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Changing Courses: A Study of the Responsiveness of Schools to the National Qualifications Framework

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to present some findings from an investigation of the ways schools are adapting to the potential flexibility of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) for designing teaching and learning programmes or different pathways for students. Two studies were conducted. The preliminary investigation was based on information collected from 15 secondary schools about changes in course provision, courses students are taking, influences on course provision, and how students' needs are being met. The second study was based on responses to an online survey about ways that schools are adapting their courses to provide different qualifications pathways for students. Overall, schools are working to create more flexible courses and a wider range of courses for students. Implications for further research are discussed.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was designed to better meet the changing competencies, needs and aspirations of senior secondary school students, as well as to address the changing requirements of the New Zealand economy and society. One of the key aims of the new qualifications system is that "there are flexible pathways available to students in the provision and acquisition of learning and qualifications" (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 10).

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) marked the beginning of a new national standards-based qualification system in the senior secondary school in New Zealand. Over the three years from 2002 to 2004, each level of the NCEA (three in total) has been progressively implemented in place of the previous qualifications of

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School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate and University Entrance, Bursaries and Scholarship. The new qualifications were introduced to address criticisms from teachers, academics and officials of the former secondary qualifications system. These largely related to the disadvantages of a norm-referenced system and the use of one major annual examination to assess a limited number of skills (Ministry of Education, 2000). An earlier report by the Department of Education reviewed curriculum, assessment and qualifications in the senior secondary school and recommended that to cater for differing student needs a diverse range of programmes was required (Department of Education, 1986). This influential report also called for flexibility in course design and programmes that would prepare students for life outside secondary school.

Over the last two decades, changes have been made to the New Zealand national qualifications system and a move towards a more inclusive and flexible curriculum. But the question now needs to be asked whether these improvements have actually resulted in more flexible pathways through secondary school, and changes in courses to better meet students' needs in the senior years. The aim of the *Changing Courses* studies was to examine these issues. A preliminary investigation took place in late 2004 (Pilcher, 2006a). This was followed by a national survey a year later (Pilcher, 2006b).

Previous Research

Research has been conducted in New Zealand and overseas exploring the courses and programmes schools are offering students, and examining patterns in students' choice of courses. The *Learning Curves* study conducted by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research has shown that schools are being innovative in the range of courses offered to students (Hipkins & Vaughan, 2002; Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, & Ferral, 2004; Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, Ferral & Gardiner, 2005). Changes such as combined subjects, different versions of subjects, and a mixture of assessments have been directly attributed to the new National Certificates of Educational Achievement. Researchers found that the major programme change was within courses, with a prominent trend being the availability to students of alternative versions of core subjects. Overall, an emphasis on meeting a range of student needs has led to schools changing the design of their teaching programmes.

Hipkins et al. (2004) found that the most commonly reported reasons students selected for choosing a subject were future plans, enjoyment

and talking to others. Participants also reported parents as the primary influence on subject choice. This finding is consistent with a study conducted in the United Kingdom by Baird, Ebner and Pinot de Moira (2003) where the majority of students made their own decisions about what courses they would study, though many sought advice from teachers and parents. A longitudinal study from New South Wales (Ainley & Sheret, 1992), reported that students believed that some subjects were their choice, while others were decided for them, and as they made their way through secondary school, the amount of choice was perceived to diminish. Another finding was that more males than females were studying science and subjects typically taken by high achievers, such as physics.

Research has also highlighted the changing nature of student participation in secondary school and changing patterns in subject choices in both Australia and New Zealand (Benson, 2004; Fullarton & Ainley, 2000; Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003). Research has shown that more students are staying on to the final year of school to gain more qualifications. The cohort has also changed over the last thirty years with an increase in student numbers and greater diversification, which has contributed to an expanded subject range. For example, in New Zealand it has been reported that, overall, most traditional subjects experienced decreases in student participation from 1987 to 2002, with noticeable increases in subjects such as practical art, computer studies or IT, and physical education (Benson, 2004).

Secondary schools in New Zealand also provide a variety of programmes or use funding arrangements that facilitate clear pathways from secondary school to employment or further study. These include the Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource (STAR), Gateway, Youth Training, and Modern Apprenticeships. STAR and Gateway have been lauded for providing schools with flexibility in designing programmes that meet student and community needs, and highlight both vocational and academic pathways (Tertiary Education Commission, 2003; Vaughan & Kenneally, 2003). Innovation in programme or curriculum design in New Zealand secondary schools was highlighted in an earlier study by Marshall (1999). This Ministry of Education study involved fifteen secondary schools throughout the country that employed innovations such as subject integration, a focus on essential learning skills and faculty organisation. Marshall's report highlighted creative ways secondary schools were tackling issues of course provision and student retention. The question that arises from this report is whether

these curriculum innovations are continuing and increasing with the new qualifications system. More recently research has shown that students are producing different combinations of standards in their NCEA qualifications, allowing them to keep open future learning pathways (Hipkins et al., 2005).

Finally, research has identified several aids and barriers to flexible pathways, including advice relating to subject choice and careers, and the availability of resources and government programmes. Ainley and Sheret's (1992) longitudinal study from New South Wales found students reported non-availability of subjects and timetable restrictions as most problematic. While *Learning Curves* shows how a small number of schools are changing courses to meet student needs, it seemed sensible to obtain information from a larger number of schools about the role of the NQF/NCEA in aiding the provision of more flexible courses.

Preliminary Investigation

The aim of the preliminary investigation was to look at ways in which senior secondary schools are using the potential flexibility of the NQF to provide educational pathways (i.e., courses, programmes and offsite opportunities) that better meet the needs of their students. This study sought to find out the issues senior secondary schools encounter when trying to provide flexible pathways, and also to trial potential methodologies for future research. The key question for the study was: are secondary schools promoting flexible pathways for senior students? To answer this question four key areas were investigated:

1. *Changes in course provision*: Changes in courses offered in the senior secondary school and pathways available to students since the implementation of NCEA.
2. *Influences on course provision*: Aids and barriers to flexible courses in the senior secondary school.
3. *Meeting students' needs*: How schools identify and meet the needs of a range of students.
4. *Courses students are taking*: Patterns in students' choices of courses and decisions behind course choice.

For this study, the term "courses" refers to subjects or programmes of learning offered to students. A flexible pathway is one that allows students to change direction (study new courses) while studying a particular combination of courses, without limiting all avenues for future

study or employment. Flexibility in courses is thought to be dependent on how secondary schools in New Zealand approach the provision of programmes, which is in turn contingent on the students at the school and resources that the school has available.

Fifteen secondary schools throughout New Zealand were involved in the initial study. Data were collected in October and November 2004. The schools included in the study differed by type (single-sex and co-educational), area of New Zealand and locality (North and South Island, and urban and rural), roll (from under 300 students to over 2000), and decile. The study was exploratory, with the size of the sample restricting broad conclusions about differences between types of school.

Data gathered included course information booklets and interviews with a range of school staff such as Principal's Nominees, Heads of Departments or Faculties, Teachers, Timetablers, and Career Advisors. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions based on the four key areas outlined above. Focus groups were held with 120 students in Year 12 and 13 to find out their views on the courses they studied, the NCEA and senior secondary qualifications in general, and post-secondary school aspirations.

Overall, schools reported various changes to their senior courses from 2002 to 2004. Schools were mixing standards across levels and subjects with a course made up of level 1, 2 or 3 achievement (internal and external) or unit standards. Schools reported an expanded curriculum with new courses incorporating standards from a range of learning areas. All schools were committed to the NCEA; however, there was growth in the offering of other National Certificates. Schools offered on average six National Certificates, the most popular being in computing and tourism.

Schools met the needs and interests of their students in various ways. Students had available to them different versions of subjects that catered for a range of abilities and interests, and multi-levelling was encouraged. Students also had access to a range of programmes including transition courses, international certificates, distance learning, and academies.

The majority of schools commented that the implementation of the NQF/NCEA had increased course flexibility. This was due to schools being more creative in their course design and selecting standards that met their students' needs. Students were also able to gain a range of qualifications, and credits were transferable between providers and tied into transition programmes such as those funded by STAR. Different aids and barriers to offering flexible courses to students were identified.

These included timetables, staff, resources, students, courses and relationships with others in the education sector and community. Schools believed that more students were gaining qualifications with the advent of the NCEA. Students reported choosing courses based on career or study aspirations, likelihood of achieving in the course, and enjoyment. All students emphasised the importance of their teachers, with this being a key factor in why they chose to drop a course. Students reported receiving career advice from a range of sources: career counselors, teachers, family members, a course selection booklet, the internet or computer programmes, university liaison officers and career expos.

Overall, while schools were positive about the NCEA and its impact on course design, several issues relating to the new qualifications system were apparent. There was a perception in some schools that unit standards and National Certificates were for less able students. Students also appeared to be streamed into versions of courses based on previous achievement.

While this preliminary investigation elicited interesting data, the small sample of schools limited the generalisability of the findings. The developments in course design found in these schools, such as offering a range of National Certificates and alternate versions of courses, may not be typical of schools throughout New Zealand. The preliminary study also uncovered issues and potential trends that could be investigated in more detail to help establish what is happening in schools with regard to course provision. A national survey of schools was therefore conducted to give a more complete picture of the types of courses leading to national qualifications that schools are providing for their senior secondary students.

National Survey

The purpose of the national survey of secondary schools was to build on the findings of the preliminary investigation with the aim of examining flexibility in course design. The survey investigated whether, with the implementation of the NQF/NCEA, schools are making changes to the way they organise courses or programmes leading to qualifications, and if so, why this might be.

To date, no research studies in New Zealand appear to have taken this approach. A case study methodology has usually been employed, such as in the *Learning Curves* and *Innovative Pathways* research, conducted by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. The

present survey complements the detail of the preliminary investigation and serves as a benchmark or baseline of courses that schools are providing to students in 2005, for future monitoring.

The guiding questions for the survey were:

1. What courses, certificates and programmes are schools offering senior students?
2. Have schools made changes to their senior courses since the implementation of the NCEA? If so, what kinds of changes?
3. What factors aid or restrict the courses schools are able to provide to senior students?
4. What are schools' opinions of the flexibility of the NQF and the contribution of unit standards?
5. How does course provision differ depending on school characteristics (e.g., decile, locality, gender, governing authority, roll size and type)?

Questions to be included in the survey were based on the preliminary investigation, and covered a range of areas:

- the number of senior secondary courses;
- Scholarship, modular (part year) and beyond level 3 courses;
- English, mathematics and science courses;
- NQF Certificates other than the NCEA;
- other courses, programmes and qualifications;
- course changes since the implementation of the NCEA;
- aids and barriers to flexible course design;
- the role of the NQF in enabling flexible pathways for students;
- schools' perceptions of unit standards.

The survey was sent to 453 schools in New Zealand. This included eight Cook Island schools. A total of 183 schools responded to the survey, a response rate of 41 percent. The characteristics of the survey sample were compared with those of all schools in New Zealand and are shown in Table 1. Overall, the survey sample was similar to all New Zealand schools in the following characteristics: area of New Zealand, locality and decile bands. The survey sample had a slightly higher percentage of single sex girls' schools and state schools and fewer private schools than the national sample. Differences were also found in school type with more secondary and fewer composite schools in the survey sample. Roll differences were found for those schools with less than 100 students

and between 1001 and 2000 students; the survey had fewer of the former and more of the latter.

Table 1 Characteristics of schools that responded to the survey compared with those of all NZ schools

Characteristics	Categories	Survey Sample N=183	All NZ Schools N=445*
Area of New Zealand	North Island	74%	75%
	South Island	24%	24%
	Other	2%	1%
Locality	Urban	44%	43%
	Rural	55%	56%
	Other	1%	1%
School Gender	Co-educational	70%	75%
	Single sex girls	18%	14%
	Single sex boys	12%	11%
Governing Authority	State	73%	70%
	State:integrated	20%	20%
	Private	7%	10%
School Type	Composite	16%	25%
	Secondary	83%	74%
	Other	1%	1%
School Roll	Under 100 students	3%	7%
	100 to 300 students	19%	20%
	301 to 1000 students	49%	51%
	1001 to 2000 students	25%	19%
	Over 2000 students	4%	3%
Decile Bands	No decile reported	2%	6%
	Decile 1-3	23%	27%
	Decile 4-7	44%	43%
	Decile 8-10	31%	24%

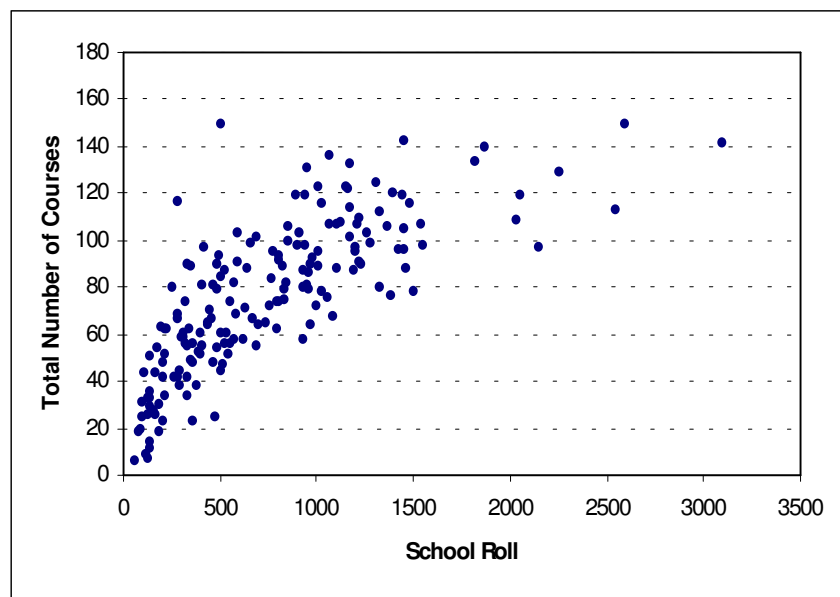
*Note: Eight Cook Island schools were not included in the table as the data were not available.

The majority of respondents were principal's nominees (89%), with just over half also indicating that they held positions of deputy, associate or assistant principal. Around a third of respondents were curriculum co-ordinators and just five respondents were school principals.

Main Findings

Patterns in courses offered to senior students

Schools offered a total of between six and 209 courses to senior students, the average being 77. Generally, most courses were offered to students at level 2. The total number of courses schools offered was found to be strongly related to their roll size. As school roll increased, the total number of courses offered by each school also increased. School roll was also found to predict the number of courses a school offered students, with no other variable (i.e., type, gender or locality) having a substantial influence.



*Base, n=177 schools. Note: Four schools were not included in the analyses due to missing data. Two schools which were "outliers" were also omitted.

Figure 1 Total number of courses offered by schools compared to school roll

The number of courses offered by schools in 2005 and 2006 was generally the same as in the preceding years. However, some schools (20%) offered more courses than they had previously for both years, and only a small number offered fewer. The majority of schools had compulsory or highly recommended courses at level 1 and level 2, and a quarter of schools also had compulsory courses at level 3. English was the course most likely to be compulsory. A third of schools offered students courses beyond level 3, such as National Certificates, University papers, and Te Reo Maori courses. Schools reported that these courses met students' needs and interests and provided academic extension.

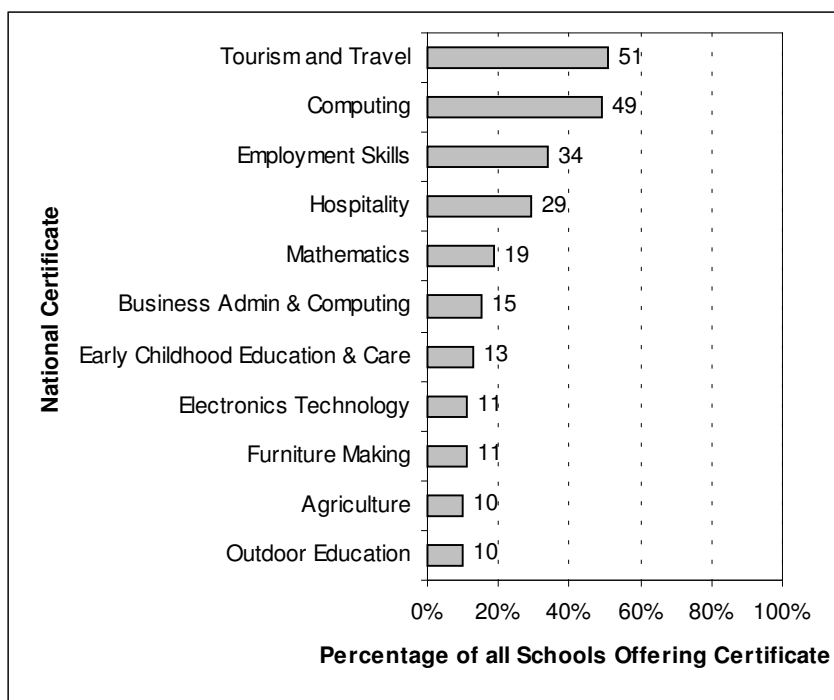
Table 2 Percentage of schools that offer courses, support, or both for Scholarship students

Scholarship Courses	Scholarship Support		
	Yes	No	Total
Yes	13%	2%	15%
No	52%	33%	85%
Total	65%	35%	100%

Note: Those not offering courses or support may not have had students entered for Scholarship. Schools were asked to indicate support they offered to Scholarship students; however, they were not asked if they had students sitting these examinations.

Two thirds of schools offered their students attempting Scholarship extra courses and/or support. As Table 2 shows, Scholarship support, such as tutorials, was more common than specific courses.

Seventy nine percent of schools offered students NQF Certificates other than the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). On average schools offered three National Certificates to students, with around a quarter offering six or more. The most popular certificates were in tourism and computing areas (see Figure 2), and most schools had started offering them before 2002. Schools chose to offer NQF Certificates, as they gave students more opportunities to gain qualifications, met students' needs, and allowed any credits gained to contribute to the NCEA.



Base: All schools, n=183.

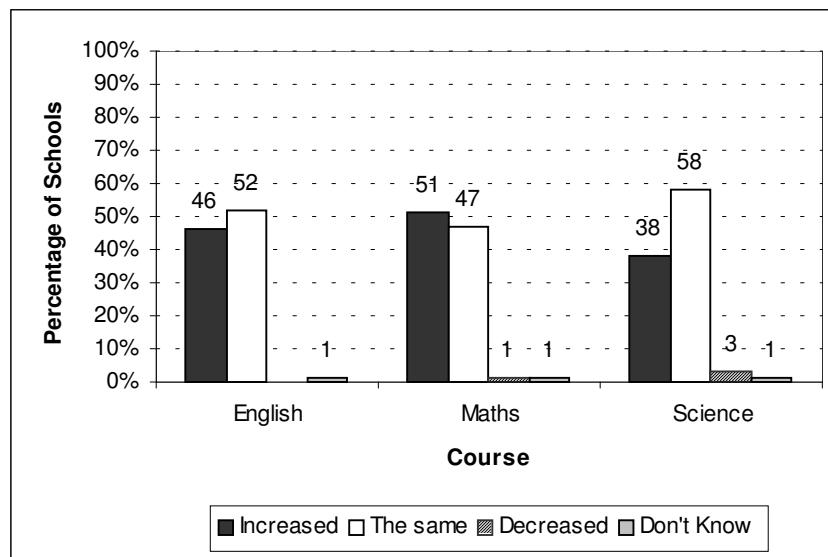
Note: Multiple response. Only Certificates with 10% or more of schools offering them have been included in the figure. National Certificates that have fewer than 10% were: Sport (8%), Science (7%), Motor Industry (6%), Equine Studies (5%), Retail (4%), Carpentry (4%), Elementary Construction (4%), Horticulture (3%), Engineering (2%), Hairdressing (2%), Boat Building (1%), Forestry (1%), Travel (1%), Aquaculture (1%), Design (1%), and Technology (1%).

Figure 2 National Certificates offered apart from the NCEA

Almost all of the schools offered a range of courses, programmes and qualifications in addition to National Certificates, with the most popular being papers through the Correspondence School. The Young Enterprise Certificate and courses funded through STAR and Gateway were also popular. Schools viewed these programmes and qualifications positively and reported they complemented courses at their schools and allowed students to gain qualifications.

Course changes since the implementation of the NCEA

Around half of the schools reported that they were now offering more English, mathematics and science courses at levels 1, 2, and 3 than

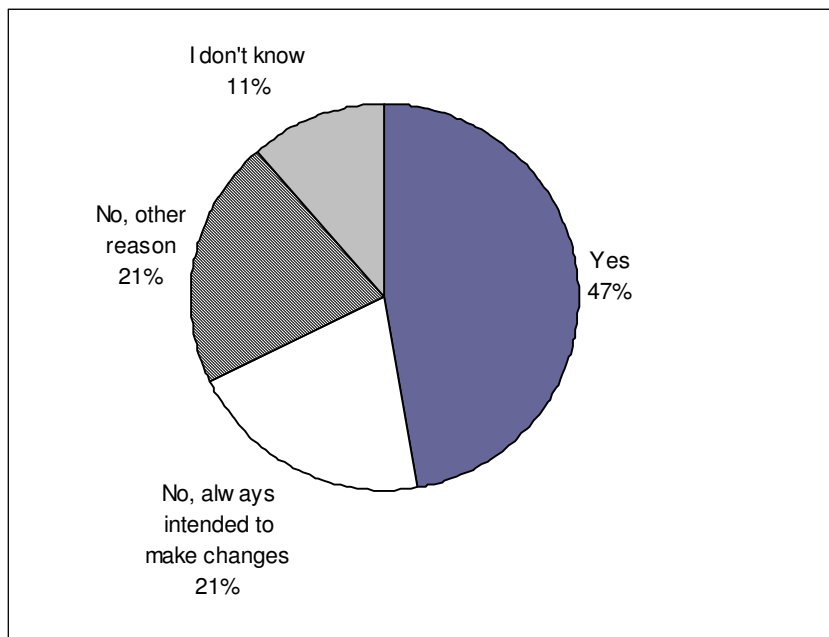


Base: Schools that offer range of English, mathematics and science courses, N=166.

Figure 3 Whether the number of English, mathematics and science courses has increased since the implementation of the NCEA

before the NCEA was introduced in 2002 (see Figure 3). Schools were more likely to offer a range of courses to students in science. Schools reported that courses differed on whether they included achievement or unit standards or a combination of both, the content of the courses, and the number of standards (and credits) offered.

New courses introduced in schools since 2002 included non-traditional courses, with those in areas of social sciences and technology being the most popular. Examples of these types of courses were Cook Island tourism, business management and trades drawing. Courses that assess standards from a range of learning areas were offered by a third of schools. These courses incorporated standards from within a learning area, such as a human biology and science course, and standards from across different learning areas, such as a computing and



Base: Schools that have made course changes, n=140.

Figure 4 Whether the changes in courses were a result of the NCEA

visual arts course. A quarter of schools had combined existing courses, the most popular being an accounting and economics course, and a geography and history course.

Just under half of schools that had made course changes reported they had resulted from the introduction of the NCEA (Figure 4).

Flexibility of the NQF/NCEA

Schools were generally positive about the NQF. Most schools agreed that the NQF had brought beneficial consequences, such as providing a wider range of courses and qualifications that better catered to students' needs, and allowed course design to be more creative. The majority also agreed that the NQF had led to more flexible pathways for students, more opportunities for further study or employment, and a wider range of qualifications. However, there were some with mixed

opinions about the NQF. A number of schools believed that courses were being broken down into too many assessment components, and students were not able to integrate knowledge and skills across standards.

The majority of schools agreed that unit standards made a valuable contribution to their programmes. Some schools, however, believed it is easier for most students to achieve unit standards than achievement standards, and over half noted that unit standards suit students who are more practical in nature. Boys' and private schools in particular believed that unit standards are academically inferior to achievement standards.

The most important aids and barriers to schools offering flexible courses were having the appropriate resources and facilities, the availability and qualifications of teachers, and adequate funding. Time to develop courses was also seen as a key barrier.

Differences in courses offered by different types of schools

In several areas of course provision differences between types of schools were noted. For instance, schools more likely to offer Scholarship courses or support were single-sex, in urban areas, high decile, secondary and with larger rolls. Schools that offered a range of National Certificates tended to be co-educational, secondary compared to composite schools, state, mid-decile and rural. Those schools that tended to offer fewer and more traditional courses were single-sex and private schools. While rural schools in general offered fewer courses to students, they provided a wide range of courses, including those beyond level 3, non-traditional and combined courses, and National Certificates.

Commentary

The preliminary investigation involved research in 15 secondary schools covering similar areas to the national survey. While this investigation broadly examined the courses schools were offering, the national survey took a more detailed approach. However, many similarities between the two studies are clear.

In both studies the most courses were offered at level 2 and it was found that as the roll of a school increased the total number of courses offered also increased. In both studies, schools offered a range of different versions of English, mathematics and science courses. A range of National Certificates and other qualifications or programmes was offered by the 15 case study schools and those in the national survey.

Those schools in the preliminary investigation did, however, offer on average a higher number of courses and National Certificates to their students than those in the national survey. This may suggest that those schools in the preliminary investigation were quite innovative and overall offered a wide range of courses.

In general, the national survey provided similar findings to the initial study and served to confirm several factors. For instance, schools are being creative in their course design, offering non-traditional and combined courses, as well as courses made up from standards from a range of learning areas. Schools in both studies were positive about the NQF and its role in increasing the flexibility of students' pathways and the qualifications students are able to gain. The national survey confirmed that there was a perception in some schools that unit standards are academically inferior to achievement standards and are more suited to "practical" students. In summary, where the case studies indicated such findings, the national survey has served to confirm what is happening in a range of different schools in New Zealand with regard to course design.

In the preliminary investigation, staff and students praised the new secondary qualification system for allowing students to gain qualifications. This is in keeping with findings from the *Learning Curves* reports where schools were pleased students were working towards the same qualification regardless of the different types of skills (academic or vocational) they were acquiring. Schools also noted an increase in flexibility with the NCEA, which was also found in the *Changing Course* data. Students were pleased to be earning credits and liked the internal component of the assessments. Overall, while schools were positive about the NCEA and its impact on course design, several issues relating to the new qualifications system were apparent. Some students were uncertain about the marking system and would have preferred results in percentages. Other concerns related to the implementation of the system and the way assessments were driving the learning in the classroom. Both students and staff commented that workload was an issue. A perceived increase in workload was also found in the *Learning Curves* reports and the more recent PPTA report (Alison, 2005).

There was a perception in some schools that unit standards are academically inferior to achievement standards, and National Certificates were for students with low abilities. In line with this opinion, some students reported that unit standards were easier than achievement standards and indicated that achievement standards were

better, as has been reported in another study (NZQA, 2006). The reason for this preference was the emphasis placed on achievement standards contributing to entrance in some university courses. A few students indicated that unit standards were a "dummy qualification". This perception appeared to originate from the "you either get it or you don't" approach for unit standards and their frequent occurrence in practical courses. Staff attributed the distinction between each of the types of standard to the disparity between credits. Students were able to earn more credits in unit standards in less time. Staff commented that this discrepancy between credits and standards needed to be resolved. These perspectives are in line with the findings from *Learning Curves* and the PPTA report on teachers' views of the NCEA (Alison, 2005). This latter report found a range of views on the differences between standards and recommended that credit values of standards be reviewed and changes made based on workload. These differences in opinion on aspects of standards may reflect each school's overall views of the place of unit standards and how readily they have adopted them and other National Certificates.

Some staff felt that National Certificates other than the NCEA were for low ability students; however, the majority of staff members commented that this perception was misguided. They indicated that all National Certificates were equal in value and were meeting the range of abilities and interests of students. Students commented that the main focus was the NCEA; however, those studying towards other National Certificates indicated that they believed there was no difference between the certificates.

With the introduction of alternative versions of courses, one finding was that students appeared to be streamed into different courses based on their ability level. For example, in one school, all courses at levels 1, 2 or 3 are assigned to one of four strands (academic, standard, preparation and foundation) that differ on factors such as the types of standards (internal or external achievement standards, or unit standards) on which students are assessed. Students are placed in each strand based on previous achievement, with multi-levelling common. As this system reflects teachers' views of student capability, two issues arise. First, once a student is placed in a course it may be difficult to move between strands, so are there "academic" students or "standard" students? Second, how do the students perceive the strands? They may view the "academic" and "standard" strands as preferable and be reluctant to be placed in the "preparation" or "foundation" strands. This

issue was mentioned by a number of schools, as the perception of students and parents was that the students should be in the mainstream course. One school reported that it struggled to include non-conventional versions of a course, as there was pressure from students and parents to offer only mainstream courses. Another issue that arose was of schools being unable to offer alternative versions because their rolls were too small.

In the area of career decisions, there appears to be conflict between keeping course options open versus providing a structured pathway that leads to a specific career destination. Boyd and McDowall (2004) reported tension between these two options, which they referred to as "exploration of choice models". Used by schools to assist young people in their career decisions, the first model sees schools allowing students to sample a range of careers, while the second involves established pathways between schools and tertiary courses or apprenticeships. Tensions are thought to arise as one model might suit one student while the other better suits another student. It is unclear from this investigation whether schools were using these models, though most had a number of transition courses, opportunities for apprenticeships, and a wealth of information on courses leading to specific tertiary courses and career destinations. Students reported receiving varied advice from teachers and careers advisors, the most common being to choose courses and careers based on what they enjoyed and to keep their options open. Staff acknowledged that it was a huge challenge for students to find a particular pathway. While some students were very clear about the courses they were studying and careers they wanted to pursue, others were unsure of their future plans. All students reported that the core courses of English, mathematics and science were needed for whatever career they aspired to. Overall, the advantages and disadvantages of keeping students' options open and having more structured pathways are issues which need to be explored.

Further Research

The national survey serves as a 2005 benchmark of the kinds of courses schools are offering their students and the rationale behind them. It would be worthwhile surveying schools in future years to monitor whether changes in the courses schools are offering students, and their opinions of the flexibility of the NQF and the status of unit standards, remain stable. This study could also be extended through more detailed observations of schools and their philosophy of course design, such as

the factors they consider before choosing to introduce or drop a course. One finding of interest was that the majority of schools believed they offered students a wide variety of courses but that they would like to offer more courses to senior students. This appears to indicate a certain discrepancy, and invites the question of how schools decide which courses they offer students. Are some schools content with their range of courses, while others are constantly looking to offer more courses based on student demands and resources available?

Findings that may suggest a change in the types of courses provided to students were shown in the more traditional offerings. For example, a number of schools were choosing to combine accounting and economics, and geography and history, for reasons of falling student numbers. Non-traditional courses introduced since the NCEA were mostly in the areas of physical education, tourism and technology, highlighting possible growth areas in student numbers. It would be interesting to see whether there are increases in student numbers in these areas post-secondary school, along with a corresponding drop-off in courses such as history or economics.

Just under half of the schools reported offering more versions of core courses since the NCEA had been implemented in 2002. Schools noted that the reason they were offering several versions of English, mathematics and science was to cater for different ability levels and to meet the needs and interests of students. It would be valuable to find out if more students are now achieving in these courses than when only one version of each course was available.

Also, while we know the kinds of courses, certificates and programmes schools are offering students, we do not know how many students study each of these, and what the student demand for these courses is. It would also be worthwhile to find out students' views about how flexible they believe the NQF is regarding their course choices and future plans.

Other areas not examined in this study that could be explored include:

- reasons behind schools dropping courses;
- impacts of timetable structure on the courses made available to students;
- how schools plan their courses based on the gender and cultural backgrounds of their students;
- how common multi-levering is (i.e., students studying courses not at their own year level).

Conclusion

From these two investigations, it would appear that secondary schools are promoting flexible pathways for students. Many schools have expanded their curriculum, offering students a wide range of courses and National Certificates since the NCEA has been implemented. Some schools are being more innovative in their course design than others, offering new courses made up of a combination of standards and making changes to their timetables to accommodate students. With several versions of courses available to students, courses are more closely tailored to their needs and more structured pathways exist from one level to another. While other schools offer a more traditional programme of courses, they may still be meeting the educational needs of the students attending them. With the initial implementation of the NCEA complete, schools reported that now would be a good time for consolidation. They would be reviewing what courses they have and how they met the needs of their students. Schools also reported that they would be reviewing statistics on the NZQA website to find out where students were or were not successful in gaining credits and certificates. It is likely that in the next three years, further changes will occur and more courses will be modified. At this stage, at least, there is evidence that the policy intention of schools in providing secondary students with a wider range of courses and more flexible pathways is being met.

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