject choices to pursue interests'. 'Valuing student opinion' and 'instilling a sense of belonging to the school community' were inspired by research on the significance of student voice and school belonging for student engagement (Conner et al., 2022).

Question Seven (a. and b.) related to teachers' role in learning. Potential bias in grading internal assessments (See Chapter Four) occurred at my school (particularly for males) so I was curious to see if participants felt they were marked 'fairly in internally graded assessments.' The subtopic, 'cater for my individual learning needs' stemmed from Aotearoa's larger class sizes than OECD average (Alison, 2018; Crossan & Scott, 2016; Hipkins et al., 2016). I wondered if teacher workload affected student learning. Question 7b shed light on the effect teacher attitude has on student engagement.

In **Question Eight**, participants were asked if NCEA could be improved in a range of areas directly relating to the NCEA Change Programme (See Chapter Three).

Question 9, the short answer question, gave participants the opportunity to discuss their own experience of NCEA in more detail. This was important as it further enhanced past student voice and generated themes I had not considered previously (Bryman, 2016).

PARTICIPANTS

Recruitment Process

Techniques used to recruit participants included word of mouth and social media (Facebook) (See Appendix E for social media message). The social media message briefly informed individuals of the study and included a link to the survey site Qualtrics. Potential candidates were encouraged to pass the survey on to other individuals if they wished. In this way, the snowball method was utilised; "sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience of characteristics relevant to the research" (Bryman, 2016, p. 415).

Although the snowball method as a sampling procedure was unlikely to present an accurate portrayal of the population, it was the best data collection method because of its potential to reach individuals. I also made allowances for my personal relationships by recruiting participants outside my immediate contacts. The sample included approximately 50% of participants not known to me. Recruitment and collection commenced mid-May 2023. The survey was open to the public for approximately three weeks to allow for completion. A total of 76 people responded. On average, 60-62 people answered each question (aside from the written text question, where 26 responded). Any invalid responses were discarded, for example, individuals who completed qualifications overseas or who started but did not complete the Consent form.

Participant Demographics

The sociocultural context of the focus group was inclusive of gender, age, ethnicity and occupation. Being a past NCEA student was the only requirement. Participants' ages ranged from 18-32 years; accounting for 15 years of NCEA in practice. The small proportion of respondents denoted the demographic information as merely indicative and not an accurate portrayal of NCEA's past or current student makeup.

Gender

Table 2

Participant Gender

Gender	Percentage (%) of Participants
Male	59.68
Female	37.10
Another Gender	3.23

Ethnicity

The Digital Inclusion Research Group reported Māori and Pacific Peoples have reduced access to internet and digital devices compared to Pākehā and Asians (DIRG, 2017). Given the use of social media, it was possible the survey could be disproportionately skewed towards some ethnic groups. Therefore, targeting specific networks connected to culturally diverse groups was necessary. As a result, the proportion of Māori and Pacific survey participants reflected the 2018 Census ethnic makeup (See Appendix F for 2018 Census information) (Stats NZ, 2020). In my survey ethnic makeup, compared to the 2018 Census, the Pākehā cohort was smaller by 6.9%, Asian individuals reduced from 15.1% to 3.57% and 'Other' increased by 7.13%.[26]

[26] The MELAA (Middle Eastern/Latin American/African) category was not present in the 2018 Census data (Stats NZ, 2020). Regarding NCEA data, MELAA was present for the first time in the 2022 Annual Report (NZQA, 2023a). Although NZQA detailed MELAA back to 2013, for the sake of consistency, it has been omitted.

Table 3

Participant Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Percentage (%) of Participants
New Zealand European	63.1
Māori	16.67
Pacific Peoples	8.33
Asian	3.57
Other	8.33

School Information

35 schools were identified, spanning from Northland to Canterbury (See Appendix G for school details). A quarter were state integrated/private and 75% were state schools. All Decile levels were present, bar 1 and 2. Recruitment attempts were unsuccessful in attaining this cohort. Essentially, this meant these individuals either chose not to partake upon being contacted or may not have been known to myself or my peers who passed the survey on. The online data gathering method might have caused accessibility issues for those in high deprivation areas, but this finding could also indicate that past Decile 1 and 2 students do not mix in the same workforce and university social circles.

NEET Youth

Participants came from a range of different career fields and nine were studying. One listed their occupation as ‘Sickness Beneficiary’. Although they did not identify as such, 20% of participants known to me were unemployed at the time of the survey. The survey NEET rate of known participants was significantly higher than Aotearoa’s 2023 average of 11.7% (Stats NZ, 2024b). The reluctance in admitting to being NEET, suggests individuals did not wish to be associated with the stigma attached. To respect privacy, no personal demographic information was shared in NEET youth commentary.

Survey Data Analysis

I applied descriptive analysis as the statistical treatment to my research. Descriptive analysis examines data within the context of both the research purpose and reality by identifying patterns and trends (Loeb et al., 2017). Descriptive analysis can also reveal limitations and "diagnose issues that warrant the immediate attention of policymakers" (Loeb et al., 2017, p. 3). This technique enabled me to extrapolate statistical insights. Quantitative findings were aggregated according to question type and bar graphs were used as a visualisation tool to present raw data. Pivot tables were used to group and compare data, explore trends and calculate percentages. Cross reference analysis was applied and gender, ethnicity, school decile and occupation were considered.

Thematic analysis was employed for qualitative information. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The last survey question was analysed thematically. Answers were grouped by topic or were used to support findings of quantitative questions. Thematic analysis is flexible and seeks to reveal trends and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016). Key themes were examined and reviewed in relation to my research aim and questions. The identified themes included, subject efficacy and availability, discontentment with the position of trade-based subjects, marking and grading issues and relevance to future.

My analysis was also guided by my literature review (See Chapter Three and Four), my theoretical framework, historical analysis, political ideological theories and Marxist arguments about capitalism (See Chapter Two). Of note; the intersection between Marxism, neoliberalism and worsening inequality was highlighted in my survey findings.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure credibility, ethical considerations such as informed consent, retaining privacy and reducing participant harm were taken into account. Proper informed consent was achieved by providing potential participants with all relevant information and a series of consent questions at the beginning of the survey. The sections, *'Survey Information for Participants'* and *'Participant Consent Form'* were inspired by Bryman's (2016) examples (See Appendix D). Participants were informed their identity would remain

confidential, but data would be anonymised after completion so could not be withdrawn. Bryman (2016) emphasises the importance of confidentiality in reducing participant harm. As all individuals gave full consent, it was unnecessary to omit 'invalid' data on ethical grounds. However, I did note in the results, a small proportion of participants met the criteria for NEET youth, although they identified as other occupations. This raised an ethical issue for me that was discussed with my supervisors, after which it was decided to classify these participants as NEET.

Bryman (2016) notes the internet itself also poses some ethical issues. Using social media to message individuals with a website link increased the suspicions of two participants who sought reassurance that the link was safe, and my account had not been hacked before completing the survey. Emotional harm reduction strategies were another ethical consideration (Bryman, 2016). Revisiting negative school experiences might cause distress for some, so it was necessary to clarify survey participation was completely optional. Additionally, a section at the end of the survey offered mental health and wellbeing support to protect participant welfare. Balancing research needs with participant wellbeing was essential at an ethical level. As my past student survey was an original contribution to NCEA literature, I needed to ensure similar studies could be replicated in future. Afterall, the quality and originality of new research is considered an ethical issue (Bryman, 2016). Ethical approval for Application: #FS2022-67 was given by the Ethics Committee on 11/05/2023 (See Appendix H).

Research Limitations

Throughout the research process, it was important to acknowledge the potential risk of personal bias. Referring to the literature and engaging in a critical reflection process was a helpful strategy to deal with my bias. Some additional limitations are discussed below.

Informed Consent Forms can increase uncertainty among potential participants (Bryman, 2016). Several individuals who were perhaps reluctant or lacked interest, did not complete the form and progress to the survey.

Although 'Neutral' is a midpoint between opposing ends of a Likert scale, it can also serve as a collection of differing opinions (Chyung et al., 2017). 'Neutral' can indicate uncertainty, indecisiveness, subject matter unfamiliarity, feeling pressured to answer, or a reluctance to share opinions that may not align to the norm (Chyung et al., 2017). The prevalence of 'Neutral' throughout some survey sections might be

explained by participants believing the question irrelevant to personal experience. ‘Neutral’ proved a limitation in some instances because it did not clarify participants’ perspectives. Furthermore, ensuring survey question comprehensiveness meant some sections lacked specification. For example, the option ‘Thinking skills’ in Question Four was originally ‘Critical Thinking’ and may have garnered different responses.

The majority of participants attended schools in Auckland, the Bay of Plenty, Waikato and Taranaki areas. Entire districts were missed in the survey. In particular, the absence of Decile 1 and 2 schools was a limitation, and I was unable to gain insight into the school experience of the lowest decile schools. The snowball method was unsuccessful in reaching these individuals. Moreover, the disproportionate number of male respondents may have skewed results slightly to be male dominant. Additionally, the small proportion of respondents (60-62 participants) meant that in no way can this study be considered generalisable. My research was unable to provide a full and accurate portrayal of how all past students throughout Aotearoa view NCEA.

The only publicly accessible decile data at the time of research was found in a New Zealand Herald article where the journalist discovered and shared a Google Spreadsheet detailing decile changes for 2015 (See Appendix G) (Singh, 2014). The lack of data could be because in 2012, ERO announced it would omit deciles in future reports due to the stigmatisation of low deciles equating to low educational achievement (Hartevelt, 2012). Given the shift towards the new EQI, the MOE (2023c) now has little data on deciles. Singh’s (2014) publication was the only record available, representing a significant gap in publicly available information. This proved a limitation because it did not come from an official source and was not up to date.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approaches specific to this thesis. The research aim and questions were revisited, and the mixed methods approach guided the study. This chapter explained the survey design, recruitment process and summarised participant demographics. Data analysis techniques, ethical considerations and research limitations were discussed. The following chapter presents the online survey findings.

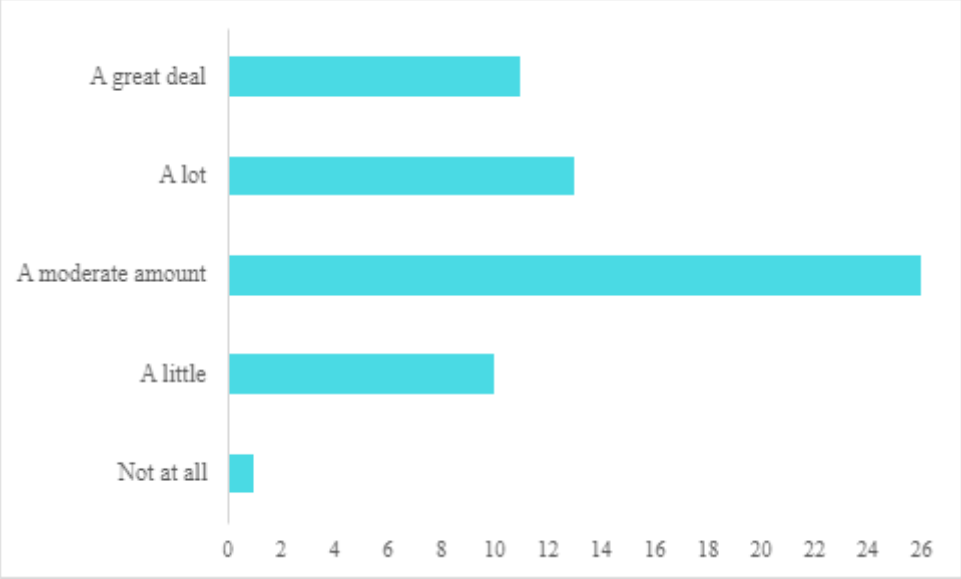
6. Findings

This chapter presents the findings split into 12 categories, relative to the survey questions. Bar graphs are present, and sections are often accompanied with relevant short-answer responses. Findings are not generalisable as only 60-62 participants responded. Nevertheless, patterns have emerged from the data.

Question 1. Engagement

Figure 1

Q1: I was engaged in my NCEA learning



81.96% were engaged in their learning in some capacity. 16.39% were 'A little' engaged. 1.64% were not engaged at all. Māori and Pacific Peoples were present at both ends of the engagement scale. Higher decile schools had more engaged participants of all ethnicities.

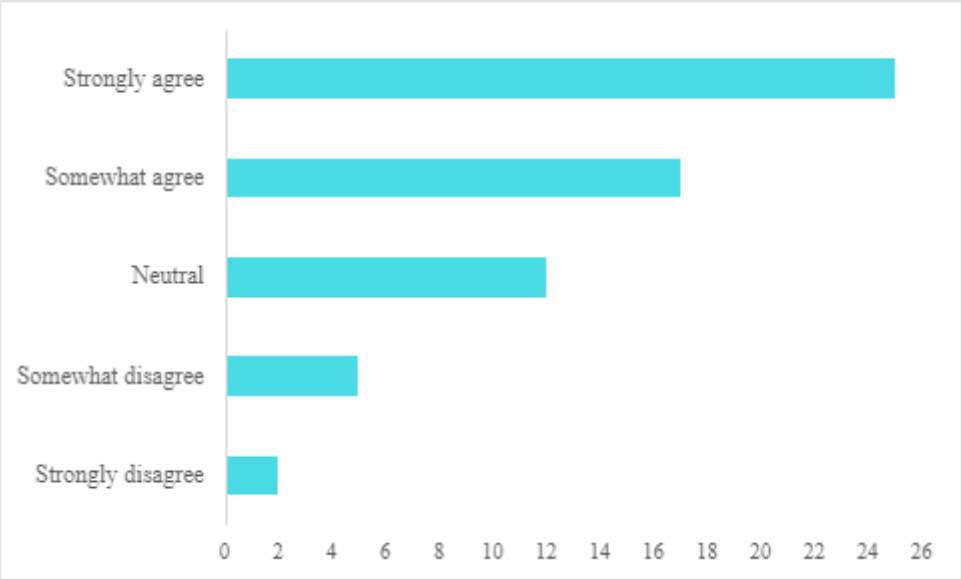
80% of the 'A little' respondents and the individual who was not at all engaged were male. 20% at the time of the study were NEET youth. 40% worked in vocational roles. 40% identified as Māori and Pacific Peoples.

‘A great deal’ respondents: 63.63% were female. 18.18% identified as Māori and Pacific Peoples. 90.90% attended Decile 7-10 schools. Two respondents were still studying but the remainder were employed in STEM sector occupations.[27] 45.45% of the most engaged participants attended state integrated or private schools.

Question 2. Motivation

Figure 2

Q2: I tried to achieve the best NCEA results I could



The majority of participants tried to achieve the best NCEA results they could. The linear trend signifies the steady increase in the number of respondents invested in their studies.

Of the ‘Strongly disagree’ and ‘Somewhat disagree’ responses; 42.86% were female and 57.14% were male. Nearly three quarters (71.43%) were Māori or Pacific Peoples. All respondents in these two categories attended Decile 4-7 schools. Participants tried less to achieve at lower-mid decile schools.

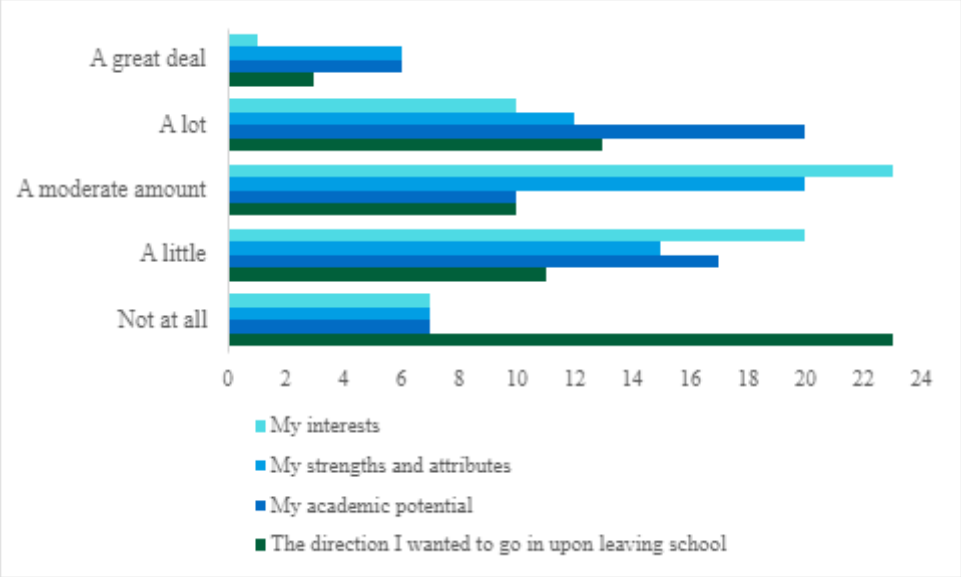
[27] STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Question 3. Learning

This question has four subtopics assessing the extent to which NCEA helped participants understand their interests, strengths and attributes, academic potential, and post-school ambitions.

Figure 3

Q3: NCEA helped me to understand:



Interests

37.70% of participants maintained that NCEA helped them to understand their interests 'A moderate amount'. Of these participants, 82.60% attended Decile 7-10 schools. 34.78% identified as Māori or Pacific Peoples.

'Not at all' represents 11.48% of participants. 32.79% participants selected 'A little'.

Overall, more than half the survey participants indicated NCEA helped them to understand their interests to some degree.

Strengths and Attributes

One third of participants answered ‘A moderate amount’. Taken in conjunction with ‘A lot’ and ‘A great deal’ answers, NCEA helped 63.33% of students to understand their strengths and attributes.

NCEA helped 10% of participants ‘A great deal’ to recognise their strengths and attributes. However, 66.66% of this group attended Decile 9-10 schools. None of these participants were Māori or Pacific Peoples. 83.33% of this group were male and 83.33% embarked on careers in either the health, engineering or technology sectors. Listed occupations included ‘Doctor’ and ‘Clinical Pharmacist’.

11.67% of participants maintained that NCEA did not help them to understand their strengths and attributes at all.

Academic Potential

“I personally did not feel NCEA prepared me at all for the academic step-up into university.”

11.67% selected ‘Not at all’. Almost half (42.86%) of these participants selected the same response for ‘Interests’ and ‘Strengths and Attributes’. This cohort attended Decile 5-7 schools and were New Zealand European, Asian or Other ethnicities.

A third of participants felt NCEA helped them to recognise their academic potential. Males and females were equally represented in the ‘A lot’ category. In this category, a quarter were Māori and Pacific Peoples. 85% of this group attended Decile 7-10 schools.

10% of respondents attributed NCEA as being extremely helpful in understanding their academic potential.

Direction Upon Leaving School

38.33% of participants did not feel NCEA provided them with help in deciding a direction upon leaving school. 78.20% of this cohort were male. No ethnicities were exempt and 50% were known NEET Youth.

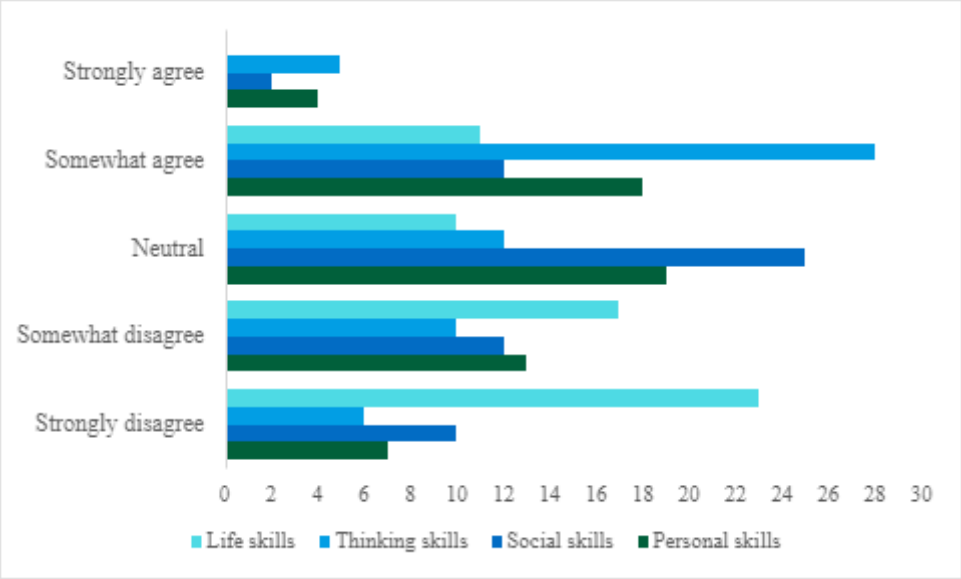
30.43% of this cohort identified as Māori and Pacific Peoples. Participants attended Decile 4-9 schools. 91.30% of this group attended state schools.

Question 4. Confidence in 21st Century Skills

This question assessed the development of confidence in relation to life, thinking, social and personal skills.

Figure 4

Q4: An NCEA education developed my confidence in the following areas:



Life Skills

65.57% disagreed in some capacity that NCEA developed their confidence in life skills.

"NCEA needs to be less focused on teaching students to pass an exam and more oriented towards developing learning skills, an ability to think critically and gaining an understanding of practical real-world tasks."

18.03% of participants selected ‘Somewhat agree’. Of this group 42.86% identified as Māori and Pacific Peoples and 85.71% attended Decile 7-10 schools.

Significantly, none of the participants selected ‘Strongly agree’.

“Very few opportunities for the development of life skills. Opportune time for these skills to be taught as an adolescent transitions to adult.”

Thinking Skills

‘Strongly disagree’ comprised 9.84% of responses. 83.33% were male. One third were known NEET youth.

At 45.9%, ‘Somewhat agree’ is the largest collective result for Question 4. Respondents identified as New Zealand European or Asian. 83.33% attended Decile 8-10 schools. When combined with ‘Strongly agree’, more than half of participants acknowledged NCEA helped them to develop confidence in thinking skills.

Social Skills

22.95% of participants agreed NCEA helped them develop confidence in social skills. In comparison, 36.06% of participants disagreed to some extent.

40.98% had no opinion either way and remained ‘Neutral’. The neutral majority may have skewed findings.

Personal Skills

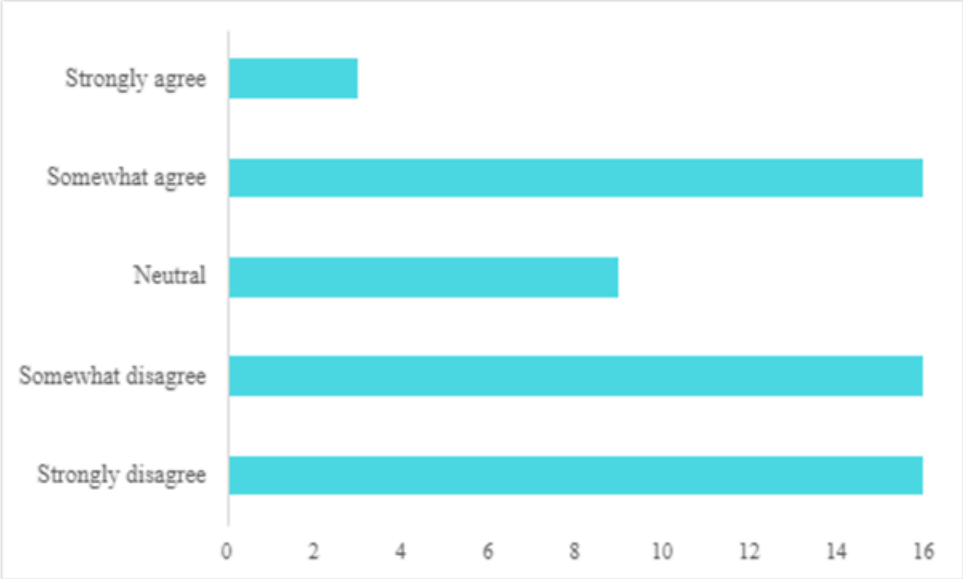
‘Neutral’ at 31.15% was the largest result and may indicate some confusion as to what personal skills intended to measure.

Over a third of participants (35.96%) agreed in some capacity that NCEA developed confidence in personal skills.

Question 5a. Lifelong Learning

Figure 5

Q5.a: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "NCEA inspired me to seek knowledge and become a lifelong learner after leaving school."



'Strongly disagree', 'Somewhat disagree' and 'Somewhat agree' all returned the same result of 26.67%. A total of 53.34% disagreed in some capacity.

"School sucks and saps your creativity and will to learn."

> *The main issue with NCEA is more fundamental than just tweaking subject availability and communication. Outside of New Zealand, NCEA provides no opportunities as it isn't internationally recognised. The curriculum is outdated and doesn't change to fit modern students who end up learning more outside of school … I believe we should abandon NCEA as a whole and adopt IGCSE. That way more opportunities are available to students outside of New Zealand and will allow more assistance in teaching due to its wider appeal.*

Question 5b. Preparation for Training, Education and Workforce

Figure 6

Q.5b: NCEA prepared me for:

Further Training and Education

50.82% of respondents selected 'Somewhat' (44.26%) or 'Strongly agree' (6.56%) that NCEA prepared them for further training and education.

29.51% disagreed in some capacity. 77.78% of these participants were male.

"Didn't really do a good job at preparing you for university."

> *I found it disheartening to get poor grades from NCEA which now at my level of learning means nothing … If I can barely pass NCEA but get a degree and do my Masters [B+ average], I think it says a lot about the NCEA system because I can clearly do the postgraduate studies but that could have easily been hindered by my NCEA results and not allowing me University Entrance.*

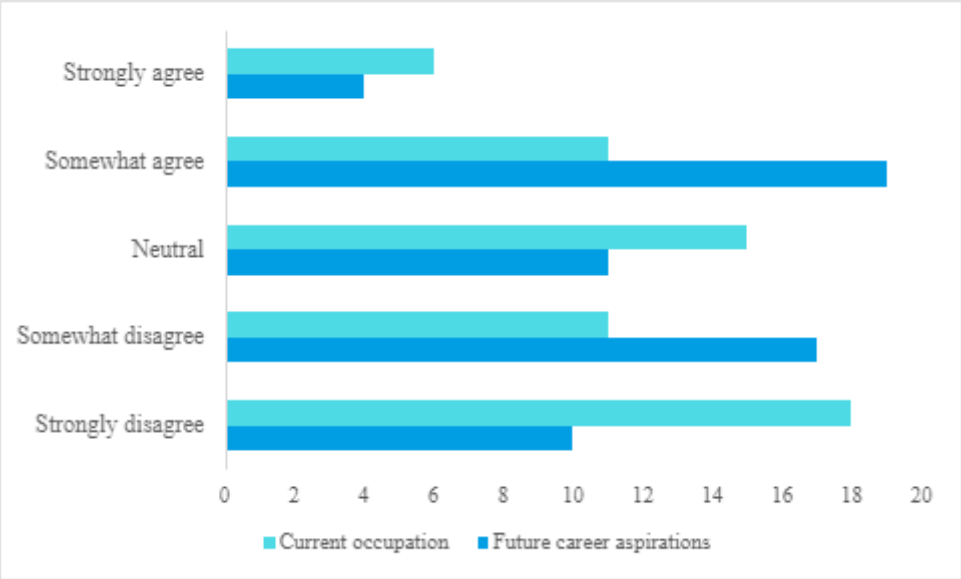
The Changing Workforce

A third of participants ‘Somewhat’ disagreed and 21.67% ‘Strongly’ disagreed that NCEA prepared them for the changing workforce. Only 11.67% of participants ‘Somewhat’ agreed. A third of participants selected ‘Neutral’.

Question 5c. Relevance to Current Occupation and Future Career

Figure 7

Q.5c: What I learnt through NCEA is relevant to my:



Current Occupation

The largest response from participants when asked if what they learnt through NCEA was relevant to their current occupation was ‘Strongly disagree’ at 29.51%. 72.22% of participants in this field were male.

> *Incorporate more work experience into the curriculum. People don't find out they dislike their degree the majority of the time until they are halfway through. NCEA's structure expects students to choose a career in a field of which they've never experienced.*

"Felt like it was useless. Was just a tool to get students to work. After high school it's never been referenced. If you want to attend uni you still can after a few years."

Future Career Aspirations

31.15% 'Somewhat agree' and 6.56% selected 'Strongly agree'. Although there were only a small number of participants in the latter field, three quarters identified as Māori and Pacific Peoples who felt that what they had learnt through NCEA was relevant to their future career aspirations.

27.87% selected 'Somewhat disagree'. These participants included a mix of occupations, from Doctor to Fitter and attended a range of schools from Decile 4-10.

Of the 16.39% who strongly disagreed, 90% identified as New Zealand European, Asian or Other and a total of 70% were male.

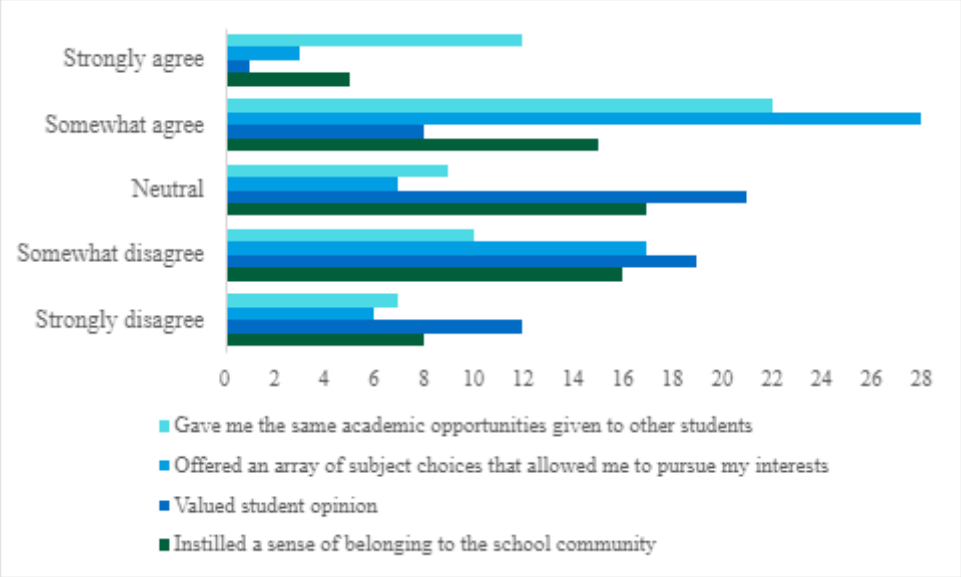
"NCEA is dated, unsupportive, and does not set people up for success in the workforce."

Question 6. School Experience

This question assessed school experience including, academic opportunities, subject choice, student opinion and belonging.

Figure 8

Q6: I felt that my school:



Gave me the same Academic Opportunities

56.67% 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' agreed NCEA gave them the same academic opportunities as other students. In contrast, 28.34% 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' disagreed. Māori and Pacific Peoples represented more than half of the recipients who disagreed their schools had given them the same academic opportunities.

"All kids should get the same opportunities to do all the assessments!"

"You'll only make the education gap worse with the NCEA system. Private school kids will do all the assessments available, us small town, low decile students just won't have the opportunities because we aren't being taught."

Offered an Array of Subject Choices

50.82% agreed in some capacity NCEA offered an array of subject choices that allowed them to pursue their interests. 80.64% of these participants attended Decile 7-10 schools.

> *I struggled with the NCEA system at my school because as a lower decile school, they didn't have the resources to cater for someone who wanted to pursue a university education (no dedicated Calculus class, no Level 3 Physics teacher) … I had to do a university preparation course before starting my degree.*

Valued Student Opinion

More than half of participants disagreed in some capacity that their school valued student opinion. 'Strongly disagree' 19.67%, 'Somewhat disagree' 31.15%.

14.75% selected 'Somewhat agree' or 'Strongly agree'. 88.89% of these respondents attended Decile 7-10 schools. Over a third of participants were non-committal.

"My school cared more about their appearance than they did about student's individual academic achievements."

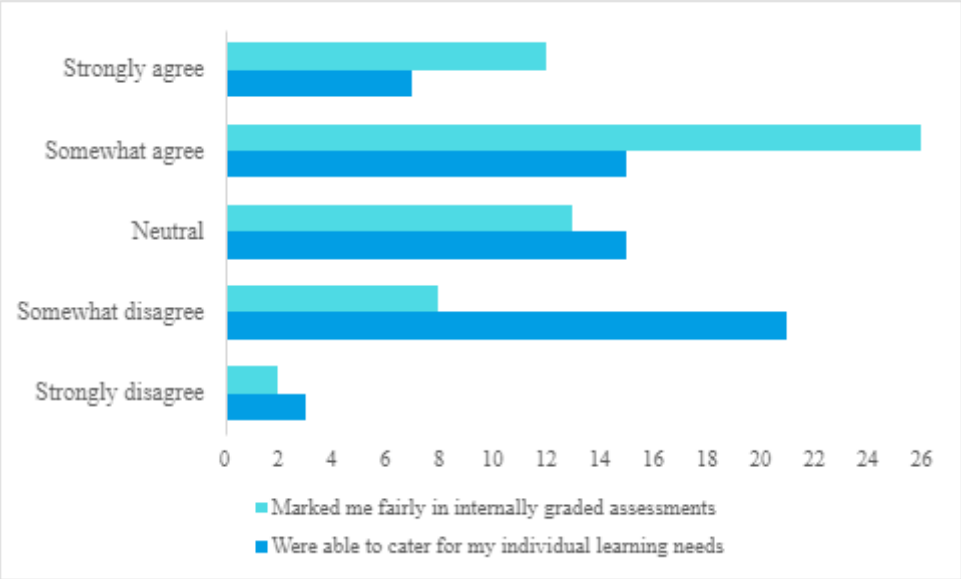
Instilled a Sense of Belonging

Results show a relatively even split between participants disagreeing (39.34%), agreeing (27.87%) or remaining neutral (32.79%) towards their school instilling a sense of belonging in the school community.

Question 7a. Teacher Marking and Learning Needs

Figure 9

Q7.a: I felt that my teachers:



Fairly Marked in Internal Assessments

42.62% selected 'Somewhat agree'; 19.67% 'Strongly agree'. In regard to the latter, half of the schools were single sex and over 90% of them were Decile 7-9. A higher percentage of Māori and Pacific Peoples (62.5%) somewhat disagreed they were fairly marked in internally graded assessments.

Catered for my Individual Learning Needs

Overall results show that at 39.35%, slightly more participants disagreed that their individual learning needs were catered for by teachers, compared to 36.07% that either 'Somewhat' or 'Strongly' agreed. In the 'Strongly agree' category, all participants attended higher decile secondary schools and came from a range of ethnicities and occupations.

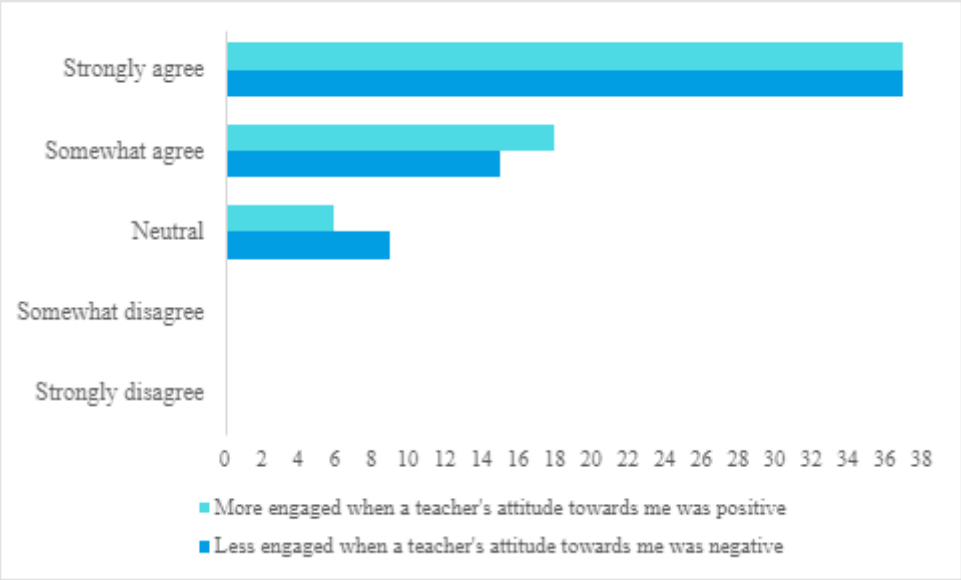
> *My teacher said' "Why do you want to do the assessment? You already have enough credits." This attitude towards learning is wrong, and because of the system, teachers are able to foster*

this attitude in kids simply because they can't be bothered to teach something… All teachers care about is getting our credits, endorsing the subject, and to them that means their job is done, even if there is still more to learn in the subject.

Question 7b. Teacher Attitude and Student Engagement

Figure 10

Q7.b: I felt that I was:



90.17% of respondents ‘Somewhat’ and ‘Strongly’ agreed they were more engaged when a teacher's attitude towards them was positive.

“It’s culture and teachers that instil the want for lifelong learning.”

85.25% of respondents ‘Somewhat’ and ‘Strongly’ agreed they were less engaged when a teacher's attitude towards them was negative.

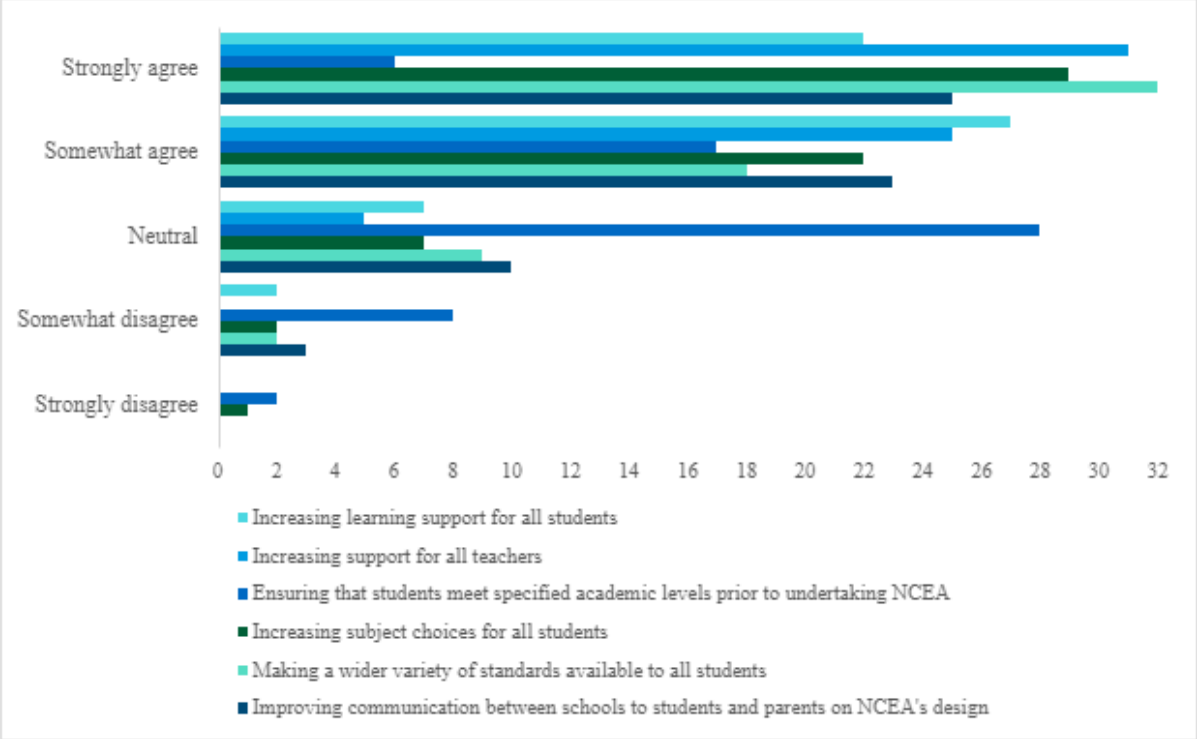
Didn't really feel engaged or interested in any of my classes except for the sciences… All the teachers that were enthusiastic in their classes always had my attention which was usually the science classes, chemistry and physics, maths, etc. Taking those classes in Year 13 definitely sparked a love for science and mechanics.

Question 8. NCEA Improvement Options

This question assessed the Change Programme suggestions for NCEA improvement.

Figure 11

Q8: NCEA could be improved by:



Increasing Learning Support for All Students

84.48% of participants 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' agreed NCEA could be improved by increasing learning support for all students.

"I was diagnosed with inattentive ADHD as an adult and I'm still becoming aware of all the missed opportunities and success from not having any learning support or being accommodated for through NCEA."

"NCEA needs improvements regarding support for disabled/chronically ill students."

Increasing Learning Support for All Teachers

91.82% of participants 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' agreed NCEA could be improved by increasing support for all teachers.

"My most transferable knowledge and skills are courtesy of my teachers, not NCEA."

Ensuring that Students Meet Specified Academic Levels Prior to Undertaking NCEA

45.90% selected 'Neutral' which shows that a large proportion of recipients reserved judgement on this question.

9.84% selected 'Strongly agree'. Out of this small amount, 80% of participants attended single sex, state integrated Decile 7-9 schools. Of the 13.11% that selected 'Somewhat disagree', 75% were male and half attended lower Decile 4-6 schools.

Increasing Subject Choices for All Students

83.61% of participants 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' agreed NCEA could be improved by increasing subject choices for all students.

"The range of subjects offered at my school probably wasn't indicative of the full array offered by the NCEA system."

Making a Wider Variety of Standards Available to All Students

81.97% of participants 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' agreed NCEA could be improved by making a wider variety of standards available to all students.

"Not enough range in what you could study."

Improving Communication Between Schools to Students and Parents on NCEA's Design

78.68% of all participants 'Somewhat' and 'Strongly' agreed NCEA could be improved with better communication between schools to students and parents on NCEA's design. 40.98% 'Strongly' agreed.

"Hopefully, nowadays it has improved but based on my own anecdotal experience, I think when/if I do have kids of my own one day, they would learn a lot more from being home-schooled."

Question 9. If you have any additional comments relating to your experience with NCEA, how it was implemented by your school and teachers or its relevance to life outside of school:

Participants had the opportunity to add their own personal opinions on NCEA and responses varied from short answers to over 700 words. (See Appendix I for complete answers). Specifically, they tended to offer their own personal critique of NCEA and recommendations for improvement. Participants reflected on their experience with the education system, their school, teachers, subjects and shared their thoughts on NCEA's irrelevance to life outside school. Even if a participant chose answers in the multi-choice questions that indicated a relatively positive NCEA experience, their comments spoke otherwise. Several common themes emerged from the comments.

Subject Efficacy and Availability

A male who worked in the construction industry critiqued NCEA implementation at his school but noted; "NCEA is an imperfect system but struck a good balance between internal and external assessment." From the comments, STEM subjects seemed to be a success of NCEA. Multiple participants favoured STEM as the subjects were more engaging and better prepared them for further training and education, in comparison to other subjects.

> *NCEA tends to favour academically inclined students, more so students who excel in STEM subjects. My school tended to favour these subjects and offered more of these classes in the timetable. This resulted in less classes for other subjects like art, history, languages etc to be offered.*

"NCEA seems to work for STEM minded people going into STEM fields and careers."

"I feel the subject English at NCEA level didn't really help me during my [university] degree."

"The subjects I found most lacking were the languages and English while the sciences and mathematics were the most engaging and prepared students best for future studies."

"English was boring."

Subject availability was an issue. Lower decile and rural schools did not have the same subjects available or even subject specific teachers for students. In some schools, students were actively encouraged to take subjects they were not interested in. Timetable clashes were also problematic.

"I was not able to pursue some of the subjects I was most interested in because they were not university approved."

> *Timetable clashes were common. As a student this felt like you had to pick and choose what classes truly mattered and got stuck with "filler" classes that held no relevance to your career path or interests. Additionally, I felt that classes which were not NCEA [UE] approved were discouraged by our school and teachers from taking these classes.*
>
> *I go to a small school. In Level 2 maths, because most kids just want to do stats, they only do the statistics exam, and the kids who want to do calculus miss out. If the curriculum was the same across the country this would not happen!*

Discontentment with the Position of Trade-based Subjects

One of the most prevalent themes was male discontentment with NCEA. Overall, males were less engaged (80% 'A little' engaged, one 'Not at all') and 57.14% disagreed they tried to achieve the best results they could. 78.20% of participants who believed NCEA did not help them at all in deciding the direction they wanted to go in upon leaving school were male. Over 70% who disagreed NCEA prepared them for further training and education were male. The majority of those who strongly disagreed NCEA

helped them to develop confidence in life skills (65.21%) and thinking skills (83.33%) were male. The majority of participants who strongly disagreed that NCEA was relevant to their current occupation (72.22%), or their future career aspirations (70%) were male. Multiple comments point towards the need for vocational direction, practical learning and work experience in school, most notably in the trades.

"Especially in urban areas, the trades are an under-appreciated set of careers. If NCEA focused on preparatory courses for major trades, it could reduce early student drop out and lead to better fulfilment from later careers."

"One of my teachers actually told me anyone who doesn't go to uni the year after they finish high school is basically destined to become a 'drop kick'."

"I did not find NCEA practical, I find myself better at lab or practical activities. I barely passed NCEA but have a B+ average in my postgraduate studies."

Marking and Grading Issues

There were several comments critiquing NCEA's NAME marking system. Comments favoured university grading that assigns percentages for assessments and gives an overall GPA per paper. Participants could not make sense of failing the strict criteria to receive an NCEA pass grade.

"I strongly disagree with the overweighting of final grades based on externals/end of year exams. This system of assessment applies unnecessary pressure and a false environment which puts an overemphasis on knowledge retention above practical application."

> *My main problem with NCEA is that it doesn't award extreme success, and it punishes borderline failure. If you are one mark off getting achieved, you don't get any credits. Additionally, the highest you can get is an excellence, which just gives you excellence credits which look nice, but doesn't do anything. A much better system of grading is the university way. For example, 49% wouldn't be a pass in NCEA so you wouldn't get any marks, but 49% in university is still 49% of the grade for that assignment, and still counts towards your GPA.*

> *Tests should be based on performance by percentage. At University if you get 49% you are still credited with a percentage of what you did right. With NCEA a Not Achieved is worth 0 credit when you could have got one question wrong to pass… I found NCEA a poor way of grading an individual's knowledge and found the grading system at university more fair and accurate.*
>
> *The entire NCEA system is all about getting qualifications. Entering the university system, it is incredible to see the change. The marking at university that uses percentages works better than NCEA's A/M/E… The marking scheme, using percentages, works a hundred times better than achieved merit excellence.*

"It's also graded so specifically when everyone has different learning and output skills."

"One exam at the end of the year, or at the end of Term 2 and Term 4 if that's preferable, to remove all the stress of those internals. Simple percentage and letter grades."

"The fact someone can fail and not get credits because they had one small error is a joke."

Irrelevance to Future

NCEA failed to either inspire many participants to seek knowledge or become lifelong learners after leaving school or prepare them for the changing workforce. Comments from participants show how irrelevant NCEA has been to their life outside of school.

"NCEA felt like a waste of time."

"In my case, NCEA and most of high school, in general, was pointless."

"All round a rubbish system … It's hilarious how little NCEA has played a role in my life."

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings, identified key themes in the data and cited comments made by participants relating to their NCEA experience. Although not generalisable, the findings displayed several themes and indicated an overall sense of discontentment with NCEA. Participants seemed to have a better educational experience at higher decile schools, and this was also true for Māori and Pacific students. Participants who attended lower decile schools felt they were not offered the same educational opportunities, evident in lack of subject choice and resources. NEET youth individuals came from a range of different deciles. Many participants were engaged in their learning to some degree and were motivated to achieve results. Lower decile students were less motivated and less engaged in their learning. The role of teacher attitude in student engagement was noted. The importance of communication and relationships between schools, teachers, parents and students were evident. Results strongly indicated male dissatisfaction. There was widespread agreement that NCEA was not achieving its objective of preparing students for their future and was not relevant to life outside of school. The following chapter discusses the survey findings in relation to the literature.

7. Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to connect the components of this thesis together by discussing the survey findings in relation to the literature and theoretical framework. The discussion is structured into four sections that present the central arguments in turn. These sections are: engagement and relevance, interschool variation and educational inequality; and historical and contemporary systemic barriers to achieving educational equality. Lastly, lists a series of policy recommendations.

Argument One: Engagement Relevance

Although my survey indicated that many students were engaged in their studies to some degree, disengagement remains an issue and is evident in NEET youth rates. Survey findings also reveal a disconnect between what NCEA offers as an education system and the skills necessary for life outside school. Based on survey responses and critical literature, NCEA's capacity to engage students whilst delivering its objectives of preparation and relevance to the 21st century, can be called into question.

Disengagement and NEET Youth

The survey results indicate the majority of participants were engaged in their learning to some degree and motivated to try to achieve results. My personal experience meant that I found this result surprising as it directly contradicted my own experience of NCEA. However, 20% of known participants were NEET youth when the survey was conducted and their disengagement warrants further investigation. Survey findings revealed NEET was prevalent across all deciles and was not confined to specific socioeconomic cohorts. I was concerned to see such high rates of NEET participants in my survey, and I wanted to draw attention to this policy issue. This led me to consider potential reasoning as to why this disconnect in learning and life is occurring.

NEET statistics might be seen to represent a failing on NCEA's behalf to engage students and achieve its objectives of preparing them for civic duties (MOE, n.d.-a; NZQA, n.d.-d; NZQA, 2022c). This finding is documented in the literature as NCEA is considered to have several fundamental design and implementation flaws that negatively impact student engagement and motivation (Graham et al., 2010). Notably, some students felt that NCEA is easy, boring and lacks incentives for students to strive, with one

claiming, “It encourages people to be average” (Meyer et al., 2006, p. 49; Webber et al., 2018). Long survey answers included statements of a similar nature, reflecting patterns evident in the literature.

Further to my survey findings and those of the WEAG (2019), attention needs to be paid to NEET youth. Disengagement in education increases the risk of becoming NEET which in turn, creates obstacles for future career opportunities and financial stability (MBIE, 2013). The possibility of employment decreases the longer individuals remain as NEET because employers are less likely to hire individuals who have long unexplained absences from the workforce, due to the general stigma that such individuals are unmotivated and unskilled (MBIE, 2013). Low educational attainment increases the likelihood of individuals entering precarious, low wage work (WEAG, 2019). The consequences of NEET (See Chapter One) also impact wider communities and the economy. Strategies to re-engage youth are expensive, but failure to do so undermines the “legitimacy of the state” (Strathdee, 2013, p. 30). Therefore, obtaining a qualification is a vital tool for constructive participation in society (OECD, 2021). Sufficiently engaging students in schooling is essential in maintaining a functioning democracy.

Literature links low motivation in learning with lower decile schools, which offer a high proportion of Unit standards, low-interest subject choice irrelevant to future aspirations and low expectations from schools and teachers (Jensen et al., 2010). Many teachers feel that NCEA does not motivate under-achieving students, consequently compounding the issue of disengagement, especially for marginalised individuals (Hipkins, 2007; Lipson, 2018). NCEA may contribute to social problems because disengagement in learning can impact on students’ long-term wellbeing, security and could ultimately lead to alienation from society (Madjar et al., 2009). Additionally, it can also perpetuate a cycle of unemployment and benefit dependency (WEAG, 2019). NEET youth face an increased likelihood of long-term poverty (WEAG, 2019).

21st Century Relevance and Preparation

Past policy initiatives aimed at increasing engagement and motivation such as introducing endorsements, appear to be effective (ERO, 2019; Madjar et al., 2010; NZQA, 2014; PPTA, 2017). A student commented, “Endorsements are motivating. Without that I would slack off” (ERO, 2019, p. 9). However, my survey findings revealed there are still engagement and motivation issues among some students, particularly males. This was an unexpected result because any mention of gender was a minor aspect of the literature in comparison to more dominant debates. The survey indicated many males were not

satisfied with their NCEA experience. Overall, males felt they had less direction and were less prepared for further training and education. 65.21% and 83.33% of those who strongly disagreed NCEA helped them to develop confidence in life skills and thinking skills were male.

The majority of survey participants who strongly disagreed NCEA was relevant to their current occupation or future career aspirations were also male. Comments pointed towards the necessity for more attention to be given to vocational subjects. These findings confirm that the Change Programme's introduction of the Vocational Pathways award is a worthwhile initiative. The strategy may increase engagement and provide better direction for students not wishing to enter tertiary study. Nearly 40% of participants said NCEA provided no direction for school leavers. Of this group, over 78% were male. Survey findings revealed over half of participants (53.34%) disagreed that NCEA inspires lifelong learning. Literature attributes this loss to a focus on over-assessment and credit accumulation (NZCER, 2018).

Survey findings contradict literature furthering NCEA's ability to "prepare students for further study, life, and work" as "Students can learn things as part of their NCEA programmes that provide clear pathways into further education, training, and employment" (NZCER, 2018, p. 10). High proportions of students in the survey disagreed that NCEA was relevant to their current occupation and over half also disagreed that NCEA was relevant to the changing workforce. However, it should be noted, 50.82% agreed in some capacity that NCEA prepared them for further training and education. Nevertheless, survey findings ultimately revealed that NCEA is not delivering on its objectives of preparation for all students. Strathdee (2013) notes, there is a disconnect between education, training and the current demands of the labour force. The low skilled workforce in Aotearoa means individuals may lack motivation to achieve in education because "there is little reason for them to gain qualifications" (Strathdee, 2013, p. 38). This aligns with written responses from participants claiming that the NCEA qualification is essentially meaningless.[28] Strathdee (2013) recommends policy efforts to shift Aotearoa towards a higher skilled workforce with higher wages to motivate students to gain qualifications.

[28] *"Felt like it was useless. Was just a tool to get students to work. After high-school it's never been referenced."*
"NCEA felt like a waste of time."
"In my case, NCEA and most of high school, in general, was pointless."
"All round a rubbish system … It's hilarious how little NCEA has played a role in my life."

Regarding 21st century skills, 65.57% disagreed NCEA helped to develop confidence in life skills. Nearly half (45.9%) agreed in some capacity that NCEA developed thinking skills. Chu et al. (2017) highlights the need for educational departments to offer sufficient guidance and support to schools for the teaching and assessing of these skills. Literature also emphasises the necessity of acquiring a baseline of functional knowledge before 21st century skills can be properly developed (Wood & Hughson, 2024).

Argument Two: Interschool Variation Harms Educational Equality for Low Decile Students

The flexibility of school-based choice creates interschool variation. While not definitive, school decile rating is a significant factor affecting educational equality. Decile level can be indicative of differences in NCEA experience. Lower decile schools may encounter resourcing and accessibility issues which restrict learning opportunities for students. Although the survey did not explicitly address flexibility, the findings draw attention to issues surrounding NCEA's flexible design which allows for interschool variation. In this way, both the survey and the literature reinforce the argument that the implementation of NCEA in different decile schools strongly impacts OTL and educational equality. This thesis argues that NCEA's interschool variation negatively affects marginalised individuals, specifically Māori and Pacific students. The introduction of the EQI funding may not sufficiently address prevailing inequality.

The Decile System and Interschool Variation

The publicised strengths of 'flexibility' and 'inclusivity' are not fully supported in NCEA literature or reflected in the survey findings. Interschool variation perpetuates pre-existing inequalities within the education system (Jensen et al., 2010; Lipson, 2018). There are concerns that, "Too much flexibility is given between schools as to what they offer" (Meyer et al., 2006, p. 52; NZCER, 2018). Although Decile 1 and 2 schools were not present in the survey, the same trajectory that exists for decile achievement rates, also proved accurate for student experience.

Overall, survey participants were more engaged, motivated and satisfied with their NCEA experience at higher decile schools. Academic potential was realised and participants felt they were better equipped with preparatory skills for their futures. In contrast, participants who attended lower decile schools felt more negative towards NCEA and believed they were offered a different standard of education with less

opportunities available to them. These participants indicated the negative impact the lack of resources such as subject and standard availability had on their education.[29] One participant noted they had to undertake a university preparation course before starting tertiary study. There was a common theme surrounding the lack of availability of STEM subjects at lower decile schools. This is a surprising finding because some students (particularly higher decile) noted that NCEA appears to be delivering where STEM subjects are concerned.

Resourcing constraints and subject accessibility issues are well documented problems in the literature, particularly for lower decile and smaller schools (ERO, 2019; Jensen et al., 2010; Turner et al., 2010, p. 25; Yuan et al., 2010). The flexibility of student choice is dependent on a school's ability to deliver a wider range of academic options. Flexibility depends on the capacity of schools to offer learning opportunities. Furthermore, higher decile largely equates to higher rates of educational achievement for all students, regardless of ethnicity (Yuan et al., 2010). The disparity in achievement in relation to deciles may be indicative of resource availability, assessment opportunities and the quality of teaching and learning in different schools (ERO, 2019). Better support for lower decile students is not considered in the Change Programme, but it is a worthwhile policy pursuit (NZCER, 2019).

The differences in the quality of education students receive at different decile schools is also worthy of discussion. This is evidenced by annual achievement rates, as well as being a significant factor of note in the Change Programme pilot results for functional literacy and numeracy (See Appendix A and B). In the first pilot, there was a 60-68% difference in achievement between Decile 1 and 10 students (Evaluation Associates, 2022). Educational quality in low decile schools is a serious policy concern that needs to be addressed. The prevalence of Unit standards appears to be harming Aotearoa's most marginalised students because they do not appear to receive the same OTL as students at higher deciles. To improve educational equality, Māori, Pacific and low decile students need to be given the same opportunity to achieve UE (Wilson et al., 2016).

[29] *"I struggled with the NCEA system at my school because as a lower decile school, they didn't have the resources to cater for someone who wanted to pursue a university education (no dedicated Calculus class, no Level 3 Physics teacher) … I had to do a university preparation course before starting my degree."*
"You'll only make the education gap worse with the NCEA system. Private school kids will do all the assessments available, us small town, low decile students just won't have the opportunities because we aren't being taught."
"…the kids who want to do calculus miss out. If the curriculum was the same across the country this would not happen!"

The Impact on Māori and Pacific Students

Statistically, Māori and Pacific Peoples are more likely to live in high-deprivation communities and attend low decile schools (Agnew, 2010; Jensen et al., 2010; Shulruf et al., 2010). Survey findings revealed that generally, Māori and Pacific participants had better NCEA experiences at higher decile schools. Results showed that these participants felt their academic potential was realised and were equipped with necessary skills for their future. Overall, survey findings demonstrate that higher decile schools may be implementing NCEA in a manner that provides Māori and Pacific students with a better NCEA experience.

The Māori and Pacific participants who were engaged a great deal attended high decile schools. In contrast, 71.43% who were not motivated at all to achieve attended lower decile schools. Furthermore, a greater proportion of higher decile Māori and Pacific students undertook study at a tertiary level. Survey findings align with well-documented research revealing the connection between higher decile, UE-approved subjects and improved ethnicity-based attainment rates. In comparison to lower decile, Unit standards and lower levels of motivation, engagement and achievement (See Chapter Four).[30]

Curriculum is seen as a 'cultural construct' and it is vital that policymakers make allowances for cultural differences in education (Edwards et al., 2007). Although it is important to have a culturally responsive education system, low achievement rates may reflect low decile school underperformance, as opposed to culture alone (Marie et al., 2008; Rata, 2009). Marie et al. (2008) suggests further research to measure the impact that culturally relevant Mātauranga Māori strategies have had in raising Māori achievement, particularly as Māori are still underachieving (See Appendix A). Mātauranga Māori is emphasised in the Change Programme but no mention is given to better support Pacific or low decile students (Kenny, 2021; NZCER, 2019). Pacific student funding is ranked third in the new EQI, where previously it was the highest under the decile system (MOE, n.d.-c).

EQI Funding: Repetition?

The decile system has long been used as a proxy for school quality, despite the MOE and media's claim that deciles were a false and inaccurate measure of school quality (Milne, 2022; MOE, n.d.-e; Venuto,

[30] (ERO, 2019; Jensen et al., 2010; Lipson, 2018; NZQA, 2022d; Turner et al., 2010; Yuan et al., 2010).

2022). The MOE (n.d.-d) states that, “Deciles have been misunderstood to be a de-facto measurement of school “quality”. This is not the case.” (p. 3). However, if achievement rates are a measure of school ‘quality’ then decile rating is largely indicative of performance (see Appendix A). The MOE contradicts itself by stating that low socioeconomic status has a negative effect on educational success (MOE, n.d.b). Gordon (2013) insists, “It is clear that socio-economic factors are important indicators of performance at school, both in New Zealand and all other countries” (p. 4). The EQI will group schools into seven bands (Education Counts, 2024). The MOE (2023c) warns that the EQI grouping will not be a way to measure school quality.

The EQI aligns with the social democratic view that funding is necessary to uplift marginalised groups, though funding alone is an ineffective strategy to improve educational equality (Rata, 2009; Ray, 2009). Social democrats aim to lift underperforming cohorts by providing them with financial assistance because individuals must be motivated to assume a degree of personal responsibility. However, Marxists argue “social democracy can be viewed as an illusion to protect capitalism,” and it should be noted, equity-based measures align with neoliberal perspectives (Taylor, 2007, p. 54). In the 1990s when equity was first introduced in the education policy sphere, it was criticised for having the capacity to avoid addressing inequality (Simon, 2000). For example, under the EQI, the linking of funding to individual students has essentially diverted policy attention away from the role socioeconomic status plays in educational inequality. Although the EQI may reduce interschool competition, it may also become more difficult to document disparities between schools (MOE, n.d.-e).

Argument Three: Historic and Contemporary Systemic Barriers to Achieving Educational Equality

This thesis argues that there are enduring structural themes and challenges influencing persistent inequality in Aotearoa’s education system. Research highlights how historically, the education system was placed on unequal foundations that remain in present-day. Aotearoa’s education system does not provide all students with an equal learning experience.

Socioeconomic Status

My research and historical analysis has revealed that socioeconomic status plays a significant role in disparities in educational equality, opportunity, quality and achievement. Rata (2009) notes that Aotearoa has attempted to create an egalitarian society but at the same time, socioeconomic inequality has prevailed. Although differing cultural values should be taken into account in curriculum design, the impact of socioeconomic status on education should be given greater attention (Graham et al., 2010; Jensen et al., 2010; Rata, 2009; Webber et al., 2018). The survey findings show that Māori and Pacific students—who are among Aotearoa's most marginalised, achieve better results at higher decile schools. Likewise, survey findings also revealed that New Zealand European students who attended lower decile schools tended to have negative experiences of NCEA.

NZQA states, "it is probable that the lower average socio-economic level of Māori and Pasifika students is a factor influencing the lower qualifications attainment rates for students of these ethnicities." (NZQA, 2010, p. 15). The survey findings indicated that students who attended lower decile schools did not have the same educational opportunities, subjects or resources available to them. Lower decile schools are clearly in need of more support, resourcing, teacher provision and funding (Lipson, 2018; Marie et al., 2008; PPTA, 2018; Rata, 2009; Ray; 2009). These problems are long-standing, for example, the Starpath Project urged lower decile secondary schools to give their students adequate opportunities to achieve UE (Yuan et al., 2010). Education is a method to raise socioeconomic status and escape the harmful consequences of poverty (Simon, 2000; WEAG, 2019). However, education in high deprivation areas may serve to perpetuate pre-existing inequalities as opposed to alleviating them.

Neoliberalism and Capitalism: Unavoidable Inequality?

This section questions whether the prevailing structural disadvantages in Aotearoa's education system are unavoidable, as a result of capitalism and neoliberalism. In undertaking my research, I started to question why, even after multiple policy attempts aimed at improving it, inequality remains such a pervasive issue throughout the education system and wider society. My historical analysis, theoretical framework and considerations on the Marxist view of education led me to the realisation that, try as policymakers and consecutive governments might, raising equality may not be feasible. Of note is the intersection between Marxism, neoliberalism and worsening inequality.

Marx denounced the possibility of educational equality because the oppressive nature of capitalism relies on class structure and preparing individuals for exploitation in the labour market (Rata, 2009). Greaves et al. (2013) believed that Marx himself would be sceptical over education's supposed good intention of attempting to cater towards student interest because education functions in capitalism's favour. Even issues such as NEET youth can be explained using these perspectives. Marxists recognise unemployment as a structural issue which aligns with the neoliberal emphasis on competitive markets that includes the need for unemployment as a mechanism to control inflation (Auerbach, 2007; Greaves et al., 2013; Klees, 2017). Despite governing powers claiming contrasting political identities, the political economy remains neoliberal, and governments still function under this framework (Manwaring et al., 2024). A further consideration into the continued perpetuation of educational inequality seen throughout low decile schools, is the possibility that the capitalist system is preparing already marginalised groups for low wage, precarious, high insecurity work. Specifically, "education has a role in conditioning and institutionalising children not only for exploitation at work but towards an acceptance of their future life conditions and expectations" (Greaves et al., 2013, p. 146).

Marxists maintain that education is "intentionally rigged in favour of the elite capitalist class" as a means of ensuring the necessary reproduction of social inequality (Hill, 2022, p. 71). Ultimately, the oppressive structures of capitalism and neoliberalism are designed to maintain inequality on a global scale (Klees, 2017). For there to be equality in education, the working class would need to become conscious, the class system eradicated, and society would need to be restructured in its entirety (Greaves et al., 2013).

Policy Recommendations: Improving Educational Quality, Opportunity and Equality

Areas of NCEA and the wider New Zealand education system need further refinement. The following section presents a series of policy recommendations for improvement, supported by thesis' research. Suggested modifications focus on the composition of NCEA and practical implementation of policy at a structural level. The MOE may wish to consider these recommendations, especially as policy efforts such as the Change Programme indicate a continued desire to refine NCEA.

NEET Youth Rate as a Measure of NCEA Success in Schools

Student engagement is difficult to measure due to its subjective nature (Axelson & Flick, 2010; Johnson, 2015). NEET youth epitomises disengagement in both school and society and represents a failing of both NCEA's objectives and schools to sufficiently engage these individuals (Strathdee, 2013). Therefore, measuring NEET youth rates per school might provide a useful tool, particularly as survey findings show NEET individuals are not confined to certain demographics so it is a widespread issue.

In the absence of deciles and the media's competitive league tables, it could be beneficial to report on NEET youth alongside achievement rates. Measuring each schools' long term NEET youth rates annually may be useful in discovering to what extent NCEA is achieving its objectives of civic preparation and if schools are preparing students for their future. This policy may reduce pressure for schools to meet UE rates, instead encouraging them to employ strategies to retain students.

The Change Programme's Vocational Pathways (VP) award is a strategy that may also help to reduce the stigma attached to non-traditional subjects. Both the VP and the NEET youth measures may cause schools to widen their vocation options, which in turn could improve student engagement, particularly for males.

85% Pass Rate Target Removal

Removal of the 85% pass rate target in its entirety would help to improve NCEA's validity and credibility as a qualification. The 85% target pressures schools and teachers to pass students they may not consider academically capable (Emerson et al., 2014; NZCER, 2018). Forcing pass rates is not an indication of improved education levels and can prove damaging to students who may not be properly prepared for further training and study (PPTA, 2015). Although an increase in achievement was viewed as being 'necessary for the economy', it may in fact prove harmful as school-leavers do not have an adequate level of education needed to enter society (Downes, 2015a).

Survey findings and literature revealed some students did not feel they were prepared for university and this opinion is shared by tertiary educators (Emerson et al., 2014; Emerson et al., 2015; Hipkins et al., 2016; Tapaleao, 2013). Removing the 85% pass rate target may reduce NCEA's well documented characteristics of over-assessment and credit farming, helping teachers and students to be less focused on credit attainment. In turn, this could potentially help NCEA to place more focus on quality learning rather

than teaching to the test. The MOE should be concerned with improving educational quality, not merely achievement rates.

State Centralised MOE: Removing Boards of Trustees

This thesis advocates for a state-based centralised educational organisation that has oversight over all secondary schools, shifting governing power away from Boards of Trustees. This change would mean Boards of Trustees would essentially be disbanded. In the past, *Tomorrows' Schools* was criticised because measures did not sufficiently address pre-existing inequalities between schools (Ray, 2009; Simon, 2000). Ray (2009) argues, "communities have differing access to money, expertise and social and professional contacts, how could it be expected that the outcomes for their children will be the same?" (p. 26). The PPTA (2018) explains how schools essentially operate as islands and that this competitive environment is damaging and reduces equality. Boards operate and exist in already unequal environments, so it is unlikely that the most disadvantaged students benefit from this initiative. Introducing Boards in a competitive neoliberal era that encouraged competition, private investment and viewed education as another commodity undermines any notion of equality in this policy design. Reverting to a historic Department of Education that oversees the curriculum, funding and allocation of resources to schools across the country may be a viable strategy to improve equality.

Balancing Standards: Core National Standards for the 21st Century

The variable ways schools are implementing NCEA is negatively impacting educational opportunity and quality. A potential strategy to increase equality is to introduce the teaching, learning and assessment of compulsory core national standards in specific subjects. These standards, taught consistently across all schools, would give all students the opportunity to learn skills necessary for the 21st century. Inspired by the Change Programme's compulsory functional literacy and numeracy standards (originally for entry into NCEA Level 1), a focus on a core set of standards in specific subjects may help NCEA to better achieve its purpose of educational equality. In suggesting this policy, it is important to note that NCEA's flexibility should be retained. Students should still be given the opportunity to diversify their learning in optional subjects of their choice.

Additionally, findings and literature reveal disparities in educational opportunity between deciles. Some subjects and Achievement standards are unavailable at lower decile schools. Alternatively, some

participants in higher decile schools emphasised their wish to pursue vocational subjects but were encouraged instead towards traditional academic pathways and UE attainment. Giving higher decile students the opportunity to sit Unit standards in their own personal areas of interest may both prepare and encourage them to pursue a future in this area. Balancing Achievement standards in lower decile schools and Unit standards in vocational subjects in higher decile schools would better align with the principle of egalitarianism. Additionally, the PPTA (2017) recommended restricting the amount of Unit standard credits students can obtain which would serve to increase credibility and improve equality of opportunity for low decile students.

Grading Changes: NAME System and External Moderation

Survey participants and individuals interviewed in the 2006 *Student Motivation* report and 2018 *NCEA Review* opposed NCEA's NAME three-point scale grading system because of the strict marking and lack of grade variety (Meyer et al., 2006; NZCER, 2018). The strict marking criteria frustrated individuals who felt it was inflexible and unfair (Meyer et al., 2006). The university percentage-based grade system was offered as a superior and preferable alternative. Percentage grades and the concept of assessments building towards a final GPA was considered fairer and more motivating. The MOE may wish to consider grading system alternatives.

Additionally, to completely remove the possibility of assessment bias and to reduce teacher workload, all internal assessments should be marked by external moderators. Although the majority of survey participants agreed to some extent that they were marked fairly by their teachers in internal assessments, there was a disproportionate amount of Māori and Pacific Peoples who disagreed. This policy change may prove beneficial for Māori and Pacific Peoples because it may help to improve educational equality and increase NCEA's credibility.

Conclusion

This chapter evaluated and connected survey findings to relevant literature. Three central arguments, born out of the research and survey findings were presented. Lastly, a series of policy recommendations were proposed. The following chapter concludes this thesis and answers the research questions.

8. Conclusion

This chapter concludes my thesis by revisiting my research aim and answering the research questions. Limitations are mentioned and avenues for future research are recommended.

Research Aim and Questions

My research endeavoured to evaluate NCEA as an education policy. In an effort to understand my own disengagement, I undertook this research in the hope that it would offer something useful and original to NCEA literature. I considered historical perspectives, contemporary literature and created a space for past students to share their opinion on NCEA. Therefore, this thesis offers a unique contribution to NCEA policy discussion. Early in the research process it became evident that past student voice was largely absent from NCEA debate. I felt it was important that these voices were heard—particularly the voices of the disengaged. The aim of this thesis was to investigate the establishment, implementation and reform of NCEA policy and practice. In particular, this thesis asked:

- How have education policies changed over time in Aotearoa?
- What are some of the issues and problems associated with NCEA in practice?
- According to academic commentary and past student views, to what extent has NCEA achieved its purposes and objectives?
- How do some past students view their experience of NCEA?

Research Summary

The four main areas of research conducted in this thesis were:

- An historical analysis of education policy
- A review of relevant policy documents
- A review of critical commentary on NCEA
- A survey on the views and experiences of past NCEA students

The first area of research: The analysis of Aotearoa's historic education system was undertaken in order to gain insight into the country's relationship with education and to provide the policy context for NCEA. The importance of the historical analysis of education policy was outlined and the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis was woven throughout. Social democracy, neoliberalism, Human Capital Theory (HCT), and the third way were explored, reinforcing the political, economic and ideological foundations of my research.

The second area of research: Operated as a bridge between the historical policy context of education in Aotearoa and the literature review. NCEA's system, design and evolution was examined, including its structure, purpose, objectives and recent policy initiatives

The third area of research: Analysed commentary on NCEA by examining and exploring existing scholarship in order to gain a thorough understanding of the qualification system and its impact since implementation. The literature review outlined dominant ideas, compared differing views, connected research similarities and created a space to develop this thesis' original research.

The fourth area of research: A survey was administered to strengthen past student voice for NCEA discussion and to address a gap in the literature. The views of survey participants, who had undertaken NCEA and entered into society as school leavers, provided comparative reflections between current life and NCEA experiences.

Question One: How have education policies changed over time in Aotearoa?

Although policy has shifted and adapted to external demands, underlying themes in education have remained remarkably similar throughout Aotearoa's history. Education policy does not exist in an independent reality and is impacted by societal inequalities, economic shocks, domestic and global events and political ideologies of governing groups. Educational agenda is not neutral as it reflects prevailing political ideologies and dominant societal and economic concerns. Throughout history, themes of egalitarianism and workforce preparation have remained core values in Aotearoa's education policy. Promoting equality of opportunity and attempts to maintain a functioning democracy are present in many strategies—particularly in the policies of consecutive social democratic governments. Neoliberal ideals of labour force preparation and policies intending to keep pace with growing economic demands have existed for decades. Neoliberalism shifted educations' focus to increased competition, seen through

forcing schools to essentially operate as competitive islands, preparing students for an aggressive labour market. The concept of equity also emerged, but it has been criticised as it has the capacity to avoid addressing inequality.

As Aotearoa entered the 21st century neoliberal and social democratic ideals were balanced by adopting the third way ideology. NCEA was born out of the growing necessity for a curriculum to meet labour force demands. Although policy efforts attempted to reduce past elitism of traditional academia, tensions between academic and vocational subjects still existed. NCEA was designed to be inclusive of both. However, there are unresolved systemic barriers that education policy failed to address throughout history and NCEA is no exception. Although assimilative policies of early New Zealand have transformed into initiatives aiming to be more culturally responsive, there are still vast ethnic disparities in education and in wider society. Despite recognising education as a means to uplift society, all policy to date has failed to improve educational inequalities for marginalised individuals, such as Māori, Pacific Peoples and those in lower socioeconomic positions.

Question Two: What are some of the issues and problems associated with NCEA in practice?

There are concerns that NCEA has failed to be correctly implemented in practice. NCEA has been placed on top of an already unequal foundation, so attempts to raise equality have been unsuccessful. The system has inherently inequitable barriers, meaning NCEA has been unable to deliver on the promise of equality. The qualification continues to perpetuate the cultural and socioeconomic inequities it was put in place to alleviate. This has occurred because NCEA's flexible design creates interschool variation. In particular, the variation in how NCEA is implemented between schools has had a detrimental impact on Aotearoa's most marginalised students who are not offered the same opportunities as higher decile students.

Research indicates that decile level, while not definitive, is a strong factor in the perpetuation of educational inequality. Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in disparities in educational attainment and this issue needs to be addressed. As Māori and Pacific students are more likely to attend low decile schools, this has caused discrepancies in achievement rates. The high proportion of Unit standards taught at low decile schools is indicative of teachers and schools' low expectations of students. Marginalised students have less opportunity to achieve UE and are more likely to be disengaged and

unmotivated in their studies. Failure to adequately engage students increases the risk of individuals becoming NEET youth.

Additionally, low decile students are particularly affected by credit farming which is caused by grade inflation policies such as the 85% pass rate target, thus reducing the credibility of NCEA. The validity and efficacy of NCEA as an educational qualification is also diminished by over-assessment, internal moderation and grading. Survey comments and research indicates that students are frustrated with the NAME grading system and strict marking requirements needed to attain certain grades. As a result students have expressed a preference for percentage-based grades. Ultimately, NCEA has quality, consistency and inclusivity issues. NCEA in practice is designed in such a way that it perpetuates inequalities.

Question Three: According to academic commentary and past student views, to what extent has NCEA achieved its purposes and objectives?

Purpose

NCEA may be achieving its purpose to give all students, regardless of ethnicity or social standing, the opportunity to achieve a senior secondary school qualification. However, upon closer inspection this purpose is flawed and does not promote the egalitarian values Aotearoa's education system was founded on. The lack of definitive learning requirements has created immense variation in what each qualification consists of. Although NCEA's flexibility is considered a strength, because it allows students to pursue their own learning pathways, opportunities are limited depending on what individual schools offer. This thesis draws attention to the disparities in educational equality, quality and opportunity between deciles. A core set of national standards as a foundation for functional learning should be required in conjunction with the option to select subjects of personal interest. In this way, NCEA can maintain flexibility whilst delivering equality. Ultimately NCEA's purpose should be centred on ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to receive the same quality education, not the equal opportunity to achieve a qualification, as this is open to interpretation.

Objectives

NCEA's objectives are based on neoliberal ideals of active citizenship and labour force participation. The qualification aims to prepare students for further training, education, the changing workforce and society. Additionally, it intends to promote lifelong learning and develop 21st century skills. The capacity of NCEA to deliver on its objectives is dependent on many factors, including school community and implementation of the qualification, teaching, resourcing, subject availability and student engagement, as well as attitudes towards learning. This is reflected in the literature and survey responses. The high proportion of NEET youth in the survey suggests that NCEA is not preparing some students for their future. This finding is shared by the majority of survey participants who felt they left school without any direction. Schools pressured to meet the 85% pass rate target emphasise UE attainment and this may prove detrimental to some students. For example, males wishing to pursue a vocational pathway can become disengaged in their learning. Survey responses indicated a high proportion of males believed NCEA failed to prepare them for vocational occupations in-line with their career aspirations.

Question Four: How do some past students view their experience of NCEA?

My survey sought the opinions of past student experiences of NCEA. Overall, the results indicated many individuals were dissatisfied with NCEA. Many felt NCEA was largely irrelevant to life outside of school. Specifically, written responses criticised NCEA's capacity to adequately prepare them for tertiary study and the changing workforce. Participants expressed that NCEA was not relevant to current occupations. Many believed that NCEA did not inspire lifelong learning. In particular, males were discontented with the limited vocational options and requested increased opportunities to pursue learning pathways in trade-based subjects.

More than half of participants claimed NCEA helped to develop their thinking skills and discover their interests, academic potential, strengths and attributes. However, the majority of participants felt NCEA did not develop confidence in life skills or help them to understand the direction they wanted to go in upon leaving school. Overall, results indicated participants who attended higher decile schools had better educational experiences and OTL. Survey results revealed this was also the case for Māori and Pacific students who attended higher decile schools. In comparison, lower decile participants noted the lack of OTL and resources available at their schools.

School community, belonging and valuing student opinion were noted as areas in need of improvement. Although most students felt they were marked fairly, a higher proportion of individuals did not feel their school adequately catered for individual learning needs. However, the majority of students were engaged in their learning to some degree and motivated to achieve results. The relationship between student engagement and teacher attitude was evident. Notably, many felt that NCEA was delivering on its approach to STEM subjects. Participants generally agreed with the Change Programme initiatives.

Concluding Comments

This thesis is relevant because there have been continued efforts to improve NCEA. In my view, education in Aotearoa needs to be an engaging experience where every individual is treated equally. Students should have the same opportunity to receive the same quality education, to attain useful knowledge and learn skills necessary for them to thrive in society. Education needs to be valued by all New Zealanders and to achieve this we need to raise our expectations of student capability and deliver a high standard of learning. NCEA should help students realise their potential and prepare them for a positive future, one in which school leavers are both inspired and cultivated. At present, I do not believe NCEA achieves this and because I do not want any youth today to go through a similar experience as my own, I have been inspired to try to make a difference.

In order to compete internationally, Aotearoa needs an education system that is relevant to the 21st century and is sophisticated enough to keep pace with a rapidly developing global environment. Education cannot just be tailored to a New Zealand context, it needs to adapt to a changing world. It may be beneficial for the MOE to consider designing a high-quality curriculum that meets the same academic standards as other countries.

Research Limitations

The absence of survey participants who attended Decile 1 and 2 secondary schools is perhaps the most significant limitation in this investigation. Another key limitation was the small sample size, meaning findings could not be considered generalisable.

Future Research Directions

Based on this thesis' findings, avenues of future research might seek to explore the relationship between educational disengagement and NEET youth. Interviewing NEET individuals could provide insight into the factors that create a disconnect between these individuals and society, such as negative experiences with education. As NEET youth might be seen to represent a failing on NCEA's behalf in regard to achieving objectives, the MOE may wish to undertake a study that can help to explain how NCEA is not benefiting these individuals and how to increase engagement. Exploring ways to improve student engagement is of particular significance post-COVID-19.

The enthusiasm of survey participants and the nuanced, thought-provoking responses suggests that taking past student voice into account may be a worthwhile policy pursuit, particularly as past student voice is currently such a diminutive category in literature. Previous students can directly relate their firsthand experiences of NCEA to life outside of school. Their perspectives could be advantageous in policy attempts to refine NCEA to better cater for stakeholders. For example, based on the findings, it may be useful to carry out more research into male perspectives of NCEA to see if requests for additional vocational subjects and trade work experience is widespread. Likewise, research needs to explore NCEA's relevance or indeed, irrelevance to wider society and its ability to prepare students for their future.

A serious policy issue that needs to be addressed and warrants further research is the impact of interschool variation on educational equality, achievement levels and student experience. Additionally, studies may wish to investigate past student experiences of NCEA at Decile 1 and 2 schools. Further research is needed to determine the impact socioeconomic status has on educational experience, quality and achievement. Studies need to be undertaken to analyse the performance of all ethnicities across different socioeconomic cohorts. Research on the extent to which culturally relevant curriculum has had a positive effect on marginalised student achievement rates is needed. Policymakers should consider monitoring Pacific pass rates to discover whether less proportionate funding under the new EQI may cause variations in future achievement.

This thesis has established the need for more research to be completed to better determine prevailing educational inequalities and the connection between capitalism and neoliberalism. A deeper exploration of unavoidable structural barriers to education would be useful. Furthermore, a comprehensive study is needed to compare Aotearoa's curriculum quality at an international level. Forcing increases in

achievement rates through grade inflation policies, is not the equivalent to having a society of highly educated individuals who have the skills to compete in an international arena.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

NCEA Annual Attainment Rates

This data ***(NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a).**

*Due to the change from roll-based measures to enrolment-based measures, there may be a slight difference in the results (NZQA, n.d.-c). The data is reflective of the 2012 and 2022 Annual Reports (NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a).

*Tables start from 2008 due to NZQA available data showing yearly percentages. No Annual Report showed a combination of all these years.

* Note the 85% pass rate target was introduced in 2012.

* These tables are from NZQA data … have been created from NZQA Annual Report data.

Table A1

Level 1 Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1-3	54	55	61	62	64	55.8	58.5	61.7	63.4	63.4	58.4	58.6	64.7	59.7	56.7
4-7	69	69	73	75	78	71.3	74.6	77.2	78.1	78.2	75.2	73.7	76.5	74.9	70.2
8-10	81	81	84	87	87	79.9	80.7	83.2	83.2	81.9	81	78.8	75.5	73.6	70

Table A2

Level 1 Attainment by Gender

Percentage (%)

Gender	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	66	68	71	74	76	65.3	68	70.3	71.6	71	68.2	66.5	69.6	67	63.4
Female	75	76	78	81	82	74.7	77	78.8	79.1	79.2	76.8	74.9	74.1	71.5	66.5

Table A3

Level 1 Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Asian	75	74	78	81	83	72.7	74.1	76.5	77.7	77.3	76.9	73.9	73.1	70	65.9
European	79	79	83	84	86	76.8	78.8	80.2	80.8	80.5	78	76	75.8	74	69.7
Māori	53	55	60	64	66	53.7	58.4	61.4	63.2	62.9	58.4	57.7	60.8	57.7	53.9
Pacific	48	50	54	59	63	58.8	62.6	66.7	66.8	67.1	62.8	61.8	68.2	62.3	56.6

Table A4

Level 2 Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1-3	61	60	67	72	73	60.1	65.2	68	70.8	71.4	69.5	69.7	73.7	69.8	66
4-7	73	73	78	81	82	74.2	77.6	79.8	81.5	81.3	80.1	80.2	83.9	81.4	78.9
8-10	83	84	86	88	89	79.9	81.9	82.8	85	84.7	84.2	84.2	86	85.1	83.8

Table A5

Level 2 Attainment by Gender

Percentage (%)

Gender	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	70	71	75	78	80	67.5	70.9	72.6	75.2	75.5	74.2	74.7	77.8	76	73.3
Female	80	80	84	86	87	75.2	79.1	80.1	81.8	81.5	81	80.2	82.4	79.8	76.6

Table A6

Level 2 Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Asian	77	78	80	82	85	72.6	74	74.3	76.9	77.6	77.3	78.3	80	81.1	76
European	82	81	85	87	89	76.7	79.9	80.6	82.2	82.3	81.5	81.1	83.2	81.2	79.4
Māori	63	62	69	74	75	58.7	64	67.3	70.9	70.7	68.6	68.9	71.9	68.3	64.1
Pacific	54	55	62	64	69	61.7	67.5	70.1	73.3	73.9	72.1	71.3	77.1	71.5	67.3

Table A7

Level 3 Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1-3	53	52	59	64	66	43.5	45.6	50.1	53.9	55.6	56.9	59.4	66.9	62.9	59.1
4-7	67	66	71	74	74	57.9	59.9	64.5	65.2	66.1	66.3	67.5	73.1	72.2	70.1
8-10	78	76	81	82	81	69.1	71.2	74.6	75.8	76.4	76.5	76.9	80.9	80.7	79.3

Table A8

Level 3 Attainment by Gender

Percentage (%)

Gender	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	64	63	69	71	71	50.4	53	56.3	58.7	60.1	61	62.3	68.5	66.8	65.6
Female	75	75	78	80	81	62.6	66.1	68.5	69.2	70.5	70.7	71.9	75.5	74	70.5

Table A9

Level 3 Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Asian	76	73	78	78	80	62.8	65.3	66.5	68.9	70.2	70.5	71.3	76.5	76.2	73.6
European	75	74	79	81	81	61.8	64.7	67.5	68.6	69.2	69.9	70.8	74.6	73.2	71.6
Māori	53	52	61	65	66	40.8	44.3	47.7	50.2	52.6	52.9	55.1	60.7	58.5	55.7
Pacific	41	44	52	55	60	43.5	47.3	52	54.2	58.9	58.9	60.3	68.9	64.9	59.4

Table A10

UE Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
1-3	44	42	44	46	48	31.4	24.1	26.4	28.1	27.4	27.8	29.8	32.7	30.2	27.9
4-7	62	59	63	64	64	50.5	43.6	48.3	47.8	47.2	47.2	46.6	51.6	50.8	49.5
8-10	75	73	76	77	77	65.7	61.4	64.9	66.4	66.2	65.3	65.4	69.9	68.8	67.6

Table A11

UE Attainment by Gender

Percentage (%)

Gender	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Male	61	59	61	62	61	44.4	39	41.4	42.2	42.1	42.4	42.2	46.8	45.5	44.9
Female	70	69	70	71	73	56	52.3	54.4	54.9	55.2	54.8	55.8	59.6	57.7	55.3

Table A12

UE Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

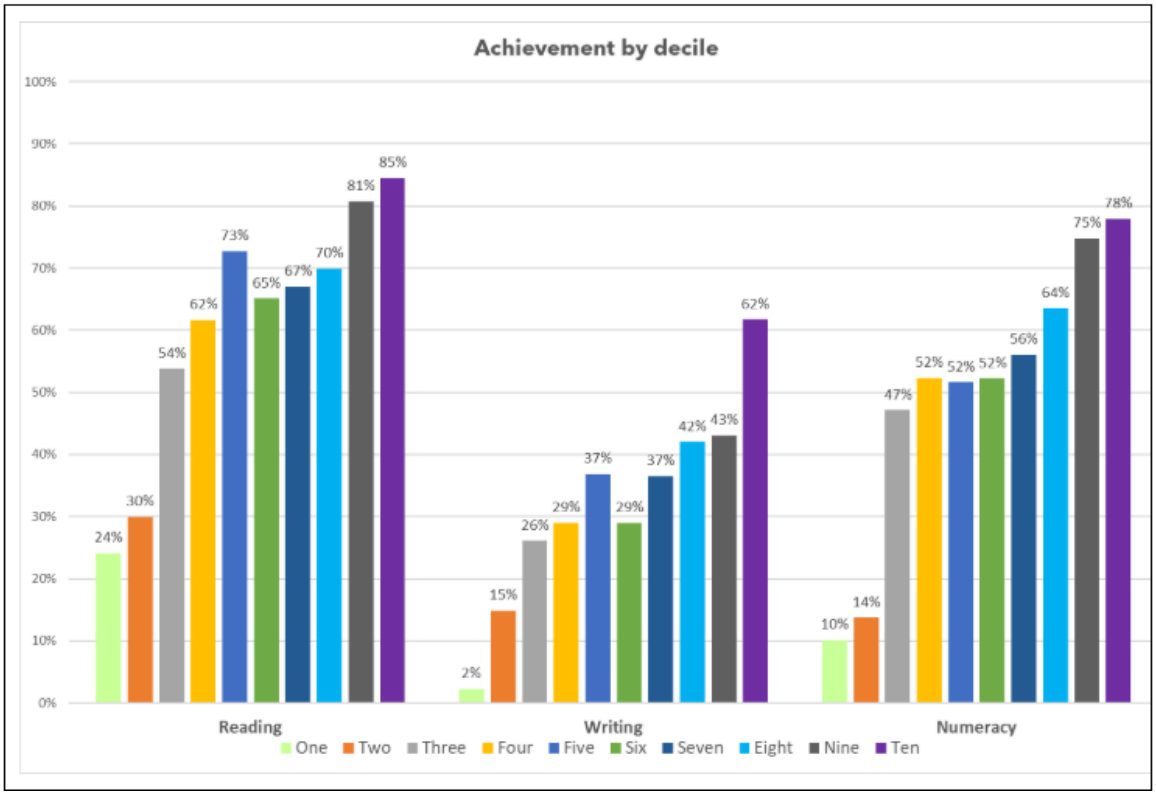
Ethnicity	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Asian	73	70	74	74	75	60.1	56	57.5	58.8	60.1	60.1	59.3	64.1	63.4	61.3
European	71	69	72	74	74	56.5	52.3	54.8	55.6	55	55	55.1	59	57.2	56
Māori	46	42	47	49	49	30.6	25.3	27.8	28.1	29.3	29.3	29.9	34.1	31.7	30.9
Pacific	32	35	36	39	43	31.6	26.2	26.7	27.7	29.3	28.6	30.3	33.7	33	28.7

Appendix B

NCEA Change Programme Co-Requisite Pilot Results

Figure B1

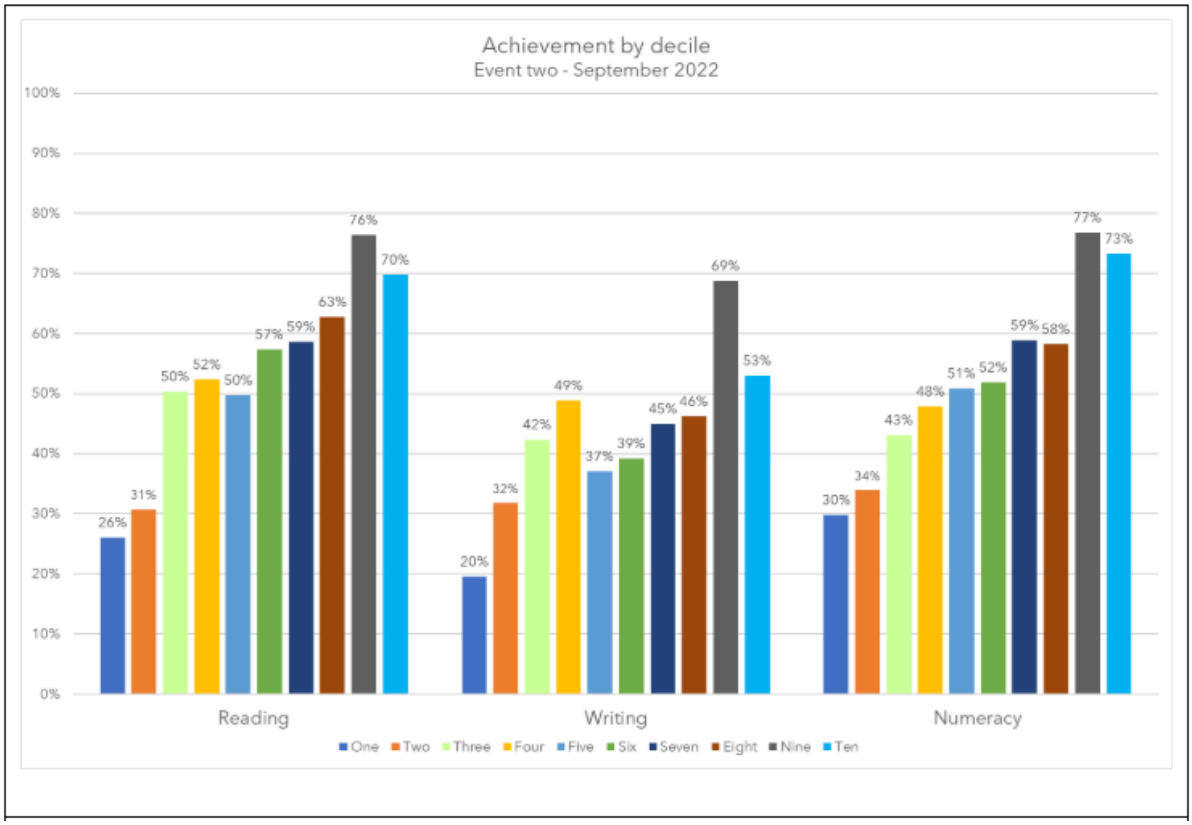
Pilot 1: Decile Results



Note. (Evaluation Associates, 2022).

Figure B2

Pilot 2: Decile Results



Note. (Evaluation Associates, 2023).

Appendix C

Impact of 85% Pass Rate Initiative on Achievement Rates

Table C1

Level 1 Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
1-3	54	+10	64	-7.3	56.7	+2.7
4-7	69	+9	78	-7.8	70.2	+1.2
8-10	81	+6	87	-17	70	-11

Table C2

Level 2 Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
1-3	61	+12	73	-7	66	+5
4-7	73	+9	82	-3.1	78.9	+5.9
8-10	83	+6	89	-5.2	83.8	+0.8

Table C3

Level 3 Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
1-3	53	+13	66	-6.9	59.1	+6.1
4-7	67	+7	74	-3.9	70.1	+3.1
8-10	78	+3	81	-1.7	79.3	+1.3

Table C4

UE Attainment by Decile

Percentage (%)

Decile	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
1-3	44	+4	48	-20.1	27.9	-16.1
4-7	62	+2	64	-14.5	49.5	-12.5
8-10	75	+2	77	-9.4	67.6	-7.4

Table C5

Level 1 Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
Asian	75	+8	83	-17.1	65.9	-9.1
European	79	+7	86	-16.3	69.7	-9.3
Māori	53	+13	66	-12.1	53.9	+0.9
Pacific	48	+15	63	-6.4	56.6	+8.9

Table C6

Level 2 Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
Asian	77	+8	85	-9	76	-1
European	82	+7	89	-9.6	79.4	-2.6
Māori	63	+12	75	-10.9	64.1	+1.1
Pacific	54	+15	69	-1.7	67.3	+13.3

Table C7

Level 3 Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
Asian	76	+4	80	-6.4	73.6	-2.4
European	75	+6	81	-9.4	71.6	-3.4
Māori	53	+13	66	-10.3	55.7	+2.7
Pacific	41	+19	60	-0.6	59.4	+18.4

Table C8

UE Attainment by Ethnicity

Percentage (%)

Ethnicity	2008	Variance	2012	Variance	2022	Total Change
Asian	73	+2	75	-13.7	61.3	-11.7
European	71	+3	74	-18	56	-15
Māori	46	+3	49	-18.1	30.9	-15.1
Pacific	32	+11	43	-14.3	28.7	-3.3

Note. (NZQA, 2013; NZQA, 2023a).

APPENDIX D

The Survey: Survey Information for Participants, Consent Form, Survey Questions and Significant Survey Findings

Survey Information for Participants

The Success and Relevance of NCEA According to Past Students

My name is Amelia Arnerich. I am currently writing my Social Policy Master's thesis on NCEA. I am interested to learn the views of past students who have experienced NCEA. As part of my research, I am conducting a short online survey. The survey should take around 10-15 minutes.

Please be aware that your participation in this survey is optional.

All information you provide in the survey is confidential and your name will not be used. You have the right to among other things to:

- Refuse to answer any particular question.
- Ask any further questions about the study that occurs to you during survey completion by commenting at the end of the survey.
- Withdraw your responses by contacting the research team within a week of filling out the survey.
- Receive a copy of the research findings.
- Be given access to a summary of the findings from the study, when it is concluded.

If you do choose to participate, I thank you very much for your time and help in making this study possible. If you have any queries or wish to know more please contact myself or my research supervisor.

Other Relevant Information

- No one is paying or sponsoring this research.
- The findings will be presented as a thesis.
- A report will also be given to the Ministry of Education and my findings will be used in a research publication.
- Participants will remain anonymous and information will be confidential and stored electronically in a password protected folder on my laptop. It will be stored for five years.

Contact Information

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Participant Consent Form

I have read and understood the Survey Information for Participants section that describes the research project. Any questions that I have relating to the research have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions about the research at any time during my participation.

During the survey, I understand that I do not have to answer questions unless I am happy to talk about the topic. I can stop the survey at any time.

When I sign this consent form I will retain ownership of my survey, but I give consent for the researcher to use the survey for the purposes of the research outlined in the Survey Information for Participants section.

Please select your answer for the following statements:

I wish to view the transcript of the survey.

I wish to receive a copy of the findings.

I understand that my identity will remain confidential in the presentation of the research findings.

I give my consent for the researcher to use my survey for the purposes of the research outlined in the Information Sheet.

I understand that upon completing the survey, I will be unable to withdraw my participation.

Survey Questions

Student engagement can be defined as:

"How involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other."

I was engaged in my NCEA learning.

	Not at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Please select	○	○	○	○	○

I tried to achieve the best NCEA results I could.

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Please select	○	○	○	○	○

NCEA helped me to realise:

	Not at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
My interests	○	○	○	○	○
My strengths and attributes	○	○	○	○	○
My academic potential	○	○	○	○	○
The direction I wanted to go in upon leaving school	○	○	○	○	○

An NCEA education developed my confidence in the following areas:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Life skills	○	○	○	○	○
Thinking skills	○	○	○	○	○
Social skills	○	○	○	○	○
Personal skills	○	○	○	○	○

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "NCEA inspired me to seek knowledge and become a lifelong learner after leaving school."

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Please select	○	○	○	○	○

NCEA prepared me for:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Further training and education	○	○	○	○	○
The changing workforce	○	○	○	○	○

What I learnt through NCEA is relevant to my:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Current occupation	○	○	○	○	○
Future career aspirations	○	○	○	○	○

I felt that my school:

	Not at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Gave me the same academic opportunities given to other students	○	○	○	○	○
Offered an array of subject choices that allowed me to pursue my interests	○	○	○	○	○
Considered student voice to be important to the success of the school	○	○	○	○	○
Instilled a sense of belonging within the school community	○	○	○	○	○

I felt that my teachers:

	Not at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
Marked me fairly in internally graded assessments	○	○	○	○	○
Were able to cater for my individual learning needs	○	○	○	○	○

I felt that I was:

	Not at all	A little	A moderate amount	A lot	A great deal
More engaged when a teacher's attitude towards me was positive	○	○	○	○	○
Less engaged when a teacher's attitude towards me was negative	○	○	○	○	○

Do you think that NCEA could be improved in the following areas?

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Increased learning support for all students	○	○	○	○	○
Increased support for all teachers	○	○	○	○	○
Students need to have met specified academic levels prior to undertaking NCEA	○	○	○	○	○
More subject choice available for all students	○	○	○	○	○
Wider variety of standards available for all students	○	○	○	○	○
Clearer communication from schools to students and parents on NCEA's design	○	○	○	○	○

If you have any additional comments relating to your experience with NCEA, how it was implemented by your school and teachers or its relevance to life outside of school, please feel free to comment below:

Significant Survey Findings Specific Percentages

Table D1

Gender Results of Note

Engagement in NCEA learning (Not at all)	100.00% Male
Engagement in NCEA learning (A little)	80.00% Male
Engagement in NCEA learning (A great deal)	63.63% Female
Participants tried to achieve the best NCEA results they could (Disagreed in some capacity)	57.14% Male, 42.86% Female
NCEA helped understand interests (A moderate amount)	37.70% Male/Female - relatively even
NCEA helped understand strengths & attributes (A great deal)	83.33% Male
NCEA helped recognise academic potential	33.33% Male/Female 50/50
NCEA helped with direction upon leaving school (Not at all)	78.20% Male
NCEA education developed confidence in life skills (Strongly disagreed)	65.21% Male
NCEA education developed confidence in thinking skills (Strongly disagreed)	83.33% Male
NCEA prepared me for further training and education (Disagreed in some capacity)	77.78% Male
What I learnt through NCEA is relevant to my current occupation (Strongly disagreed)	72.22% Male
What I learnt through NCEA is relevant to my future career aspirations (Strongly disagreed)	70.00% Male
NCEA could be improved by ensuring that students meet specified academic levels prior to undertaking NCEA (Somewhat disagreed)	75.00% Male

Table D2

Ethnicity Results of Note

Engaged in NCEA learning (Overall)	Higher decile schools - all ethnicities
Engaged in NCEA learning (A little)	40.00% Maori & Pacific Peoples
Engaged in NCEA learning (A great deal)	18.18% Maori & Pacific Peoples
Participants tried to achieve the best NCEA results they could (Disagreed in some capacity)	71.43% Maori & Pacific Peoples
NCEA helped understand interests (A moderate amount)	34.78% Maori & Pacific Peoples
NCEA helped understand strengths & attributes (A great deal)	0.00% Maori & Pacific Peoples
NCEA helped recognise academic potential (Agreed)	25.00% Maori & Pacific Peoples
NCEA helped recognise academic potential (Not at all)	11.67% NZ European, Asian & Other
NCEA helped with direction upon leaving school (Not at all)	30.43% Maori & Pacific Peoples
NCEA education developed confidence in life skills (Somewhat agreed)	42.86% Maori & Pacific Peoples
NCEA education developed confidence in thinking skills (Strongly agreed)	100.00% NZ European & Asian
What I learnt through NCEA is relevant to my future career aspirations (Strongly disagreed)	90.00% NZ European & Asian
What I learnt through NCEA is relevant to my future career aspirations (Strongly agreed)	75.00% Maori & Pacific Peoples
Participants felt that their school gave them the same academic opportunities (Strongly disagreed)	50+% Maori & Pacific Peoples
Participants felt their teachers marked them fairly in internally graded assessments (Somewhat disagreed)	62.50% Maori & Pacific Peoples

Table D3

School and Decile Results of Note

Engagement in NCEA learning (A great deal)	45.45% Attended state integrated/private schools
Engagement in NCEA learning (A great deal)	90.90% Attended decile 7-10 schools
Participants tried to achieve the best NCEA results they could (Disagree)	85.72% Attended state schools, decile 4-7
NCEA helped understand interests (A moderate amount - majority response)	82.60% Attended decile 7-10 schools
NCEA helped understand strengths & attributes (A great deal)	66.66% Attended decile 9-10 schools
NCEA help understand strengths & attributes (A great deal)	83.33% Embarked on STEM subject careers (All were male)
NCEA helped recognise academic potential	85.00% Attended decile 7-10 schools
NCEA helped recognise academic potential (Not at all)	11.67% Attended decile 5-7 schools
NCEA helped with direction upon leaving school (Not at all)	91.30% Attended state schools, decile 4-9
NCEA education developed confidence in life skills (Somewhat agreed)	85.71% Attended decile 7-10 schools
NCEA education developed confidence in thinking skills (Strongly agreed)	83.33% Attended decile 8-10 schools
Participants felt that their school offered an array of subject choices (Agreed in some capacity)	80.64% Attended decile 7-10 schools
Participants (Agreed in some capacity) that their school valued student opinion	88.89% Attended decile 7-10 schools
Participants felt their teachers marked them fairly in internally graded assessments (Strongly agreed)	90% Attended decile 7-9 schools 50% Attended single sex schools
NCEA could be improved by ensuring that students meet specified academic levels prior to undertaking NCEA (Strongly agreed)	80% Attended single sex, state integrated, decile 7-9 schools

Table D4

General Results of Note

Engagement in NCEA learning (In some capacity)	81.69% of all participants
NCEA helped develop confidence in social skills (No opinion - neutral)	40.98% of all participants
NCEA helped develop confidence in social skills (Disagreed in some capacity)	36.06% of all participants
NCEA helped develop confidence in social skills (Agreed in some capacity)	22.95% of all participants
NCEA helped develop confidence in personal skills	Approximately 33.33% across each category
NCEA inspired me to seek knowledge and become a lifelong learner (Disagreed in some capacity)	53.34% of all participants
NCEA prepared me for further training and education (Agreed in some capacity)	50.82% of all participants
NCEA prepared me for the changing workforce (Disagreed in some capacity)	55.00% of all participants
Participants felt that their school gave them the same academic opportunities (Agreed in some capacity)	56.67% of all participants
Participants felt that their school offered an array of subject choices (Agreed in some capacity)	50.82% of all participants
Participants (Disagreed in some capacity) that their school valued student opinion	50.82% of all participants
Participants felt their school instilled a sense of belonging to the school community (Disagreed, agreed, neutral)	Relatively even split
Participants felt their teachers marked them fairly in internally graded assessments (Agreed in some capacity)	62.29% of all participants
Participants felt their school catered for their individual learning needs (More disagreed in some capacity then agreed)	39.35% of all participants disagreed
Participants felt more engaged when a teachers attitude towards them was positive (Agreed in some capacity)	90.17% of all participants
Participants felt less engaged when a teachers attitude towards them was negative (Agreed in some capacity)	85.25% of all participants
NCEA could be improved by increasing learning support for all students (Agreed in some capacity)	84.48% of all participants
NCEA could be improved by increasing learning support for all teachers (Agreed in some capacity)	91.82%of all participants
NCEA could be improved by ensuring that students meet specified academic levels prior to undertaking NCEA (Neutral)	45.90% of all participants
NCEA could be improved by increasing subject choices for all students (Agreed in some capacity)	83.61% of all participants
NCEA could be improved by making a wider variety of standards available to all students (Agreed in some capacity)	81.97% of all participants
NCEA could be improved by improving communication (Agreed in some capacity/ Strongly Agreed)	78.68% of all participants 40.98% of all participants

APPENDIX E

Social Media Message

The Success and Relevance of NCEA[31]

Hey everybody! For my Master's, I am writing a thesis investigating the success and relevance of NCEA. As part of my research process, I am conducting a short survey and I would be interested to hear about your experience. Your participation would be greatly appreciated. Please click on the link to the survey below if you would like to take part.

https://qfreeaccountssjc1.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cNIOw3JjpeU4vuC

[31] *'The Success and Relevance of NCEA'* was the original title of my thesis.

Appendix F

2018 Census Information

Table F1

2018 Census Ethnic Makeup of New Zealand

Ethnicity	Percentage (%) of Population
New Zealand European	70.2
Māori	16.5
Pacific Peoples	8.1
Asian	15.1
Middle Eastern/Latin American/African	1.5
Other	1.2

Note. (Stats NZ, 2020).

Appendix G

School and Decile Information

Table G1

Listed Secondary Schools of Participants

Region	Secondary School	Gender	Charter	Decile
Northland	Bream Bay College	Co-Ed	S	5
	Otamatea High School	Co-Ed	S	4
	Whangarei Boys' High School	Boys	S	5
Auckland	Carmel College	Girls	I	9
	Diocesan School for Girls	Girls	P	N/A
	Hobsonville Point Secondary School	Co-Ed	S	10
	KingsWay School	Co-Ed	I	9
	Long Bay College	Co-Ed	S	10
	Mahurangi College	Co-Ed	S	7
	Mount Albert Grammar School	Co-Ed	S	7
	Rodney College	Co-Ed	S	4
	Rosmini College	Boys	I	9
	St Mary's College	Girls	I	8
	Waitakere College	Co-Ed	S	3
	Waiuku College	Co-Ed	S	6
	Westlake Boys High School	Boys	S	9
Waikato	Cambridge High School	Co-Ed	S	9
	Hamilton Boys' High School	Boys	S	7
	Hauraki Plains College	Co-Ed	S	5
	Putaruru College	Co-Ed	S	4
	Sacred Heart Girls' College (Hamilton)	Girls	I	7
Bay of Plenty	Aquinas College	Co-Ed	I	8
	Katikati College	Co-Ed	S	6
	Mount Maunganui College	Co-Ed	S	6
	Tauranga Boys' College	Boys	S	6
	Tauranga Girls' College	Girls	S	6
Taranaki	Francis Douglas Memorial College	Boys	I	8
	Inglewood High School	Co-Ed	S	7
	New Plymouth Boys' High School	Boys	S	7
	New Plymouth Girls' High School	Girls	S	7
	Sacred Heart Girls' College (New Plymouth)	Girls	I	7
	Stratford High School	Co-Ed	S	4
Nelson	Nelson College	Boys	S	7
Canterbury	Timaru Boys' High School	Co-Ed	S	7
Distance Education	Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu	Co-Ed	S	N/A

Note. (Singh, 2014).

Character of Schools

74.28% were state schools: 26 schools
22.86% were state integrated schools: 8 schools
2.86% private schools: 1 school

Gender of Schools

57.14% were co-educational schools: 20 schools
22.86% were boys schools: 8 schools
20.00% were girls schools: 7 schools

APPENDIX H

Letter of Ethical Approval

Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete | ***Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences***

The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240
New Zealand

Te Kura Whatu Oho Mauri
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THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Amelia Arnerich
ameliarnerich@gmail.com

Dr Gemma Piercy-Cameron

Te Kura Aronui School of Social Sciences

11 May 2023

Dear Amelia

Re: **FS2022-67: Student's Experiences of NCEA**

Thank you for submitting your revised application to the ALPSS Human Research Ethics Committee. We have reviewed the final electronic version of your application and the Committee is now pleased to offer formal approval for your research activities as included therein.

We encourage you to contact the committee should issues arise during your data collection, or should you wish to add further research activities or make changes to your project as it unfolds. We wish you all the best with your research. Thank-you for engaging with the process of Ethical Review.

Kind regards

Dr Oleg Medvedev, Convenor
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences Human Research Ethics

APPENDIX I

Question 9 Survey Comments

Yeah man, school sucks and saps your creativity and will to learn. The magic does not exist in our system, the beauty and poetry of life is denied and if you're not interested in becoming a suit contributing to the gradual destruction of our environment and society then there's no support for you.

NCEA tends to favour academically inclined students, more so students who excel in STEM subjects. My school tended to favour these subjects and offered more of these classes in the timetable. This resulted in less classes for other subjects like art, history, languages etc to be offered and timetable clashes were common. As a student this felt like you had to pick and choose what classes truly mattered and got stuck with "filler" classes that held no relevance to your career path or interests. Additionally, I felt that classes which were not NCEA [UE] approved we were discouraged by our school and teachers from taking these classes.

Idk I'm biassed — NCEA seems to work for STEM minded people going into STEM fields and careers. Seemed to set me up quite well. But no way would I take Art & Woodworking as NCEA subjects (my two favourite before NCEA level 1 kicked in). I was chasing E's, and E's were easy for the STEM subjects if you were smart enough to game the system. Do I want to kick it and have fun in the creative classes? Hell yeah. Do I want to get an Achieved for focusing on fun instead of results? Hell no. My most transferable knowledge and skills are courtesy of my teachers, not NCEA. I could've passed NCEA level 3 calc with my calculator alone, without learning anything worthwhile. It's culture and teachers that instil the want for lifelong learning. Something something Dead Poets Society. RIP Robin Williams the GOAT.

"NCEA needs to be less focused on teaching students to pass an exam and more oriented towards developing learning skills, an ability to think critically and gaining an understanding of practical real world tasks."

"NCEA needs improvements regarding support for disabled/chronically ill students."

I've been doing NCEA assessments for 5 years now and I'm sick of them. The entire NCEA system is all about getting qualifications, but that isn't what secondary school learning should be. Entering the university system it is really incredible to see the change. Somehow, I get MORE assistance with learning. Even though there are assignments each week it is less stressful than the constant barrage of internal assessments and practise external assessments. The marking scheme, using percentages, works a hundred times better than achieved merit excellence. In NCEA, in short, I spend all my time preparing for what the examiner wants to hear, learning which questions will give me an excellence, writing exactly what the exemplars for internal assessments say, choosing which exams I should complete in the 3 hour period to give myself the most credits... instead of actually learning the material. NCEA tests aren't a test of knowledge of the subject. Also, NCEA causes some subjects to be ignored and some students to miss out. I go to a small school. In level 2 maths, because most kids just want to do stats, they only do the statistics exam, and the kids who want to do calculus miss out. If the curriculum was the same across the country this would not happen! All kids should get the same opportunities to do all the assessments! For example, in biology last year, my teacher decided that, since we'd all have enough credits with just 1 external, we wouldn't learn a second. As someone who was looking forward to this assessment, it was disappointing that I wasn't able to learn just for the joy of learning. My teacher said' "Why do you want to do the assessment? You already have enough credits." This attitude towards learning is wrong, and because of the system, teachers are able to foster this attitude in kids simply because they can't be bothered to teach something. You'll only make the education gap worse with the NCEA system. Private school kids will do all the assessments available, us small town, low decile students just won't have the opportunities because we aren't being taught. All teachers care about is getting our credits, endorsing the subject, and to them that means their job is done, even if there is still more to learn in the subject. I personally believe that an approach closer to the old School Certificate system would work better. Just one exam at the end of the year, or at the end of term 2 and term 4 if that's preferable, to remove all the stress of those internals. Simple percentage and letter grades. Simple tests with no big long explanations having to be written. Pages of explanation in science exams is ridiculous -- it makes the exam subjective, when it doesn't need to be subjective. Short answers, just one exam for each subject covering all material possible. Then teachers have to teach it all, no shortcuts. Maybe 1 in class assessment allowed per subject for creative writing portfolios/speeches, experiments in science, etc. But not constant internal assessing all through the year. It makes us lose interest. The exams definitely need to change, as they are confusing and

subjective. I have to do a lot of practice exams just in order to know what the examiner is asking in a question, let alone how to write the answer. But I've done externals in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. In all those years I scored worse in the real exam than the practise exam and so sent several exams in for a remark. EVERY SINGLE YEAR, at LEAST one assessment has come back with a changed grade -- even in 2019 and 2020 where I only sent in 1 or 2 maths exams! Something is wrong with the exam or the marking if it is that easy to change a grade from merit to excellence. And I shouldn't have to pay for these remarks ... if NCEA makes a mistake with their marking 4 years in a row, why should I have to pay to get a proper result, or for them to at least check again that the result is proper? All in all, thank you for reading my very long comment. I hope you take some of this into consideration because I know that a lot of my fellow students feel similarly about the structure of NCEA and change would be greatly appreciated.

I was diagnosed with inattentive ADHD as an adult and I'm still becoming aware of all the missed opportunities and success from not having any learning support or being accommodated for through NCEA. When I was able to engage in class it was only due to an interest in the subject or as a result of having a Neurodivergent teacher. However, I was never able to engage to my full potential across all areas of my highschool education and as a result I am still learning (8 years after highschool) what feel like fundamental skills. A very direct result of this can be seen across my tertiary education which has been severely affected due to similar failures in engagement. I now find myself needing to have a pause both in finishing my degree (BE hons, environmental engineering) and life in general.

"I personally did not feel NCEA prepared me at all for the academic step-up into university."

"Especially in urban areas, the trades are an under appreciated set of careers. If NCEA focused on preparatory courses for major trades, it could reduce early student drop out and lead to better fulfilment from careers later on."

I struggled with the NCEA system at my school because as a lower decile school, they didn't have the resources to cater for someone who wanted to pursue a university education (no dedicated Calculus class, no Level 3 Physics teacher). This meant I had to do a university preparation course before starting my degree.

Didn't really feel engaged or interested in any of my classes except for the sciences. Couldn't be fucked with any exams other than math and science. English was boring asf (but I still took the class for the credits) All the teachers that were enthusiastic in their classes always had my attention which was usually the science classes, chemistry and physics, maths, etc. Taking those classes in year 13 definitely sparked a love for science and mechanics.

To me, NCEA felt like a waste of time. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and one of my teachers actually told me anyone who doesn't go to uni the year after they finish high school is basically destined to become a 'drop kick'. Timaru boys was a very sports-focused school, you were either in the First XV, a science nerd or otherwise, they didn't really care. Well now I have a Bachelor of Science majoring in Psychology and work full-time for Victoria University. I'm sure some schools are good, but in my case, NCEA and most of high school, in general, was pointless. Hopefully, nowadays it has improved, but based on my own anecdotal experience, I think when/if I do have kids of my own one day, they would learn a lot more from being home-schooled.

"I feel the subject English at NCEA level didn't really help me during my [university] degree. NCEA English needs to focus more on how University expects us to write ie: APA referencing and other key themes."

"Not enough range in what you could study. Didn't really do a good job at preparing you for university."

Felt like it was useless. Was just a tool to get students to work. After high-school it's never been referenced. If you want to attend uni you still can after a few years. And that's good because who really knows what they want to do at 18. It's also graded so specifically when everyone has different learning and output skills.

NCEA is an imperfect system but struck a good balance between internal and external assessment. In my opinion the range of subjects offered at my school probably wasn't indicative of the full array offered by the NCEA system (due to popularity of subjects, teaching resources and school population). The subjects I found most lacking were the languages and English while the sciences and mathematics were the most engaging and prepared students best for future studies.

I feel that the main issue with NCEA is more fundamental than just tweaking subject availability and communication. Outside of New Zealand, NCEA provides no opportunities as it isn't internationally recognised. The curriculum is outdated and doesn't change to fit modern students who end up learning more outside of school (shown in the MCAT exams constantly needing grade scaling and tweaking). Even teachers struggle with teaching the subjects they're meant to because of the vagueness of the exam guidelines. Personally, I believe we should abandon NCEA as a whole and adopt IGCSE. That way more opportunities are available to students outside of New Zealand and will allow more assistance in teaching due to its wider appeal.

"Mount Albert Grammar School (MAGS) sucks. From my experience, I can conclude that [my school] cared more about their appearance than they did about student's individual academic achievements."

I wish more subjects were considered 'University approved'. I was not able to pursue some of the subjects I was most interested in because they were not University approved, and I had to have a certain number of my subjects as University approved for University acceptance. Even if the University approved subject I had to take didn't contribute to the degree I wanted to pursue.

"I strongly disagree with the overweighting of final grades based on externals/end of year exams. This system of assessment applies unnecessary pressure and a false environment which puts an overemphasis on knowledge retention above practical application."

I had undiagnosed ADHD all through high school and university and was written off as a kid that didn't care, was smart and had potential but didn't try, and was uncooperative with direction or refused to follow instructions. I think it's terrible how school systems don't check or cater for neurodivergence. I think it's hilarious how little NCEA has played a role in my life. I'm a senior marketing executive, who barely uses anything I studied despite having a degree in marketing and a masters in marketing management. NCEA is dated, unsupportive, and does not set people up for success in the workforce. I lucked out and begged for a placement opportunity in high school to see if marketing was what I wanted to do, but there was nothing offered to me to help me navigate the path I should take, especially being the first and only person in my family to attend university. All round a rubbish system, the interest based learning Spotswood College in New Plymouth now offers is incredible and I wish I had the chance to learn that, as it would've been more effective for my ADHD learning style.

My main problem with NCEA is that it doesn't award extreme success, and it punishes borderline failure. If you are one mark off getting Achieved, you don't get any credits. Additionally, the highest you can get is an excellence, which just gives you excellence credits which look nice, but doesn't do anything. A much better system of grading is the university way. For example, 49% wouldn't be a pass in NCEA so you wouldn't get any marks, but 49% in university is still 49% of the grade for that assignment, and still counts towards your GPA.

The fact you can get 99% of an assignment right and get a fail in Chemistry is a joke. I achieved all the excellence and merit criteria of a chemistry assessment and got a fail as I had one small working typo in the achieve component. The fact someone can fail and not get credits because they had one small error is a joke.

I did not find NCEA practical, I find myself better at lab or practical activities. I barely passed NCEA but have a B+ average in my postgraduate studies. Tests should be based on performance by percentage. At University if you get 49% you are still credited with a percentage of what you did right. While in NCEA a not achieved is worth 0 credit when you could have got just one question wrong to pass. NCEA was based far too much around writing tests and less practical learning when I did it. Most of my high marks at university are based around my practical work not so much theory. I found it disheartening to get poor grades from NCEA which now at my level of learning means nothing. I found NCEA a poor way of grading an individual's knowledge and found the grading system at university more fair and accurate. If I can barely pass NCEA but get a degree and do my masters I think it says a lot about the NCEA system because I can clearly do the postgraduate studies but that could have easily been hindered by my NCEA results and not allowing me university entrance.

"Very few opportunities for the development of life skills. Opportune time for these skills to be taught as an adolescent transitions to adult."

Incorporate more work experience into the curriculum. People don't find out they dislike their degree the majority of the time until they are halfway through. NCEAs' structure expects students to choose a career in a field which they've never experienced.