![Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga — Ministry of Education]

Education Report: Evaluation of the testing of the Vocational Entrance Award

To:	Hon Jan Tinetti, Minister of Education		
Cc:	Hon Kelvin Davis, Associate Minister of Education Hon Jo Luxton, Associate Minister of Education		
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Purpose of Report

The purpose of this paper is to provide you with an update of the testing of key policy settings and design for the Vocational Entrance Award and the outcomes of the initial evaluation and seeks your agreement to pause testing of the Award prototype.

Summary

1. The development of the 'Vocational Entrance Award' (the Award) as part of the NCEA Change Programme, along with the Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE), was identified in 2019 as being a possible solution to issues with how vocational education and training (VET) was supported in schools and through to post-school VET and employment [METIS 1292080 refers].

2. The overall intent of the Vocational Entrance Award (name provisional) ('the Award'), as agreed by Cabinet, is "…to enable direct entry into higher-level vocational education and training [VET]" [CAB-19-MIN-0203 and CAB-20-MIN-0023 refer].

3. In August 2022, following consultation and engagement with the sector, it was agreed that the Ministry would work towards undertaking small-scale targeted prototypes in 2023 in one or two industries, and four to six lead delivery partners [METIS 1292080 refers].

4. The purpose of the prototyping phase was to test the design principles and key policy settings to see how they could look in practice, to test other potential components of the Award, and to consider how it fits within the wider NCEA qualifications and awards system.

5. A preliminary evaluation of prototyping has been completed. The purpose was to identify critical feedback that needed to be considered when planning for wider development or testing in 2024. The evaluation report is attached in Annex 1.

6. The evaluation indicates that the Award as designed does not resonate with school-based and Workplace Development Council (WDC) based stakeholders as enabling direct entry into higher-level vocational education and training and that there are other practicalities that need to be addressed. However, the prototyping phase has helped identify other work that could be undertaken in collaboration with the WDCs to improve VET in schools, including rethinking the current Vocational Pathways structure and awards, and improving VET resources for use in schooling settings.

7. Note that even if the evaluation had indicated that Award's purpose and design were 'about right' there are financial and other practical considerations that would need to be addressed prior to any further testing or implementation. Currently the NCEA Change Programme budget does not provide funding beyond 2023 for prototyping and design of the Award.

8. Both the evaluation and WDCs recommended pausing further development or testing of the Award at this time. A pause would:

   a. be consistent with previous advice to not progress more fundamental changes to secondary-tertiary provision at this time due to the scale of change currently underway, capability and capacity issues within the sector, and the pressures resulting from the other change processes [METIS 1307689 refers]

   b. allow time to finish developing and implementing existing initiatives to strengthen pathways into higher-level VET and

   c. enable the Ministry to work with the Workforce Development Councils (WDCs) and other stakeholders to plan out and undertake a suite of work identified as being required to fill significant gaps in supporting VET in schools.

9. The Award is just one of a range of system improvements to senior secondary and tertiary VET currently underway. Allowing these wider improvements to bed in - and to investigate/incorporate other improvements whose identification was catalysed from the testing of the concept of this Award - before work continues will additionally ensure that future developments complement and support these.

Recommended Actions

The Ministry of Education recommends you:

a. **Note** that we have been testing the proposed Award, in six schools and kura this year, through prototypes and that its evaluation has provided sufficient information to determine next steps to address agreed challenges to how VET is supported in schools

Noted

b. **Note** that the evaluation of the testing has also shown significant issues with the current purpose and design of the Award

Noted

c. **Note** that additional funding would be required should there be any further testing or development of the Award beyond 2023

Noted

d. **Agree** either to:

i. pause testing now (preferred)

Agree/Disagree

OR

ii. continue with testing, as previously planned, to the end of the year then pausing

Agree/Disagree

e. **Note** that the process of testing the Award has been important for helping to identify required wider system changes to VET that the previous Minister desired of the testing

Noted

f. **agree** to the Ministry working with stakeholders throughout the remainder of 2023 to flesh out the details of how we can improve the system, and report back to you in early 2024

Agree/Disagree

g. **agree** that the Ministry of Education release this paper in full once it has been considered by you alongside the NZCER evaluation report on prototyping.

Agree / Disagree

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Te Poutāhū | Curriculum Centre

31/07/2023

Hon Jan Tinetti
Minister of Education

06 08 2023

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Background

1. As part of Change 6 of the NCEA Change Package Cabinet agreed to signal clearer pathways to further education and employment by: […] investigating developing a Vocational Entrance Award, to enable direct entry into higher-level vocational education and training [CAB-19-MIN-0203 and CAB-20-MIN-0023 refer]. The Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) and Professional Advisory Group (PAG) recommended the development of an award to:

   a. break down the academic/vocational binary wherever possible in the schooling sector

   b. raise the esteem of pathways that are less valued

   c. ensure that all subjects, courses, and programmes of learning have a purpose beyond schooling and are useful and relevant to the student's next steps

   d. work towards ensuring that all standards, including industry-derived standards, support coherent learning that helps young people to develop a broad range of competencies and capabilities.

2. In February 2022, the then Minister of Education agreed to an overall timeframe for finalising the Award, including prototyping in one or two industries this year, and phased introduction of additional industry pathways in 2024 and 2025 [METIS 1280465 refers].

3. The Ministry also undertook targeted sector engagement last year to inform the high-level design of the Award which you and the then-Minister agreed to in August 2022. [METIS 1292080 refers]. While feedback from targeted engagement showed agreement over the key challenges in the VET system, there was no consensus on the overall concept or key purpose of the Award. However, we considered that there was sufficient support for the idea of the Award to merit testing what it could look like in practice and to help inform and shape other aspects of VE reform.

4. Through prototyping in six schools and one kura we have been able to test the agreed design principles, including the ability for students to attain both the Award and University Entrance (UE), the expectation that students would need to meet the overall requirements of the relevant level of NCEA (including literacy and numeracy), and the degree to which it could help prepare students for post-school VET. Prototyping has also provided opportunities to explore remaining design questions such as the place of work experience and portfolios and the relationship with existing NCEA Awards.

5. The preliminary evaluation of prototyping, which was delivered in June 2023, recommends that the Ministry pause further prototyping of the Award to enable further design and policy work in the vocational education and NCEA spaces which may provide further clarity to the how the Award can best deliver on the MAG and PAG's vision for Change 6. This recommendation is echoed by the WDCs which recommend a pause to enable consideration of what better support for VET in schools looks like, and aligning the curriculum with pathways, providers, and work experience.

6. A focus of the prototyping phase was to continue to work with the Workforce Development Councils (WDCs) as they became more established and had more time to form views with the industries that they represent on how to best improve secondary VET and the place of a new award in that. The Ministry worked with representatives of the WDCs to agree on the two industries and on the schools and kura Māori to approach. The WDCs formed a consensus that the two industries would be Digital

Technology and Building and Construction, represented by Toi Mai and Waihanga Ara Rau respectively. All the WDC representatives remained involved and informed throughout.

7.   The NCEA Change Programme budget had funding for the design phase and for co-design and testing of the Award with key stakeholders. There is no budget beyond 2023 for further development or implementation. Should the prototype be continued or expanded, additional funding would be required.

Summary of Prototyping Evaluation

8.   A preliminary evaluation of the prototyping phase was commissioned from the New Zealand Council for Education Research (NZCER) and an evaluation report was delivered to the Ministry in late June 2023 (attached to this report as Annex 1). As part of the evaluation, both school-based and WDC-based participants were interviewed and divergences and similarities in opinion between these two evaluation groups were compared.

9.   The evaluation found three key themes, being that:

a.   the purpose of the Award resonates with few

b.   there is consistent feedback that it would be best to instead look again at the existing Level 2 Vocational Pathways Award

c.   the Award is unlikely to address parity of esteem between 'vocational' and 'academic'… and could exacerbate it.

10.   The evaluation concluded by recommending that the Ministry pause prototyping of the Award until further design and policy work on system wide design, and the development of skills standards by WDCs has occurred.

Purpose resonates with few

11.   While there was there was overall support for a vocational award in principle, there appeared to be no consensus on the overall concept or key purpose of the Award amongst both school and WDC based participants. Comments from both evaluation groups indicated that the purpose of the Award is not understood or does not resonate. For instance, more respondents disagreed than agreed with the suggestion that the VEA could provide a clear and direct pathway to future vocational employment or further learning. This is of serious concern given discussions had and supporting materials provided.

12.   One reason for the lack of resonance of the Award's purpose may be that VET is extraordinarily diverse and there is no consistent minimum requirement for entry into post-school VET. There has been no demand from tertiary education organisations to impose any entry criteria other than what they each already set for individual qualifications; it is difficult to envisage any declining entry due to a student not having this new Award.

Rethinking current Awards

13.   A consistent theme in the feedback from participants was that upgrading the current Level 2 Vocational Pathways Awards (VPAs) and extending them to include Level 3 would be a better option. Prototyping has provided a catalyst for school and WDC stakeholders to consider the future of vocational education in senior secondary and what elements of the current systems work and has the potential to provide a clearer

pathway from the current Level 2 awards to further education, training and employment.

14. The current Vocational Pathways broadly align with the new WDC structures set up through the Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE). The WDCs have given considerable thought to how to improve the Vocational Pathways and to what is required to support schools to use them in the way originally intended, including as a curriculum designing tool. For example, feedback indicated that there is an opportunity now to rethink and structure and core of the existing VPAs and extend them to Level 3, particularly around identifying a core of standards which support all pathways. We will continue to work with the WDCs on these and other improvements.

15. Should you agree to a pause, the Ministry will consider this as an alternative step to progressing the Award further. Note however that this feedback may in part be due to more familiarity amongst participants with current policy settings than the less defined Award we were prototyping, and current certainty around the future of vocational education. As the NCEA and the RoVE changes mature, we will be better placed to engage WDCs on the development of any future awards, or redevelopment of existing ones.

Parity of esteem

16. One of the Award principles is that students in all settings should be able to attain both the Award and University Entrance (UE), if they desire, to support flexibility of post-school pathways. While there was in-principle support from participants of this design principle, comments from respondents indicated scepticism whether this may be possible in practice due to perceived incompatibilities between UE, which requires achievement standards from approved subjects, and a vocational award likely including skill standards. Although this is not a design parameter, this assumption likely colours participants views of an Award.

17. Current assumptions and beliefs held within schools about VET may lead to the positioning of the Award as vocational and as an alternative to UE rather than a potential complement. This may create a risk of schools using the Award to justify streaming practices and exacerbate the disparity between academic and vocational learning. Other examples uncovered in the evaluation report that indicate that the Award may not have the desired impact include:

    a. an assumption that many students aspiring to achieve the Award would struggle to achieve literacy and numeracy requirements

    b. the withdrawal of a programme from one school from the prototyping phase because it was reoriented to support university aspirations

    c. feedback from Digital Technology teachers that they are struggling with thinking about how their achievement standards-based programmes and aspirations of their students to attend university fit with something that is "vocational"

    d. schools already thinking that they would need to ensure that any student seeking to achieve the Award would start preparing to do so from Year 9 which is relatively unrealistic.

18. Rather than being a means to recognise that a learner has completed necessary learning for post-school VET, the feedback we are hearing is that it is good to have something to recognise the achievements of those who are not academic and do not aspire to and/or "are not capable of going to university". This is contrary to Award's

intent and purpose so further design and policy work is needed to ensure a risk to parity of esteem is eliminated.

WDC Response to Evaluation

19. Since the concept of an Award was first announced, it has consistently been recognised that there is a significant opportunity for industry (via WDCs) to partner with the Ministry, and 'reach back' into and influence the VET learning students in schools and kura do.

20. During discussions last year, the WDCs were still undertaking recruitment to fill essential roles and wanted time to consider what could be truly transformative for learners and their industries.

21. The WDCs have now seen the results of the evaluation and recommend a pause on any further development of the Award for now. This would enable time for a reset - to consider what VET in schools looks like, to refresh what needs to be refreshed, and to align the curriculum with pathways, providers, and work experience.

22. The passing of time and their intimate involvement in the prototyping phase has helped to provide the WDCs with opportunities to identify a number of improvements to how VET is supported in schools such as:

    a. the different ways that achievement standards and unit standards are resourced for schools is a contributor to parity of esteem between the assessment standards

    b. the mixed availability of teaching, learning, and assessment resources for the schooling environment results in many teachers having to develop their own. Where these resources are not provided, the result is often duplications of effort, variable pre-moderation, a lack of consistency, and compromises to and variability of the overall quality of outcomes

    c. there is a need for guidance on how teachers can develop learning programmes that will meet the needs of students and industry.

Pausing Prototyping of the Award

23. We recommend you agree to a pause on prototyping the Award in line with the recommendations of the preliminary evaluation and the feedback from WDCs. We can then work with WDCs and other stakeholders throughout the remainder of 2023 to explore other improvements in detail to implement the intent of Change 6. We will report back to you on the outcome of this work in early 2024.

24. The evidence so far supports a need to look again at the purpose and value of the Award and to focus this within the context of considering what changes in the structure of Vocational Pathways and how to best support them to achieve what was intended. While the testing of the concept of the Award was very small-scale and ordinarily caution is needed when attributing the views of the few to the many, those involved in this prototyping phase are all experienced practitioners who are advocates for VET. The views heard through the evaluations are consistent with previous consultations and the insights gleaned from real life testing add validity of previous concerns raised.

25. The prototyping process has been successful in identifying other system changes that could make a material difference to how secondary school VET is supported and its flow through to tertiary VET, including for the WDCs to take the lead on developing examples of coherent programmes of learning. These changes align with the advice we received from the MAG and PAG during the development of the NCEA Change Package. The prototyping process has provided us with valuable insights and enabled outcomes consistent with the previous Minister's desire for the testing to occur in 2023 "…to help inform and shape other aspects of VE reform."

Benefits to wider VET system

26. At a high-level, changes driven by the RoVE and NCEA change programmes will have major implications for VET provision, which will support long-term sector improvement. Some examples of substantial opportunities for changes are underway, such as:

    a. the work of the WDCs in developing skills standards which provides opportunities to improve the consistency and quality of VET learning within secondary schools and throughout the different tertiary education providers

    b. the refresh of further aspects of the Vocational Pathways, including scoping the value of including Level 3 standards to enhance their value and use as a curriculum design and planning tool to support schools to design and develop programmes of learning

    c. development of the National Careers System Strategy, which provides opportunities to improve the quality of career advice and support for learners

    d. Review of Achievement Standards and their explicit inclusion of pathways in each of the subjects' guidance and products.

27. Pausing further work on the Award at this time will provide time for the above opportunities underway which addresses system issues to be developed and implemented, which may enable stakeholders to have more certainty in the purpose and intent of the Award. As these changes bed-in, we will be better informed of how the Award can best support and promote these changes in schooling settings, and it fits as part of a wider system. This will also be responsive to change fatigue and provide time to develop and implement additional improvements to how VET is supported in senior secondary beyond the Award.

Opportunities of working with WDCs through a pause

28. As noted above the WDCs have also identified a range of opportunities to improve VET in schools. We have already agreed to further discuss and consider these options. Undertaking this work would ensure that a pathways award would have strong foundations from which successful implementation would be more likely. Applicability would also be broad, including as part of refocussing Vocational Pathways towards its original vision, enhancing the Level 2 Vocational Pathways Award, contributing to extending the Level 2 Vocational Pathways Award to Level 3, 9(2)(f)(iv) and better alignment of secondary-tertiary VET overall.

29. To support our ongoing partnership and the goodwill that has been generated, should you agree to pausing further work on the development and implementation of this Award, we will work with the WDCs throughout the remainder of 2023 to explore these opportunities and report back to you in early 2024.

Risks associated with pausing

30. There is a risk that if we pause prototyping then it may dampen momentum and enthusiasm for changes to NCEA overall. However, the work that will be progressed with the WDCs and other stakeholders during the pause aligns well with and supports the overall intent for the Award. In addition, directly impacted stakeholders, WDCs and teachers working in vocational education will likely engage better on the future developments if we pause given the results of the evaluation.

31. There is little risk to learners participating in prototyping as learners are undertaking the same programmes of learning that they would have undertaken in the absence of prototyping. As part of setting up prototyping, we did promise participating schools and kura that there would be formal recognition of any student who achieves their learning programme's prototyping criteria. Where schools or students wish to have formal recognition, the Ministry can work with NZQA and those schools to find a solution.

Risks associated with not pausing

32. Through the evaluation we heard that it was important to have a defined structure and set of assessment standards which could be applicable to all industry pathways as well as supporting specific ones. However, there are logistical challenges to developing, agreeing and communicating a list of standards that can be used in the next stage of prototyping in 2024. Of particular concern is that it is likely not possible to develop an additional set of criteria for all industries in time for the Award to be added to the NZQCF for 2024 which would mean that students participating in further prototyping would not be able to get recognition on their Record of Achievement. A pause allows for sufficient work to be undertaken to prepare the next iteration of the Award before further prototyping or testing.

33. If the evaluation had indicated that Award's purpose and design were 'about right', and that some of its other objectives would likely be realised, there are financial and other practical considerations that would need to be addressed prior to any further testing or implementation. As noted previously, the NCEA Change Programme budget does not provide funding beyond 2023 for prototyping and design of the Award. Continuing with prototyping will require additional budget funding to be sourced while a pause that enables further policy and design work can more easily be funded through the Ministry's baseline.

34. You will be aware that there is considerable change fatigue amongst the senior secondary and early VET tertiary sectors. One school which withdrew from the prototype testing told us that this was due to the sheer volume of change and associated stress and the impacts this was having on their staff. Pausing prototyping reduces the expected level of change for schools and will provide more time and space for schools to work through other changes to NCEA.

Alternative option – completing prototyping this year then pause

35. An alternative to immediately stopping further testing of the Award is to wait until the end of the year. This could allow another two evaluations, one at the end of the year with a broader range of stakeholders, and one next year to delve into graduate outcomes.

36. However, we think it is likely that the results would be consistent with feedback received since consultation began in 2019 and the first evaluation. The benefits of further evaluation do not merit the risk of building expectations or creating further anxiety amongst involved stakeholders. There may be a risk that continued prototyping in light of this evaluation reduces the enthusiasm of WDC-based stakeholders, and their desire to engage with the Ministry on VET in senior secondary.

Proactive Release

37. It is recommended that this Education Report is proactively released, with any information needing to be withheld done so in line with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982.

38. NZCER's evaluation report on prototyping will be published alongside the release of this report.

Annexes

Annex 1: Preliminary evaluation of Vocational Entrance Award testing through prototypes

Preliminary evaluation of Vocational Entrance Award testing through prototypes

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Contents

Introduction

The context for this research

Following the statutory review of NCEA in 2018, the Ministry[1] and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) are currently implementing the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Change programme. Change 6 addresses the need for clearer pathways to further education and work.[2] The development of a Vocational Entrance Award (VEA)[3] is one response to this imperative for change. The award is intended to clearly signal when ākonga are ready to transition into higher level vocational education and to strengthen existing vocational pathways through NCEA. Ideally, the award would help grow parity of esteem for vocational pathways, which have traditionally been seen as less important than the "well lit" pathway to university.[4]

The Ministry has developed a prototype VEA, envisaged as an endorsement of an NCEA qualification, available at NCEA levels 2 and 3. Its status, at least at level 3, would be equivalent to that of University Entrance (UE)—i.e., something that can be added to the qualification if the relevant mix of learning experiences and credits has been gained via NCEA assessments.

The Ministry is currently undertaking small-scale testing of a prototype for this award. This testing began in six schools / kura Māori, although there had been some attrition[5] by the time the evaluation activity discussed in this brief report got underway. Testing is being applied to existing learning programmes offered in the schools. The subjects targeted are set in the context of two industries—Digital Technology and Building and Construction, in partnership with their respective Work Force Development Councils (WDCs).

The Ministry wants to know if the in-principle idea and design works in practice. The aim of the testing is to ascertain how well the award's high-level design principles and criteria work within existing learning programmes. Could students in the selected programmes gain the award (if it was available)? If not, why not? The very preliminary evaluation reported here aims to help inform changes that might be needed before further testing is carried out.

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[1] The Ministry of Education is shortened to "the Ministry" throughout this report.

[2] What is the NCEA Change Programme | NCEA (education.govt.nz)

[3] Note that the award is not yet formally named.

[4] See Hipkins, R. & Vaughan, K. (2019). Subject choice for the future of work. Insights-from-research-literature-NZCER.pdf (productivity.govt.nz)

[5] One school had pulled out completely, another had scaled back participation.

Our approach

The Ministry provided us with a detailed list of questions that they thought the prototype could answer. Many of these related to design details and we wondered if the fine grain size might be premature. In discussion with the Ministry, we settled on a two-stage approach to the preliminary evaluation.

First, we designed a quick Likert survey that could provide an overview of how the VEA initiative was understood by all those involved, and how it was being enacted in the schools. With such a small sample of participants, we aimed for maximum participation by keeping the survey short and on-line for ease of responding. After several reminders we achieved eight responses from 5 schools / kura, and seven responses from 4 WDCs. Some of these responses were made on behalf of a group. The small number of achieved responses allowed us to manually match open comments and responses to Likert items on an Excel spreadsheet. This gave us some tentative insights into the patterns of responses.

Surveys with closed-response items tend to raise as many questions as they answer. Accordingly, our next step was to interview those survey respondents who indicated that they would be willing to be contacted. Rather than going back to the original set of questions provided to us, we shaped each interview around the patterns of responses to the survey, and invited participants to help us understand why people had responded as they did.

In the short time frame available, we achieved a sample of:

- Teachers and school leaders from 4 prototype schools (two interviews were with one person, and two with a pair of teachers or a teacher and a school leader)

- Representatives from three Workforce Development Councils (WDCs)

The structure of the report

Section 2 outlines findings from the Likert surveys and provides tentative explanations for the patterns of responses. It also identifies areas where the feedback needs greater clarification.

Section 3 reports key insights that emerged from the interview stage. As already noted, we did not drill down into the specifics of the preliminary criteria once it became evident from the patterns of survey responses that we needed to lift our focus to how stakeholders understood the purpose of the award and its relationship to existing vocational pathways initiatives.

Responses to the preliminary survey

The quick preliminary survey gave us a feel for how the prototype was unfolding. The survey comprised twelve Likert-scaled items with space for an open response to any of them. There were two versions of the survey: one for schools and the kura taking part in the prototype; and one for respondents from Workforce Development Councils (WDCs). Some items were common to both surveys, and some were different. We invited those leading the prototype in each location to encourage all those who had been involved in the prototype in any capacity to complete the online survey. Patterns of responses are reported below, along with any open comments relevant to specific items.

In-principle support for the VEA

We asked all respondents about their level of in-principle support for the VEA. Results are shown in Table 1. Notice that school-based respondents who had a definite view were in support of the in-principle idea, whereas opinions from WDC-based respondents were more evenly spread between agreement and disagreement. Note too that four of the fifteen respondents were unsure. This uncertainty will be a recurring theme across survey responses.

Table 1   **In-principle support for the VEA**

Item: In principle a new vocational education award (VEA) is a great idea					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)			3	2	2
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)	1	2	1	3	

One WDC respondent who disagreed with the statement had this to say in the open response section:

> Okay to test the concept but perhaps also question whether it's really needed and what it is actually credentialling / achieving. Not convinced the VEA is at the right level - should probably be Level 2 - and the variety of pathways don't feel like they make much sense (can already be shown as specialisms on the NZQA record of learning - better to extend a similar approach from the VPs at Level 2 to Level 3 as well). (WDC response)

The WDC respondent who strongly disagreed said:

> It is unclear what the objectives of the Award are, it is unclear how the design will both be more attractive to pursue a vocational pathway and the objectives. It is

unclear how the WDCs would be resourced to endorse every school's individual programme. Have ākonga, employers and industry, tertiary providers contributed any feedback on the merits of a VEA award? (WDC response)

By contrast, a school leader who strongly agreed said:

We agree with the concept of the award. We are keen to continue testing but will need to provide better comms to our students and community. There will also need to be work done with heads of the department regarding standards that contribute to this award. It feels like we should be upgrading the existing Vocational Pathways Awards. This prototype feels very single-subject based, and we are not sure how that fits in with everything. Are new standards being tagged with the different sectors? (School-based response)

This leader noted uncertainties for those doing the actual teaching. This concern was borne out in the following response, from a teacher who was unsure despite being involved:

Hard to say at this stage. The plan is incredibly vague, if there is a plan at all. … We got involved at a too early stage. I'm extremely busy and feel this has been wasting my time. (School-based response)

It seems that a lack of clarity about what the award is intended to achieve influenced responses across the spectrum. Clarification from the Ministry at the in-principle level could be helpful if the prototype is to be scaled up.

Support for the design of the award

Several items focused more specifically on the prototype design of the award itself. Tables 2 – 7 show patterns of responses to these.

Match to each school's local curriculum

The next table shows results for several items that were only asked of school respondents. Views were evenly split between agreement and disagreement that the design of the award matched to the school's high-level vision and values. Even though no-one indicated uncertainty about this aspect of the design, none of the open comments addressed this item.

Table 2 **Match between the design of the award and the school's local curriculum (n=8)**

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Our school's vision, values and local kaupapa are a good match to the award criteria	1	2		3	2
The criteria for the award align well with our school's pathways learning programmes		1	3	3	1

Just one respondent disagreed that the criteria did not align well with the way the school organised curriculum pathways but note that three respondents were unsure. Again, none of the open comments addressed this item.

WDC perspectives on the in-principle design

Responses to two design statements included in the survey for WDCs are shown in the next table. Again, there are high levels of uncertainty, but no specific comments were made that might help unpack the responses.

Table 3 **Match between the design of the award and VE expectations (n=7)**

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
The criteria for the award align well with industry and tertiary training provider expectations.	2		3	2	
Schools and their local kaupapa are well placed to deliver programmes leading to the VEA.		1	4	2	

Opportunities to learn

Several items asked about aspects of students' learning opportunities and experiences. Responses are shown on the next three tables.

Mana ōrite mō te mātauranga Māori (equal status for mātauranga Māori) is an opportunity provided by the NCEA change programme to more explicitly include aspects of mātauranga Māori in assessments. The Ministry describes this as "one of the most significant paradigm

shifts in the history of NCEA".[6] The imperative applies across all aspects of learning leading to NCEA assessments and there are parallel changes within the Curriculum Refresh currently underway.[7] We probed perceptions of how readily this change might be accommodated within programmes leading to a VEA.

Table 4 **Perceptions of opportunities to learn through and engage with mātauranga Māori**

Item: Learners have opportunities to learn through and engage with mātauranga Māori whilst involved in the VEA programme					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)		2	4	2	
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)	1		5	1	

For some respondents, this would have been a hypothetical question. Those who were actively engaged in teaching the course involved in the prototype would be better positioned to express an opinion than all those who were not. This could be one explanation for the very high level of 'unsure' responses. A different potential explanation is that respondents were not sure what opportunities for students to learn through and engage with mātauranga Māori might mean for the learning experiences they planned in any area of the curriculum.[8]

No specific open comments were made about opportunities to learn through and engage with mātauranga Māori.

The next item explored whether work experience should be a compulsory component of any VEA award. Whereas WDC respondents supported a work experience component, responses from schools were spread across the spectrum. The three school-based respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed were all teachers. During the interviews (see next section) some teachers made comments that alluded to practical challenges when organising this aspect within the constraints of the school timetable.

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[6] Toolkit 1 - Te tūāpapa o te mana ōrite: Foundations of equal status | NCEA (education.govt.nz)

[7] Refreshing The New Zealand Curriculum | Curriculum Refresh (education.govt.nz)

[8] Such a response would be consistent with high levels of uncertainty indicated by teachers when responding to NZCER;s National Survey of Secondary Teachers in 2021. Secondary teachers' perspectives from NZCER's 2021 National Survey of Secondary Schools | New Zealand Council for Educational Research

Table 5 **Should work experience be a compulsory part of the VEA award?**

Item: Work experience should be a compulsory part of the award					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)	2	1	2	3	
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)			1	3	3

As Table 6 shows, the third item in this sub-set was worded slightly differently for school-based and WDC respondents. Essentially both versions ask about the potential of the award to be motivating for the students who might wish to attain it. Opinions in both groups are almost evenly split between those who agree, those who disagree, and those who are unsure.

Table 6 **Would a VEA award be motivating for students?**

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Schools (n=8): The prospect of getting this award is motivating for our students		3	3	3	
WDC (n=7): This award is worthwhile pursuing for students considering vocational pathways.		2	2	3	

No explicit references were made to student motivation in the open comments section but some alluded to it indirectly. One of the criticisms of NCEA is that it has encouraged students to judge the worth of all learning through the lens of credits gained—i.e., the focus is heavily on extrinsic rather than intrinsic rewards for learning.[9] There are hints of that in this comment:

> Clarification of what the award includes and the value of achieving it. This award could be a super addition to all student's CV and sit as an alongside UE. It could contain NCEA results, vocational subject results, pertinent ITO (or equivalent) quals, driver's licence, interpersonal skills - especially the ability to collaborate and work in a group, attendance, work experience, portfolio of work, service... Employers would need to be educated to look for this additional certificate and understand which industry it is endorsed with. (School-based respondent)

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[9] This was a key finding from the *Learning Curves* project that tracked the uptake of NCEA in six medium-sized secondary schools across the first three years of implementation. Learning curves: Meeting student needs in an evolving qualifications regime | New Zealand Council for Educational Research (nzcer.org.nz)

NCEA-related aspects of the design

NCEA aims to credential meaningful learning across the spectrum of possibilities in the senior secondary school. The modular structure makes for flexibility in design of courses. In theory all credits awarded should signal learning that is of equal achievement value, and that has required an equivalent amount of effort on the part of the learner. These things are easy to say but difficult to achieve in practice. Three items probed this aspect of the VEA prototype.

Matching the number of credits on offer to the required amount of effort and challenge is a rather inexact science. Responses to a statement that probed this aspect of the design were characterised by high levels of uncertainty from both groups of respondents.

Table 7   **Is the minimum number of credits about right?**

Item: The minimum number of credits specified for the core VEA component is about right					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)		2	4	2	
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)		2	5		

The following is part of a longer response from a WDC respondent who was unsure. It gives some indication of where the uncertainty might lie:

> … VEA prototyping seems to be of such a diverse range and size (credits) of potential pathways that it doesn't feel cohesive enough for people to get a 'VEA'. Raising the profile (and sharing success stories) etc of those that have followed a VP - and perhaps exploring a wider range of potential cadetships/ apprenticeships for school leavers may help provide more relevant options (WDC respondent).

The next comment comes from a school-based respondent with wider responsibilities for curriculum coordination. Although this person agreed that the number of credits is about right, a level of uncertainty about aspects of the design is again evident in the issue raised:

> Wider credits could/should be used to recognise achievement. If a student does not wish to be a builder (perhaps a welder, engineer, work in logistics) this award is too heavily skewed towards Construction / BCATs. (School-based respondent)

The ideal of parity of esteem for credits gained from different types of learning experiences has underpinned the NCEA from its inception. In practice, however, credits gained from subjects taken by students on the "well-lit pathway" to university tend to be seen as having more value

than those gained from vocational learning. School structures and careers advice processes tend to reinforce this deeply embedded disparity.[10]

One item in the survey probed this aspect through a statement about the potential for interplay between the VEA and the award of University Entrance. The latter is determined by the spread of credits gained across a specified list of 'more academic' subjects, so the issue being probed is essentially whether it is practical and feasible to retain enough of these subjects in a mix with the vocational learning required to meet the design criteria for the VEA. Responses are shown in Table 8.

Table 8   **Keeping options open: potential for interplay between UE and VEA**

Item: It is important that students who aim for this award are also able to aim for a UE award if they want to keep their options open.					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)		3	1	1	3
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)				2	5

Notice strong in-principle agreement from the WDCs, with a wider spread of opinions from schools. This issue elicited several comments in the open section. A school respondent who gave an 'unsure' response suggested that the two awards, as currently designed, would be fundamentally incompatible:

> While it would be great to be able to get the VEA and UE, this is not possible due to the amount of unit standards involved in the VEA which cannot be cross credited to the UE 'qualification'. (School respondent)

The above comment implicates the design of UE as much as the design of the VEA. A comment from one of the WDC respondents was explicit about this dilemma:

> Without seeing a full evaluation of the prototype activities, it is difficult to comment. Does this kind of award add any value to what exists? Wouldn't one award that reflects readiness for a learner to follow a further educational pathway (vocational or academic) or employment? We've heard it for a few years now but the idea of two awards is still divisive and won't necessarily solve the problem. UE is the problem, with 'approved subjects' being prioritised over other areas in a learner's pathway. (WDC respondent)

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[10] The dilemma is explored in twin reports produced for the Productivity Commission: Insights-from-research-literature-NZCER.pdf (productivity.govt.nz) and Insights-from-focus-groups-NZCER.pdf (productivity.govt.nz)

This respondent strongly agreed that it should be possible to keep both pathways open but seems not to see how an additional award could achieve that, despite agreeing that the in-principle idea of a new award is a good one (see Table 1). Another WDC respondent made an open comment that implied strong in-principle support for a VEA but scepticism about whether this could be achieved in practice if systemic changes are not made in school's pathways structures and assumptions:

> We are keen to see non-university pathways highlighted and resourced for ākonga to access at secondary school. We feel this VEA does not quite hit the mark, and is another thing added to schools (particularly teachers). It is unlikely that this will be successful outside of systemic changes to support schools to provide genuine vocational pathways to ākonga. (WDC respondent)

Ongoing work to introduce new literacy and numeracy requirements as co-requisites for gaining an NCEA award has created another layer of uncertainty within the VEA prototype. The next table shows responses to an item that asked about this in-progress development within the wider NCEA change programme.

Table 9   **NCEA literacy and numeracy requirements as a potential barrier**

Item: Meeting literacy and numeracy requirements could be a barrier for some students who could otherwise benefit from this award					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)			2	5	1
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)		2	1	4	

Notice that almost all the school-based respondents agreed that the literacy and numeracy requirements created a potential barrier to gaining a VEA award. This response is not necessarily a reflection of how the VEA is designed but rather indicates a broader concern that the new requirements might act to consolidate existing disparities of opportunities for those in the well-lit pathway to university (who presumably should easily demonstrate required levels of literacy and numeracy) and those taking more vocationally oriented mixes of subjects. If the literacy and numeracy requirements are confirmed as co-requisites to *any* NCEA qualification, some schools will channel students deemed to be at risk of failing these assessments into

remedial courses that will limit their mix of other subject options.[11] This could pose a risk that a new type of VEA award is given less importance if schools respond in this way.

Will changes be needed to better accommodate the award?

The prototype of the VEA award specified that schools should continue with their usual programme, testing the VEA criteria against an already-existing course. Similarly, WDCs should be able to accommodate the core VET components within their existing qualifications requirements. The next two tables report on these 'business as usual' (BAU) aspirations for the award.

Two items probed the BAU aspect of the prototype in schools. Did the prototype work seamlessly with the chosen course, or did the school anticipate that some tweaks or more substantive changes would need to be made to accommodate the requirements for the award? The next table shows the pattern of responses.

Table 10 **Do school-based respondents see a need for changes to align the criteria more readily with an existing course? (n=8 school-based respondents)**

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
As a result of our prototype experiences, we plan to tweak the assessment standards we offer in the programme(s) involved in the prototype testing.	1	2	4	1	
As a result of our prototype experiences, we plan to change the timetable.	3	3	2		

The prototype schools did not necessarily anticipate a need to change the timetable to accommodate the VEA, but there was a higher level of uncertainty around the mix of standards to be included in the course. Some of this uncertainty doubtless relates to the design of the prototype. As already noted above, one school leader said:

> This prototype feels very single-subject based, and we are not sure how that fits in with everything. Are new standards being tagged with the different sectors? (School-based response)

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[11] Evidence for this possibility is provided in Lee, J. & Hipkins, R. (2023 / unpublished). Defining reading within a foundational literacy construct-Implications for assessment. NZCER., submitted to the Ministry of Education, May 2023.

The following comment comes from a respondent who is trialling the award in a specific subject context:

> We wonder if the prototype criteria need to be tweaked - students need to see how a particular subject (we are trialling it in DigiTech) contributes to the wider award. Students will gather experience, quals, understanding across a wide range of subjects - and all contribute to making them employable. (School-based respondent)

There is a sense here that the relationship between the parts and the whole is not necessarily clear yet to this respondent, and very likely to others as well.

The next table shows equivalent BAU items for the WDCs. The spread of opinions for the first of these items could indicate differences between WDCs themselves. Each will have different requirements for achieving the qualifications they credential, which is yet another layer of complexity to be accommodated within the overall design.

Table 11 **Do WDC respondents see a need for changes to align the criteria more readily with their existing requirements? (n=7 WDC respondents)**

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
The size of the core VET component within the school programmes we have reviewed meets requirements for WDC endorsement.	2	1	3		1
The core VET components endorsed for initial testing require changes or modifications before they are further prototyped.			2	3	2

No specific comments were made about these design aspects in the open response section.

In summary: Is this a feasible design solution to existing 'pathways' challenges?

The final table reports responses to an item that explored high-level perceptions that a VEA award could meet its aim of providing a clear and direct pathway to further vocational learning or employment. More respondents disagreed than agreed with this suggestion.

Table 12 **Can the VEA provide a clear vocational pathway?**

Item: The new VEA provides a clear and direct pathway to future vocational employment and/or further learning.					
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly agree
Responses from schools (n=8)	2	2	2	2	
Responses from WDCs (n= 7)	2	2		3	

Looking across all the responses, it seems likely that two types of concerns underpin this response pattern. The prototype is still in its early stages and there is a lot of uncertainty at all levels of detail, from the nitty gritty of the design specifics, all the way up to the high-level intent. No doubt this issue could be overcome with time and support.

> Check - do we really need it and what is it actually trying to credential? Would it be better at Level 2 than Level 3? Simplify / clarify the intent and proposed results and benefits. Clarify / work out what the 'problem' is that this award is trying to fix. Seems to me that the VP issues are not going to be solved by a VEA - changing attitudes to validity of VE for successful futures is a much bigger issue... (WDC respondent)

This quote hints at a tricky dilemma. What exactly is the issue to which VEA might be seen as a response? The Ministry might respond that the VEA is intended to have parity of esteem with UE—the challenge being addressed is to make vocational learning pathways more attractive to a wider range of learners. Respondents did not seem to see this as a credible goal. The heart of the issue is captured in this pithy comment:

> Not sure of the value, feel it will still be seen as second rate to UE. (Kura respondent)

We have already noted that some respondents see UE itself as the problem.

> Without seeing a full evaluation of the prototype activities, it is difficult to comment. Does this kind of award add any value to what exists? Wouldn't one award that reflects readiness for a learner to follow a further educational pathway (vocational or academic) or employment? We've heard it for a few years now but the idea of two awards is still divisive and won't necessarily solve the problem. UE is the problem, with 'approved subjects' being prioritised over other areas in a learner's pathway. (WDC respondent)

In this framing, no separate award would be needed if only parity of esteem for all learning pathways could be established. The final comment endorses this as an important goal to continue to strive for, but across the whole education system, not just in one part of it:

> We are keen to see non-university pathways highlighted and resourced for ākonga to access at secondary school. We feel this VEA does not quite hit the mark, and is another thing added to schools (particularly teachers). It is unlikely that this will be successful outside of systemic changes to support schools to provide genuine vocational pathways to ākonga (WDC respondent).

Interviews with key stakeholders

We tested the findings reported in the previous section by eliciting comments about patterns of responses made to the surveys. We specifically mentioned the high levels of "uncertain" responses as a pattern we hoped to unpack. We jointly conducted all but one of the interviews, comparing notes afterwards and developing key insights as these unfolded through what we heard. Each interview took the form of a dialogue, loosely based around the questions we had sent out in advance. We responded to what we were hearing and hence each conversation was quite different in the way it unfolded. For this reason, we have organised this section around key insights rather than working through discrete interview questions one at a time. (These are provided in Appendix 1).

There is in-principle support for some sort of VEA award

Everyone we spoke with was enthusiastic in their support for vocational education, albeit with quite different contexts in mind across the range of interviews. In principle, everyone saw the need for greater status and value to be given to vocational learning. Opinions differed, however, on the form and direction of potential initiatives to achieve this goal, as we now outline.

Relationship to existing vocational pathways

Several respondents—both in schools and in WDCs— asked why a new award was needed when the existing Level 2 Vocational Pathways award could potentially be extended to Level 3. One person said that it seemed as if the sector had "fallen out of love with vocational pathways.

One immediately obvious issue is the impact of the RoVE reforms[12] on the existing pathway structure. While there is broad alignment between the naming and organisation of the new WDCs and the six pathways of the existing award, they do not directly match. The table on the next page shows these alignments. In all cases the WDC appears to be somewhat more comprehensive in its coverage of possible careers than the existing pathways. We wonder if any further development of VEA would benefit from looking at the more comprehensive pathways signalled in the WDC structure.

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[12] Reform of Vocational Education: Reform of Vocational Education – Conversation space

Table 13: Relationship between existing vocational pathways and the new WDC structure

Vocational Pathway	Workforce Development Council
1: Construction and infrastructure	Waihanga Ara Rau: Construction and Infrastructure
2: Creative industries	Toi Mai*
3: Manufacturing and Technology	Hanga-Aro-Rau: Manufacturing Engineering and Logistics.
4: Primary Industries	Muka Tangata: People. Food and Fibre.
5: Services Industries	Ringa Hora: Services
6: Social and Community Services	Toitū te Waiora: Community, Health, Education and Social Services.

* This WDC does not appear to have a sub-title yet.

Several people suggested taking advantage of the current situation to rethink the structure and core of the existing level 2 pathways award, and to then extend this to level 3. One specific suggestion, made by several respondents, was to identify a "core" of work-related unit standards that would need to be gained regardless of which pathway was being followed, or the actual subject context within that broad pathway. For example, one teacher proposed the following as the standards they would choose as a central core:

- US 6402: *Provide basic life support*. The teacher described this as the "health and safety" standard.
- US 9677: *Communicate in a team or group which has an objective*. Team working was seen as an essential capability in any work context.
- US 377: *Demonstrate knowledge of diversity in workplaces*. Again, this was seen by this teacher as an essential capability in any workplace.

These are one respondent's personal choices and they acknowledged that others might choose a different mix, albeit with the same basic agenda of selecting capabilities needed in any workplace, and for which unit standards already exist.

Respondents from another school, and from a WDC envisaged a different sort of core that might apply regardless of pathway specifics. Variously mentioned were the need to demonstrate digital literacy; financial literacy; team building / collaboration; cooking (for self-care); and having a driver's licence. These would form a core to which would be added capabilities specifically related to the student's chosen pathway.

No doubt wider conversations of this sort would raise more possibilities and it would take time to achieve a broad consensus. But as an in-principle idea, a redesign of existing vocational pathways to include a common core of work-ready capabilities clearly has appeal to some respondents. One WDC respondent noted that they updated their assessment standards every year and said that the same should be happening with the vocational pathways themselves.

Preferably, they would be reviewed in June, so that updated structures were ready for designing the next year's courses.

Relationship to existing subjects and timetable structures

One feature of the prototype appeared to cause some confusion about the scope of the pathways involved. Because construction and IT were chosen as prototype areas, some respondents appeared to have formed the impression that the VEA would only be applied in these areas.

The request to apply the draft criteria to an existing course was another feature of the prototyping that caused confusion and concern. Because the prototype courses have very different structures and assessment schedules, some people struggled to see how one award could fairly represent excellence in learning when the actual learning demands of diverse courses were so different.

A different issue was raised by one of our WDC interviewees. A course design approach which allowed each school to apply the award to its existing courses (i.e., BAU) would create two sorts of moderation problems for them. First, for a VEA award to be endorsed by a WDC, they would need to approve and endorse different course designs in different schools, which would obviously create workload issues. Also, the design team in this WDC are not familiar with the *New Zealand Curriculum* so moderation of Achievement Standards grounded in NZC would also create issues for them.

Looking back over all the interviews we noticed that this sort of confusion was expressed in school contexts where vocational education pathways were part of a comparatively traditional timetable structure, with all the challenges that implies. In contexts where more innovative changes had already been made, the teachers with whom we spoke were more likely to support the development of a new structure. They were also more likely to say that they were clear about what the Ministry was hoping to achieve. With such a small sample we cannot claim this as a definitive pattern. Nevertheless, we think this proto-pattern is interesting enough to delve into and we do that next.

Innovative pathways have implications for a vocational award

The concept of a new type of vocational award appeared to be more clearly understood and visualised by schools where innovative practice is already happening.

We heard about several innovative vocational education programmes. These were taking place in schools that had both the ability and willingness to move away from traditional timetable models. They involved partnerships with community and / or industry groups, where there were mutual benefits for all parties. To make the partnerships work, alternative structures to the

traditional timetable had been created. This required vision and active support from the school's leaders, and sometimes involved teachers of traditional 'academic' subjects in collaborating to create different types of courses for students in the vocational programme.

The examples we heard about in the interviews suggested that Innovative partnerships that build strong vocational pathways typically worked along the following lines:

- The school provided students with suitable beginning trades experience and credentialed work-ready skills such as health and safety and first aid training, driver licensing and digital literacy. Academic learning might or might not continue alongside vocationally oriented learning (see below).
- The industry partner provided the school with resources and technology equipment and created work experience opportunities for students on work placements.
- If community agencies (e.g., charities that build community housing) were involved, they provided an authentic, supported work context that complimented the school-based learning programme.
- Tertiary providers covered training in specialised skills that the school might not be able to provide, or credential.

To work successfully, the programmes we heard about depended upon negotiated partnerships between schools, tertiary providers, industry partners, and in some cases community groups. Some vocational programmes involved collaborations between multiple schools, community agencies and charities.

The blending of academic and vocational learning was a point of difference between innovative programmes. One teacher told us that students had learned all the basic maths they need by year 12, and this would now be practised and applied rather than adding more content that might not be as relevant. By contrast, two teachers in another school noted the importance of continuing to build students' mathematical and literacy skills. With the science faculty in the school, they had created a "physics and maths for construction" course. This innovative course was so popular that there were two full year 12 classes in 2023. Courses such as this build vocational knowledge and skills while also earning NCEA Level 2 credits from relevant achievement standards.

School-wide changes that we heard about, in areas such as timetabling innovations, collaboration between subject teachers, and offering broader career options, have created new pathway opportunities for students through apprenticeships, work placements and subsequent support into tertiary education. These types of innovations are challenging traditional academic pathways. We heard about schools who are offering combinations of vocational and academic subjects (e.g., the example above), and where students have individualised timetables and learning pathways, tailored to their interests and the skills they need.

Several teachers and WDC respondents noted that school leaders who can / have successfully established innovative vocational programmes are able to contextualise opportunities and develop new business opportunities. They reach out and communicate effectively with potential stakeholders in the wider community. They can also lead the rest of the school and the school's community on the journey. It is important that all teachers in the school come to a broad understanding and valuing of what the vocational team are trying to achieve. This can open opportunities for collaboration on new types of courses, such as the STEM[13] example briefly outlined above. Appropriate support and guidance practices are carried out by deans and others who help students build learning pathways. Teachers in one school told us these conversations need to begin right from year 9, when students are given opportunities to try out multiple potential pathways to find where their interest and aptitude lies. They emphasised that most students can steadily build the relevant skills on a specific vocational pathway if they have the right motivation and attitude. For them, building positive relationships with students was a critically important part of the success of their programme.

Students tend to seek careers advice from their whānau first (Hipkins & Vaughan 2002)[14]. This points to the vital importance of marketing and communication in the establishment of a vocational credential. It needs to be recognised as a valuable award by stakeholders, including students, parents, schools, employers, businesses, and industries. We heard from both schools and WDCs that this communication is yet to happen. Some schools admitted that they had not told their students about it yet as they were uncertain what they should be telling them. Schools who had developed innovative vocational practice described the difficulties they had faced in persuading both their own teachers and the parents that the vocational courses they were able to offer were worthwhile and valuable learning pathways. This brings into focus the work that will be needed to introduce and then establish a VEA credential.

We heard UE described as one award with many "buckets to tailor university preparedness". Whether they agreed with its influence or not, respondents were clear about its purpose and high-level structure. By contrast, it seemed to some interviewees that the VEA seeks to provide one common credential across a range of diverging areas, making it hard to identify it as a unifying vocational credential that is a credible alternative to UE. We unpack this issue next.

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[13] Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

[14] See Hipkins and Vaughan (2002) *Learning curves: Meeting student needs in an evolving qualifications regime: From cabbages to kings: A first report* https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/learning-curves-meeting-student-needs-evolving-qualifications-regime-cabbages-

Seeking parity of esteem with UE is not necessarily an important goal for a VE award to pursue

We turn now to the goal of seeking to create a VEA award that has parity of esteem with UE. As we reported in the previous section, some survey respondents saw this as an unrealistic goal. One reason given related to the necessity of gaining credits from a select pool of 'academic' Achievement Standards in order to gain UE. It would not be possible to make an equivalent specification for a vocational award because a significant number of credits are gained from vocationally oriented Unit Standards. With a maximum of 60 credits counted for any award, there would not be sufficient room to gain credits from Achievement Standards in the necessary subject combinations specified by the UE regulations.

Another reason given in the open comments in the surveys alluded to the academic/vocational pejorative that pervades New Zealand society. This implicit belief in the superiority of traditional 'academic' subjects strongly influences the structuring of traditional school timetables, with associated subject choice implications.[15] Vocational options are placed on subject lines in a pattern that offers alternatives for students not considered able enough to take a fully academic course. This type of binary structure can make it impossible to mix and match vocational and academic subjects in coherent combinations that could lead to gaining both UE and the type of vocational entrance award envisaged in the prototype.

This concern was also raised in some of our interviews and several new arguments were added to what we had already found. One respondent raised a subtle structuring issue related to the Record of Achievement (RoA) issued by NZQA. This RoA is, in essence, structured as a "visual hierarchy" with traditional subjects at the top, just below UE endorsement. Vocational subjects and current pathways endorsements appear below any academic subjects gained.

Some respondents commented on commonly held attitudes and beliefs of parents. Well-meaning parents can be ambitious for their children to have learning opportunities that were denied to them. Such parents will typically encourage their children to take academic courses and strive towards professional careers, even when the young person's strengths and aptitudes appear (to their teachers) to lie elsewhere. Several respondents commented on the sad consequences that typically follow, with students struggling at university and dropping out in the first year. Seeking parity of esteem for a vocational award might be challenging without a strong communication campaign that aims to shift societal attitudes.

We also heard from both WDCs and schools that the universities have a lot of marketing power to reach schools and influence students' career choices. This is problematic because only a

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[15] See Hipkins, R. & Vaughan, K. (2019). Subject choice for the future of work. Insights-from-research-literature-NZCER.pdf (productivity.govt.nz)

minority of students actually transition directly to university from school, even though it is still the largest single pathway for school leavers. Many are swept along with the current.[16]

A different consequence of the traditional timetable structure can be that vocational subjects are seen as a dumping ground for students who might disrupt academic classes in which they struggle. We heard very clearly that this is a problematic attitude and practice. As noted above, successful vocational pathways begin to build right from year 9. Students need to be encouraged to try a wide range of practical learning contexts well before they have to make more specialised choices, and they need to begin building their repertoire of practical skills and knowledge as soon as possible. As several interviewees noted, placing a student into a vocational course for the first time at year 12 is just as likely to fail as sending them off to university study for which they are not suited, or perhaps not yet ready.

Being "ready": rethinking pathways to university

Interviewees working in innovative vocational programmes did not dismiss university learning as a goal for at least some of their students. Instead, they questioned the assumption that the direct pathway from school to university is the preferable pathway for all students who can manage it. Their innovative courses open up "earn while you learn" options for students who have demonstrated aptitude in a specific vocational pathway, and who bring a positive work-ready attitude to their learning. Their industry partners sought out apprentices who displayed these attributes through their vocational learning at school. The apprentices were then paid while their learning continued. The teachers noted that some students who become interested in management aspects of their chosen industry might go on to university after completing vocational qualifications, making a considered and purposeful decision in doing so.

Put succinctly, teachers reported that UE is not an immediate goal for students who embark on an innovative vocational pathway such as those we heard about. If it is important to them, young people can get to university, regardless of whether they have UE, at some future point on their overall learning journey. Should this same logic begin to be extended to other types of alternative learning pathways, the imperative to gain UE might begin to lose the hold it currently has over the traditional structuring of learning in the senior secondary school. This implies a challenge for the universities to address, rather than being an issue that is problematic for the WDCs.

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[16] Transitions from Secondary School-External Report, pg., 100. Tertiary Education Commission, 2018. https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Publications-and-others/Transitions-from-Secondary-School.pdf

Looking to the Future

As we draw together the threads of our conversations it is important to reiterate that everyone we spoke with was enthusiastic in their support for vocational education, albeit with quite different contexts in mind across the range of interviews. In principle, everyone saw the need for greater status and value to be given to vocational learning.

So far, we have mainly discussed pathways, but we heard clear messages from both schools and WDCs about the importance of credentialing that signals excellence in a student's overall learning. This works for UE because the universities have established clear expectations for the award, and they support and 'own' it. The dilemma for an equivalent VEA award was succinctly outlined by one WDC respondent:

> UE works because universities see it as an essential award for their pathway. What is the equivalent essential award for [a specific WDC] pathway? We need to go back to the drawing board to find out. The original aims were aspirational, but the solutions proposed are a band aid not the systemic design work needed. (WDC respondent)

Our conversations revealed an opportunity for industries to consider what would contribute to a credential framework for their particular needs. Such conversations could open up new possibilities for school leavers to gain credentials that provide them with some advantages or enhancements as they move into further training and learning in the tertiary sector and in the workplace. The need for further consultation within the industry sector was a message we heard in some interviews but we could not determine if this was because there was the feeling this had not happened or that the prototyping had stimulated the need and desire within industries to now want this.

One WDC respondent noted that it will be important for any new VEA award to avoid imposing barriers to entry into training and apprenticeships. Many of their students do not take up apprenticeships until their mid-20s and they do not want to see them inadvertently shut out if they have left school without gaining a vocational award.

To be successful and valued any new award needs to provide the motivation for students to pursue a vocational career, by enhancing both recognition and value of this type of learning pathway, both in schools and in the wider community. We outline some recommendations to facilitate this next.

Next Steps

Prototyping has provided the catalyst for initiating wider exploration of school vocational pathways leading to tertiary training and work opportunities, whilst highlighting some issues that, seemingly, have yet to be addressed. For example, ensuring equitable access to existing vocational programmes raises the challenge of systemic reform. This is a whole-school issue, not just something for one small team within the school to address. The wide variability in what schools offer, and how highly vocational education is valued within individual schools, are related issues. This variability came into sharp relief because the prototyping criteria depended on BAU application to existing programmes that had little in common. Although we spoke to fewer WDC interviewees, we suspect that similar widespread variability of practice might be found in the vocational tertiary sector if this challenge was more systematically explored.

We recommend that the Ministry now pause to consider the following before further prototyping happens:

- Focus in on a system wide design. This could begin by identifying with WDCs, and relevant industries / businesses the core standards that recognise work readiness. Generate consensus on the broad shape of a coherent learning programme, raising consultation to the next level.

- Once WDCs are in a position to provide examples of coherent learning programmes with clearly defined criteria, links back into Te Mātaiaho (the refreshed *New Zealand Curriculum* framework)[17] could be developed in consultation with the school sector. Doing this could help build a coherent system-wide structure that would set students up well for the transition to work and tertiary training.

- There is an opportunity to capitalise on and potentially expand the existing vocational pathways award. Consult with schools and WDCs about the potential for developing a Level 3 vocational award that provides continuity and progression from the existing Level 2 award. This option has the potential to provide a clear route from existing senior secondary school vocational programmes into tertiary training and work. One potential drawback is that it might not prompt more innovative changes in the sector.

- Allow WDCs to expedite the development of skills standards which will replace some or all of the existing unit standards and become a part of the VEA framework's system-wide design.

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[17] Te Mātaiaho (the refreshed *New Zealand Curriculum* https://curriculumrefresh.education.govt.nz/te-mataiaho

- Facilitate conversations between schools, tertiary providers and potential industry partners about the potential for opening up flexible learning pathways to enhance equity opportunities and learner agency in vocational education.

- Identify existing examples of innovative practice in vocational learning that could be shared with other schools as potential models for developing a VEA programme.

Appendix 1

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Interview Questions for Schools

From our recent survey we found that schools were either unsure about the idea of a vocational entrance award or supported it in principle. In this interview we would like to explore what lies underneath these responses.

How do you understand the purpose of the VEA? Are its aims and objectives clear to you and your colleagues?

What are some of the positives about the idea?

What concerns do you have about it?

Have you shared anything about the VEA with learners and their whānau? Why or why not?

What changes or adjustments do you think are needed to make it work (deliver outcomes) for your learners?

Does the VEA have potential to open up opportunities or introduce risks, for priority learners?

We'd like to consider the following, specifically:

> Ākonga Māori
>
> Learners from Pacific backgrounds
>
> Students with specific learning disabilities.

Do you think there is a risk that a vocational award such as the VEA could entrench streaming in schools?

Why or why not?

Do you think the current Level 2 vocational pathways award is effective? Do you think it should be developed further at Level 3?

Do you think it is realistic to aim for parity between a vocational endorsement and a UE endorsement of NCEA?   Why or why not?

Do you feel that it is worthwhile to continue with the VEA prototyping?

What would a NCEA vocational award look like if you were to design one for your learners?

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Interview Questions for Workforce Development Councils

From our recent survey we found that schools were either unsure about the idea of a vocational entrance award or supported it in principle. The responses we received from Workforce Development Councils appeared more divided. In this interview we would like to explore what lies underneath these responses.

How do you understand the purpose of the VEA? Are its aims and objectives clear to you and your colleagues?

What are some of the positives about the idea?

What concerns do you have about it?

What changes or adjustments do you think are needed to make it work (deliver outcomes) for learners?

Does the VEA have potential to open up opportunities or introduce risks, for priority learners?

We'd like to consider the following, specifically:

Ākonga Māori

Learners from Pacific backgrounds

Students with specific learning disabilities.

Do you envisage the VEA impacting on access to apprenticeships for school leavers?

Why or why not?

What are WDCs hearing from iwi and hapu about the VEA prototype? Do you think more consultation would help? If yes, what might it add?

Do you feel that it is worthwhile to continue with the VEA prototyping?

What would a NCEA vocational award look like if you were to design one?