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Working with NCEA¹³

The current senior secondary assessment system, NCEA,¹⁴ began to be implemented in 2002. The first national survey of secondary schools was conducted in 2003. This serendipitous timing has enabled us to track principal, teacher, trustee, and parent and whānau views about the qualification from NCEA's turbulent inception to the present day. Many of the items included in the very first survey were superseded in the second because issues and practices related to NCEA were evolving rapidly during that time. From the 2006 survey on, a more stable core of items has been tracked every 3 years, with additional items added as different developments or challenges have cropped up.

Detailed analyses of responses from the second, third and fourth surveys were described in a stand-alone series of reports written by Rosemary Hipkins (2007,¹⁵ 2010,¹⁶ 2013¹⁷). During the consultation process for the 2015 survey, it seemed that NCEA itself no longer appeared to be the “hot topic” it had been. While major changes had taken place in NCEA policy and/or practices between past survey rounds, the period between 2012 and 2015 was seen as being largely a time of consolidation. Thus in this chapter we report on a reduced set of items.

We look first at how supportive principals, teachers, trustees and parents were of NCEA, and whether they saw it as a credible qualification in the wider community. Then we look at the importance of qualifications for parents and whānau, how the Government's programmes to support schools to

13 This chapter has benefited considerably from contributions from Rosemary Hipkins, co-author of the book: Hipkins, R., Johnston, M., & Sheehan, M. (in press). *NCEA in context*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

14 National Certificate of Educational Achievement.

15 Hipkins, R. (2007). *Taking the pulse of NCEA: Findings from the NZCER national survey of secondary schools 2006*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

16 Hipkins, R. (2010). *The evolving NCEA: Findings from the NZCER national survey of secondary schools 2009*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

17 Hipkins, R. (2013). *NCEA one decade on: Views and experiences from the 2012 NZCER national survey of secondary schools*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

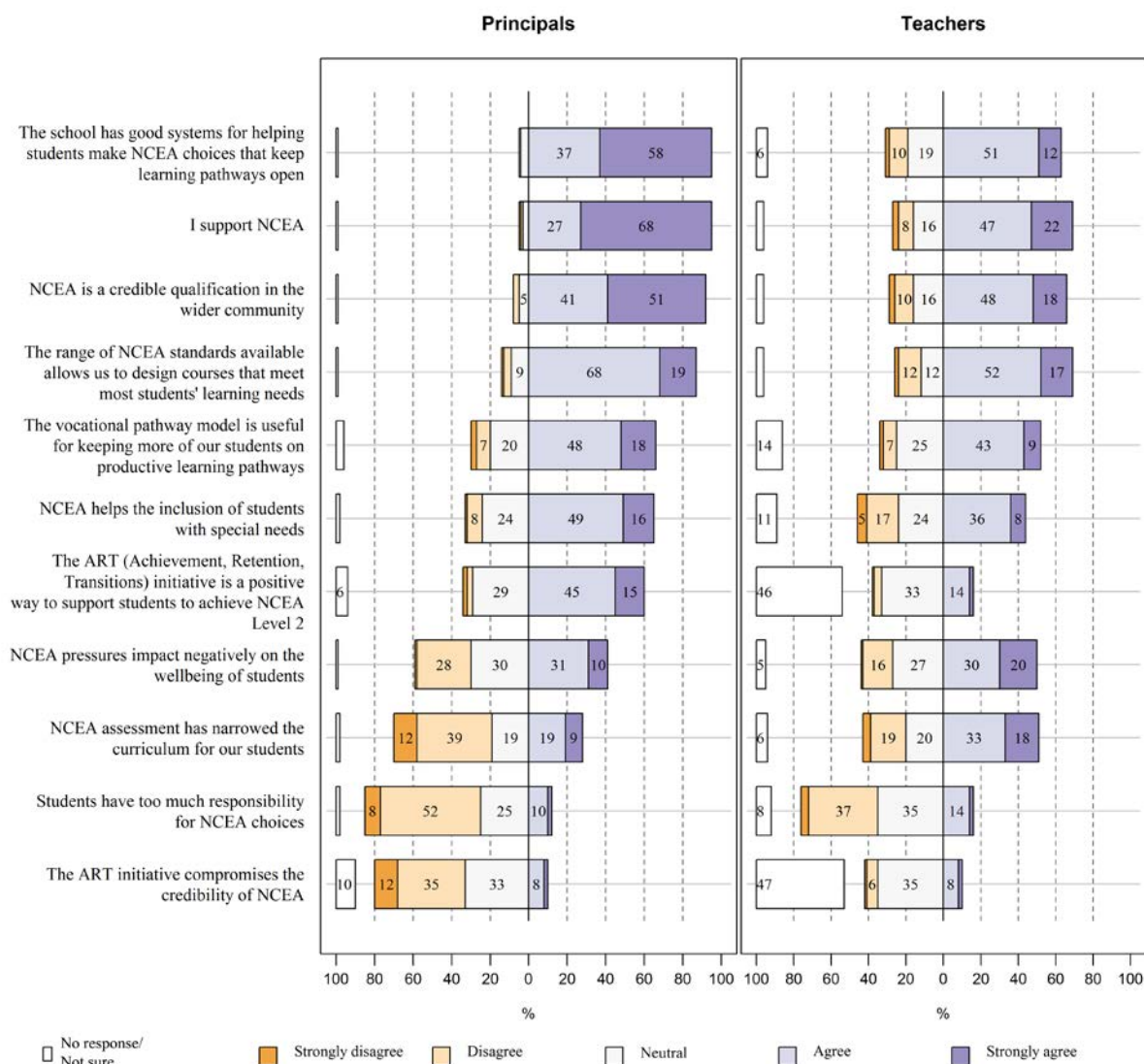
increase NCEA success rates were perceived in schools and how schools were providing different pathways and using NCEA to meet the range of student learning needs. Finally, we look at how NCEA was impacting on teachers' curriculum thinking and workloads, and the impacts for students.

Although support for NCEA remained stable, a tension between traditional and more transformative expectations has lingered. Principals and teachers in lower-decile schools were more positive about initiatives that support an inclusive approach to credentialing all students' learning gains, such as the Vocational Pathways and Achievement Retention Transitions (ART), in contrast to the traditional sorting of students according to ability.

An overview of principals' and teachers' views of NCEA

Principals' and teachers' views about NCEA are shown in Figure 6. Overall, both groups were supportive of NCEA and how it was implemented in their school, although teachers were less sanguine than principals. However, there was also a feeling that NCEA has narrowed the curriculum and impacted negatively on student wellbeing. We will look more closely at these items throughout this chapter, and compare teachers' and principals' responses in 2015 to those of 2012 and 2009.

FIGURE 6 Principals' and teachers' NCEA-related views



Consolidation of support for NCEA

All NZCER national secondary survey rounds have included the item “I am supportive of NCEA”.¹⁸ Table 5 shows patterns of responses from all four groups surveyed.

18 In 2015 the wording was simplified to “I support NCEA”. The sentiment is unchanged.

TABLE 5 Support for NCEA 2003–15

I support NCEA (agree/strongly agree)	Parents and whānau %	Trustees %	Teachers %	Principals %
2003 responses	44	*	65	87
2006 responses	37	58	60	89
2009 responses	45	68	69	95
2012 responses	54	73	68	94
2015 responses	55	69	69	95

*Not asked

Support for NCEA was generally much the same in 2015 as it was in 2012. Over the years, principals have consistently voiced the strongest support. Teachers and trustees follow. There was a small, statistically significant downward shift in levels of support from trustees from 2012. It took until 2012 before being supportive of NCEA was the majority view for parents. In 2015, 30% of parents expressed a neutral view of NCEA, with only 8% of parents not supporting it.

As was found in 2012, parents and whānau with a child in Years 11–13 (who had therefore had more experience with NCEA) were more likely to support NCEA than those whose children had not yet reached the senior secondary level: 61% of parents with children in Years 11–13 indicated they supported NCEA, compared with 48% of those with children in Years 9–10 only.

NCEA is a rather different system of assessment than the one used to assess many of today's adults when they were at school. Since people are more likely to support a system they feel they understand, we asked parents and trustees several questions related to their understanding of NCEA. This showed that:

- 63% of parents and whānau agreed that they understand how NCEA works, compared with 48% in 2012 when we asked this question for the first time. For those with students in Years 11–13 in 2015, the figure was 73%
- 21% of parents and whānau agreed or strongly agreed that “I find my child's NCEA results confusing”. The figure for those with students in Years 11–13 was 26%.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, of the 73% of parents and whānau with children in Years 11–13 who agreed they understood how NCEA works, more than half also disagreed they find their child's results confusing. The reverse also applied: of the 9% who disagreed they understand how NCEA works, 79% also indicated they find their child's NCEA results confusing. Seventeen percent of parents with a child in Years 11–13 gave a neutral response or were unsure whether they understand how NCEA works. Responses from this group of parents about whether they found their child's NCEA results confusing were less clear cut (43% were also neutral or unsure about this, 45% agreed they were confusing and 12% disagreed).

Of those with children at these year levels who agreed they understand how NCEA works, 15% also said they find their child's NCEA results confusing. Thus having an understanding of how NCEA works as a qualification does not always equate with understanding particular NCEA results:

- 87% of trustees said they understand how NCEA works
- 71% of trustees agreed that NCEA is a valuable record of student learning—the same as in 2012.

Is NCEA seen as a credible qualification in the wider community?

Another angle for probing support is to ask respondents if they perceive NCEA to be a credible qualification in the wider community. This item was added to the survey in 2009 so can now be tracked over three survey rounds. Response patterns are shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6 Perceptions of the credibility of NCEA; 2009, 2012 and 2015

<i>NCEA is a credible qualification in the wider community (agree/strongly agree)</i>	Parents and whānau %	Trustees %	Teachers %	Principals %
2009 responses	37	48	47	81
2012 responses	51	56	58	82
2015 responses	59	63	66	92

Perceptions that NCEA is a credible qualification in the wider community have improved steadily since 2009. Again, a greater proportion of principals thought this. Interestingly, in 2015 slightly more parents thought NCEA was credible in the wider community (59%) than said they personally supported it (55%).

Alternative qualifications

In the early years of NCEA some schools responded to perceptions of parental concerns about NCEA's credibility by turning to alternative examination systems, especially for the assessment of their most able students. Between 2012 and 2015 there was almost no change in the proportions of principals reporting that some students were assessed using Cambridge Examinations (10%) or the International Baccalaureate (1%). Principals of decile 7–10 schools were more likely to indicate they use Cambridge examinations (19%) than principals of decile 3–6 secondary schools (5%). No principals of decile 1–2 schools reported their students were assessed using Cambridge examinations.

A focus on achievement, retention and transitions

NCEA matters to students and families:

- 94% of parents and whānau agreed that getting a qualification such as NCEA was important in their child's education
- 32% of trustees agreed that NCEA league tables had a positive impact on roll numbers at the school. In the 2012 survey this figure had been lower (19%).

NCEA has become a specific target for the Government in evaluating how well the education system is doing overall. The Better Public Services targets, introduced just before the 2012 survey round, included a target for 85% of young people to achieve at least a Level 2 NCEA by the time they are 18, by 2017. At the time of the 2012 survey, some principals and teachers expressed concerns about this initiative, which they saw as a potential threat to NCEA's credibility. While students can continue to gain NCEA credits from employment-related tertiary courses, secondary teachers and principals were concerned that this target would be used to judge schools.

To support schools to improve student achievement of NCEA Level 2, the Ministry of Education introduced the ART programme. This was put in place to identify and support students thought to be at risk of not achieving NCEA Level 2, particularly Māori and Pasifika students. It is specifically aimed at increasing the education outcomes for students who have traditionally been under-served by New Zealand's education system.

In 2015 we asked teachers and principals for their views about ART. Mindful of the concerns expressed in open responses to the 2012 survey,¹⁹ we shaped two new items. One was positively worded ("The ART initiative is a positive way to support students to achieve NCEA Level 2"). The second item was negatively

¹⁹ Hipkins, R. (2013). *NCEA one decade on: Views and experiences from the 2012 NZCER national survey of secondary schools*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

worded to capture the concerns expressed in 2012 (“The ART initiative compromises the credibility of NCEA”). Many principals (60%) and a much lower proportion of teachers (16%) agreed that ART was a positive way to support students. Ten percent of both groups agreed that ART compromised the credibility of NCEA.

Figure 6 shows a high level of ambivalence or uncertainty about ART, especially from the teachers. When “neutral” and “not sure/no response” options were totalled, 82% of teachers did not commit to a view either way on whether ART compromises the credibility of NCEA and 79% did not express a view either way on whether ART provides positive support for students to achieve NCEA Level 2. ART tends to be managed at the senior leadership level and typically involves deans or academic mentors, so many teachers would not have been directly involved in implementing the agreed actions. Teachers who also had AP/DP or deans’ roles were more likely to voice an opinion about ART; 32% and 21%, respectively, agreed the ART is a positive way to help students to get NCEA Level 2. However, more than half those in these roles responded neither affirmatively nor negatively to the two ART-related items.

Many principals also seemed undecided about ART. Just under half (43%) were neutral or did not know if ART compromised the credibility of NCEA. Fewer (35%) were neutral or did not know if ART was a positive way to support students to gain a Level 2 NCEA. It seems that for many school professionals the jury is still out on this support programme, or they do not actually know about it.

There was an association between decile and teachers’ responses to the two ART-related items: 25% of teachers at decile 1–2 schools agreed that the ART initiative is a positive way to help students achieve NCEA Level 2, decreasing to 8% of teachers at decile 9–10 schools. Most teachers at schools of all deciles gave “neutral” or “not sure” responses to this item (64% of teachers at decile 1–2 schools, increasing to 85% of teachers at decile 9–10 schools).

Similarly, teachers at low-decile schools were more likely to disagree that the ART initiative compromises the credibility of NCEA (13% for decile 1–2 schools, compared with 4% for decile 9–10 schools). The same ART-related trends were not evident for principals.

Pressure to improve NCEA results

In 2012 just over half the teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they felt under unfair pressure to boost their students’ NCEA results. For 2015 this item was reworded to be more neutral: “I feel under pressure to improve my students’ NCEA results”. In 2015, 77% of secondary teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were under pressure to improve their students’ NCEA results. The ART initiative and the Better Public Services target of 85% of 18-year-olds achieving NCEA Level 2 are likely to have contributed to this high proportion feeling under pressure. As well, there has been a concerted focus on Teaching as Inquiry. NCEA results are likely to be an important data source when teachers make changes to their practice and inquire into the impact. This strong focus on professional inquiry could also have contributed to the perception of greater scrutiny of NCEA results, though what teaching as inquiry means in practice is still very variable.

Responding to the needs of *all* learners

Several other policy initiatives support the intent of ART. For example, when students make good pathways choices, and schools put in place the support systems to help them stay on these pathways, it is less likely that any NCEA qualifications these students gain will comprise a loose amalgam of assessment standards that offer “easy” credits. That was, and is, a main concern of those who see NCEA’s credibility being undermined by setting a specific Level 2 target. So how are these complementary policies working out in practice?

Vocational pathways

In 2013 the Ministry of Education, in partnership with Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), formally launched five “Vocational Pathways” with a sixth pathway added in 2014.²⁰ These pathways were designed to help students connect the curriculum/subject choices they make for NCEA Level 2 and the world of work. They do this by showing which Level 2 achievement standards could help build a strong learning pathway towards a career in one of the six industries in focus. By mapping explicit links between a student’s achievements, strengths and interests, and future possibilities for study and employment, Vocational Pathways provide more options for students to achieve NCEA Level 2. With input from the six industries included, “all of the pathways identify skills that are valued by employers across all sectors. Maths and English skills are especially important across all pathways ...”²¹

We asked principals and teachers for their views about the usefulness of the vocational pathway model for keeping more of their students on productive learning pathways (see Figure 6). Many principals (66%) and just over half the teachers (52%) agreed or strongly agreed that the vocational pathways model is useful for keeping students on productive learning pathways. Again, there were many “neutral” or “not sure” responses from teachers: when added together they total 39%, and only 10% of principals and 9% of teachers disagreed that the Vocational Pathways model was useful.

Eighty percent of principals of decile 1–2 schools thought the Vocational Pathway model was useful, decreasing to 53% of principals of decile 9–10 schools. Teachers’ responses to the same item also differed by decile, although not so markedly; 55% of teachers in decile 1–2 schools and 57% of those in decile 3–4 schools thought the pathways model was useful, decreasing to 48% for teachers in decile 9–10 schools.

School systems to design and track learning pathways

It is up to each school to design a programme of learning that provides coherent pathways for students with different learning needs, and to provide the support systems that help students make sound course choices within this system. The survey included several items about these challenges.

Sixty-six percent of principals and 28% of trustees indicated they use NCEA results to decide which courses and standards to offer in future. Teachers were not asked this question.

Table 7 shows the extent to which respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “The school has good systems for helping students make NCEA choices that keep learning pathways open”. This question was asked for the first time in 2012, but was not included in the parent and whānau questionnaire until 2015.

TABLE 7 Perceptions of school systems that support students to make pathways choices; 2012 and 2015

The school has good systems for helping students make NCEA choices that keep learning pathways open (agree/strongly agree)	Parents and whānau %	Trustees %	Teachers %	Principals %
2012 responses	*	81	59	92
2015 responses	61	86	63	95

*Not asked

In 2015 there were high levels of agreement with this statement from both principals and trustees, slightly more than in 2012. Around a third of parents and teachers did not agree with this statement, but they were more likely to be unsure, or to not respond, than to actually disagree.

²⁰ <http://youthguarantee.net.nz/vocational-pathways/>

²¹ According to Careers NZ’s information about Vocational Pathways, on their website: http://www.careers.govt.nz/courses/still-at-school/vocational-pathways/#cid_688

Teachers at high-decile schools were somewhat more likely to agree that their school had good systems for helping students make NCEA choices that keep learning pathways open (69% of teachers at decile 9–10 schools, compared with 58% at decile 1–2 schools).

NCEA credits can be gained for achievement specified in a wide range of achievement standards, and/or employment-related unit standards owned by the ITOs. This range of choices should allow every school to design courses that meet the needs of all their students, but do they see it that way? Table 8 shows principal and teacher responses to the statement “The range of NCEA standards available allows us to design courses that meet most students’ learning needs”. This question was asked for the first time in 2012.

TABLE 8 Do NCEA standards allow course design across the range of student learning needs? 2012 and 2015

The range of NCEA standards available allows us to design courses that meet most students’ learning needs (agree/strongly agree)	Teachers %	Principals %
2012 responses	56	74
2015 responses	70	86

More principals and teachers thought that the range of NCEA standards did allow them to design courses that met most students’ learning needs in 2015. This is a noteworthy shift in agreement, consistent with the recent emphasis on vocational pathways and the importance of supporting all students to experience meaningful achievement gains. A similar shift can be seen in Table 9, which drills down to pay attention to those students whose learning needs are arguably the most challenging to meet.

TABLE 9 Does NCEA help with the inclusion of students with special needs?²² 2012 and 2015

NCEA helps with the inclusion of students with special needs (agree/strongly agree)	Teachers %	Principals %
2012 responses	31	48
2015 responses	43	65

In 2012 just under a third of the teachers could see a role for NCEA in building inclusive practices. By 2015 this proportion had increased to 43%. Correspondingly, disagreement/strong disagreement fell somewhat (28% in 2012 to 22% in 2015). Around a third of teachers were unsure or held no view on this statement.

Principals are more likely to consider inclusion at the whole-school level, which might help explain why a greater proportion of them could see the potential for NCEA to make a contribution to inclusive practices. There were some links between principals’ agreement with this statement and their views on vocational pathways and ART. Nearly two-thirds of the principals who agreed that NCEA helps with the inclusion of students with special needs also agreed the Vocational Pathway model is useful for keeping more students on productive learning pathways. A similar proportion who agreed NCEA helps with inclusion also thought ART is a positive way to support students to achieve NCEA Level 2.

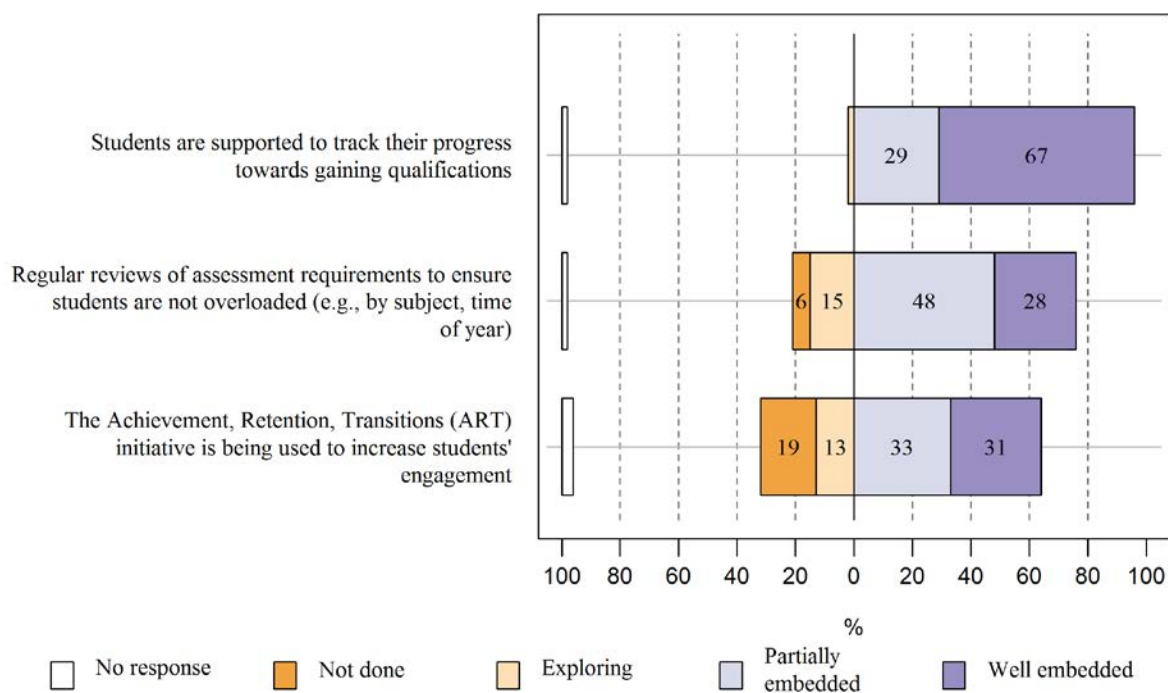
Teachers’ and principals’ views about NCEA’s role in building inclusive practices did not vary by school decile.

²² As we write this report in 2016, there is a shift away from the use of the description “students with special needs” towards the expression “students with additional learning needs”. For consistency with the wording used in the 2015 surveys, we use the former throughout this report.

Supporting students to stay on their qualification pathway

Almost all the schools had systems to support students to track their progress towards gaining a qualification: in 67%, these were well embedded, and in 29%, partially embedded. Reviews of assessment requirements to check that students are not overloaded are common, but not so well embedded, as shown in Figure 7 below. Around two-thirds were using the ART initiative to increase student engagement.

FIGURE 7 Supporting students' progress towards gaining qualifications; principal reports (n = 182)



Teachers' curriculum thinking

Teachers work within overall school structures but they have a great deal of autonomy, at least in theory, to design courses as they want to, within their school's overall programme. Even so, just over half the teachers (51%) agreed or strongly agreed that "NCEA assessment has narrowed the curriculum for my students". Sixty-three percent of Mathematics and Science teachers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

We also asked teachers about the effects of NCEA on programmes for Years 9 and 10 students. Sixty-three percent of teachers reported NCEA played an increasing part in their school's curriculum for Years 9 and 10. Forty percent confirmed their Years 9 and 10 students do practice exams for NCEA. These figures did not vary with school decile.

In 2015 the proportions of teachers who viewed NCEA as a barrier to making changes to or maintaining the quality of the curriculum were smaller than in 2012 but still somewhat larger than in 2009:

- 47% identified time taken for NCEA assessments as a barrier (between the 52% in 2012 and 30% in 2009)
- 43% identified NCEA requirements as a barrier (between the 57% in 2012 and 38% in 2009).

Once again, this may be related to the work involved in the alignment of NCEA and NZC around the time of the 2012 survey.

In 2015 we added a new potential barrier to the list: “UE requirements too restrictive on course design”. We did this because regulations for determining University Entrance are based on Level 3 NCEA results, but with some specific provisos about how credits are distributed across subjects. These regulations were tightened in the period between the 2012 and 2015 surveys. Seven percent of the teachers selected this new item as a barrier to making changes or maintaining the quality of the curriculum they teach.

We also asked teachers whether they thought online assessment of NCEA is a positive move, and 40% agreed it was. A slightly greater proportion (46%) agreed that the NZQA moderation expectations are clear, while 30% disagreed and 21% gave neutral/not sure responses. Teachers of Mathematics and Science were least likely to agree the moderation expectations are clear (35%).

The impact of NCEA on teacher workloads

The impact of NCEA on teacher workloads has been an issue ever since its inception. There is a potential opportunity cost for the time this takes up: 45% of teachers selected the item “Workload too heavy” as a barrier to making curriculum changes. The reference here is to workload in general, but a separate item asked about the manageability of their NCEA workload in particular:

- 32% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that their NCEA-related workload was manageable, while 41% disagreed or strongly disagreed that this was the case
- workloads seemed to be more manageable for teachers in small schools (46% agreement, decreasing to 29% for large schools), and for those in decile 1–2 schools (37%, compared with 27% for decile 9–10 schools)
- 84% of principals agreed that teachers struggle with their NCEA workload.

Elsewhere, the principal and teacher surveys included a bank of items that described things that could be seen as “major issues facing the school”. One of these items was “NCEA workload for teachers”.²³ There was a notable increase in the proportion of principals who saw this as a major issue for the school—compared with past survey rounds, this view now seems more prevalent among principals than among teachers:

- 65% of principals identified NCEA workload for teachers as a major issue facing their school (increasing from 49% in 2012, and 39% in 2009)
- 51% of teachers identified NCEA workload as a major issue facing their school. This is slightly less than in 2012 when NCEA and NZC were being aligned (58%) and is slightly more than in 2009 (46%)
- teacher responses about their NCEA workload were associated with school decile; NCEA workload was identified by 46% of teachers at decile 1–6 and 56% at decile 7–10 schools, as a major issue facing the school.

Teachers who agreed they supported NCEA were also more likely to agree with a group of related items, including those about their NCEA-related workload. In particular, teachers who agreed they supported NCEA were more likely to say they had:

- good or very good morale (74%, compared with 49% of those who did not support NCEA)
- a manageable workload (65%, compared with 46%)
- a manageable level of work-related stress (65%, compared with 51%)
- a fair workload (58%, compared with 42%)
- a manageable NCEA-related workload (37%, compared with 17%).

23 In the 2009 and 2012 surveys, the item was simply “NCEA workload”. In 2015 we split this into two items: “NCEA workload for teachers” and “NCEA workload for students”.

The teachers who supported NCEA were less likely to agree that:

- NCEA pressures are impacting negatively on their students' wellbeing (46%, compared with 72% of teachers who did not support NCEA).

Impacts for students

Even when schools design strong pathways, students must still make choices. While parents and whānau are often involved in making course choices, students may not consult them if they choose not to complete internally assessed work. Too many such choices as a course unfolds could result in not achieving the necessary spread of credits to keep a chosen pathway open. Should students have so much responsibility, even if they don't actually exercise the potential for making choices? We have asked about this over four survey rounds now. Table 10 shows low levels of support for the view that NCEA gives students too much responsibility, across all four groups of respondents.

TABLE 10 **Do students have too much responsibility for their NCEA choices? 2006-15**

Students have too much responsibility for NCEA choices (agree/strongly agree)	Parents and whānau %	Trustees %	Teachers %	Principals %
2006 responses	14	26	28	16
2009 responses	16	14	16	12
2012 responses	16	8	20	11
2015 responses	13	12	16	13

Five percent of parents and whānau wrote comments that reflected concern about their children's subject choices and career pathways. These comments described some of the factors parents saw affecting subject offerings and how their children choose their subjects:

School too small so when you get to Year 13, you have to compromise on your subject choices as some subjects clash with others and you then have to choose one or the other. Whereas at a larger school, you would have more options.

Unfortunately my child has made subject choices based on the teachers that are likely to be taking the class. There are several teachers that are known to be disinterested and unmotivating who are guaranteed to be teaching the following year and so we know several children who have not chosen that subject. Likewise there are fabulous teachers that this year we have enjoyed who we are not sure will be around next year and can only hope that they are so as to keep our child motivated and enjoying studies.

School needs to offer more than one language that the students can take up without sacrificing other important subjects; e.g., if the student had to take Japanese as a full year language he had to drop computers as one of the other subjects.

Disappointed that my youngest has to change schools for Yr 11 to enable her to take the subject that she needs for her chosen career path.

Other parents and whānau voiced concern about the support their child received to plan their career pathways:

Kids need career guidance so they can pick their subjects more accurately. At the moment they choose a variety of subjects which do not aim them to the career or degree they want to pursue; certain careers/degrees requires one to have the right mix of subjects. There is a great lack in this area. Kids are confused in their career path or the degree they thought they could pursue as a result.

We have sought outside help for careers guidance to make option choices as both my girls felt that what the school offered was inadequate—or the waiting time too lengthy—accessibility poor.

Need more resources, more funding for supporting child's transition from school to careers pathway, assisting choices/subjects throughout year not just at end of year for following year.

The assessment-related anxiety that some students experience was acknowledged as an issue in a recent ERO report about students' wellbeing.²⁴ One-third of parents and whānau (33%) agreed or strongly agreed that their child gets anxious about NCEA assessments, and a further 47% were neutral or unsure. For those with a child in Years 11–13, 42% indicated their child gets anxious about NCEA assessments.

Fifty percent of the teachers, 41% of the principals and 13% of the trustees agreed or strongly agreed that NCEA pressures impact negatively on the wellbeing of students. Teachers' agreement with this increased with school decile and school size.

In their comments at the end of the survey, 4% of teachers expressed concern about the effects of assessment on students' wellbeing and learning. This teacher's comment illustrates their concerns:

Consequences for an assessment-led curriculum with a focus on academic success—anxious students who are increasingly dependent on teachers due to their desire to do well (achieve with excellence) doing 22 credits across 6 subjects (132 credits). This anxiety can lead to assessment fatigue or assessment avoidance due to fear of failure. It is time to shift the focus to academic success and at the same time developing learners' skills in resilient agency, creativity, curiosity using a growth mindset where effort is rewarded.

We also asked whether the NCEA workload for *students* was a major issue facing the school. Thirty-nine percent of teachers indicated it was a major issue for their school, as did 34% of principals. Ten percent of parents and 7% of trustees noted this as a major issue facing the school. Again, there were decile-related differences. Students' NCEA workload was identified as a major issue by 30% of teachers at decile 1–6 schools, compared with 49% of those at decile 7–10 schools. These differences were amplified in principals' responses, with less than 20% of principals at decile 1–4 schools identifying student workload as an issue, compared with 69% of principals at decile 9–10 schools.

Summary and discussion

In 2015 support for NCEA was stable, and perceptions about its credibility in the wider community have continued to improve. Schools have consolidated their systems to support students to make good pathways choices and greater proportions of teachers and principals were now saying that NCEA's flexibility can help them design courses that meet most students' needs. Congruent with this, there was increased recognition that NCEA can help with inclusion.

This is the good news. There were, however, indications of ongoing tensions that have not been resolved, or that may have become worse over the past 3 years. At the very heart of NCEA there is a tension between traditional and more transformative expectations. NCEA confounds the long-established tradition that high-stakes assessments will sort students according to ability levels, and that only some

24 Education Review Office. (2015). *Wellbeing for young people's success at secondary school*. Downloaded 2 March 2016, from <http://ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Wellbeing-for-Young-People-s-Success-at-Secondary-School-February-2015>

can succeed. NCEA has a more inclusive orientation, having been designed to allow meaningful learning gains of all students to be credentialed. Both orientations have strengths and challenges but in the absence of careful public debate about these, teachers and schools can get caught up in conflicting expectations and mixed messages.

This dynamic is likely to underlie the pattern of decile-related differences in responses. Principals and teachers in lower-decile schools were more positive about the Vocational Pathways and ART initiatives—both of which support the inclusive intent to credential all students' meaningful learning gains. They were less likely to see students' NCEA workloads as a major issue, or as something that was impacting negatively on student wellbeing. They were also less likely to see teacher NCEA workloads as an issue.

Conversely, a continuing expectation of competitive sorting could help explain the pressure that is being experienced by teachers and students, and particularly those in high-decile schools. As school decile increased, leaders and teachers were more likely to say students were struggling under high NCEA workloads, yet these workloads arise in large part from the school's curriculum and assessment programme. (Students' expectations of themselves no doubt also play a role but we have no data about these.) If students have a higher workload, then so must their teachers, given that just 26–30% of all standards achieved in any one year are externally assessed.²⁵ Principals' awareness of this issue appears to have increased in 2015, perhaps because the concerted focus on pathways and targets has put NCEA into the school-wide spotlight.

Parents and whānau with children in Years 11–13, who had more experience of NCEA, tended to be more supportive of NCEA than those whose children were not yet in the senior part of the secondary school. Nonetheless, some of these parents also indicated they found their child's NCEA results confusing.

NCEA was having an effect at Years 9 and 10, with some teachers giving their classes practice exams for NCEA, an indication of the pervasive effects of the qualification in secondary schools. Most teachers were feeling under pressure to improve their students' results.

25 See Chapter 4 of Hipkins, R., Johnston, M., & Sheehan, M. (in press). *NCEA in context*. Wellington: NZCER Press.