



NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH  
TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

**Media release**

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## **NCEA gets thumbs up from students ... now they understand the system**

Students studying across all three levels of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) regard the assessment as a valuable qualification, and believe their teachers and parents do as well.

These findings are contained in research by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research entitled *Shaping Our Futures: Meeting Secondary Students' Learning Needs in a Time of Evolving Qualifications*, the third and final report of the *Learning Curves* project.

The project explores students' experiences of the NCEA, and describes the strategies they use to manage assessment workloads, their perceptions of NCEA's value as a qualification, and the ways they produce individualised qualifications.

"Students are getting more and more savvy about managing their assessments, with their decision making being driven by their strategic understanding of the assessment system as well as the factors that motivate them as learners," says NZCER Senior Researcher Rosemary Hipkins, who led the project.

"Their perceptions of the NCEA's value are closely tied to their views of its relevance and to the different ways they engage with learning and assessment. Different students actively produce quite different types of NCEA qualifications, which allows them to keep future 'learning pathways' open."

Ms Hipkins noted that over-assessment of students over the three years of NCEA could have a de-motivating impact, yet was something that could be addressed immediately by schools.

"Students saw skipping assessments as a legitimate strategy for managing over-assessment, or for avoiding the likelihood of failure or potentially embarrassing assessments. While skipping assessments is not new, what has changed is the extent to which students can now make strategic decisions about how they will accumulate the credits they need for their overall qualification, assuming they understand how the system works."

One outcome of the study which is cause for concern is that while some students see themselves as "successful learners", many are more likely to see themselves as "successful collectors of NCEA credits". These students were using risk-management strategies to maximise credit gains with little critical regard to the value of learning gains.

"This is worrying, as such actions are no more conducive to lifelong learning than were previous methods of assessment for qualifications, and it seems unlikely that this situation can change while students are over-assessed," says Ms Hipkins.

"The 'positive' is that the NCEA could offer students more scope to become life long learners, yet at this stage it is apparent that the hopes for the NCEA to become an assessment system that provides better support for lifelong learning are 'not yet achieved'."

**ENDS**

## **Scope and background – *Learning Curves* research**

The *Learning Curves* project has documented changes in the subject and assessment choices offered to senior students in six medium-sized New Zealand secondary schools between 2002 and 2004 as the National Qualifications Framework and National Certificate of Educational Achievement reforms were progressively implemented. It has also investigated how students perceive and make their subject choices within the context of each school's curriculum policies and practices.

This report documents findings from the third and final year of *Learning Curves* and is subtitled *Shaping Our Futures: Meeting Secondary Students' Learning Needs in a Time of Evolving Qualifications*. It builds on findings from the first report, *From Cabbages to Kings*, which was released in mid-2002, and the second report, *Shared Pathways and Multiple Tracks*, which was released in April 2004.

The research used six case study schools (three in rural towns, three in cities) that were selected to represent a diversity of student groups and contextual settings. In 2004 the principal and five heads of department (of English, mathematics, science, technology, and the arts) were interviewed, as they had been in 2002 and 2003. Students at Years 11–13 were surveyed in mid-2004 with some also participating in focus groups.

*Shaping Our Futures* differs in approach from the first two reports as it captures differences between the schools, rather than generalising patterns across them, as was the case with the previous reports.

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### **About NZCER**

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research is an independent, educational research organisation which provides educators, students, parents, policy makers, and the public with innovative and independent research, analysis, and advice. Established in 1934 through grants from the Carnegie Corporation, it became a statutory body in 1945 and now operates under the NZCER Act 1972 (and amendments). It is not formally attached to any government department, university, or other educational organisation.

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