

Prepared for:
Food and Fibre CoVE

Stakeholder perspectives on flexible learning

High-level findings from interviews

March 2023



Executive summary

What work has been done and why?

This project, the 'Training Careers Framework project' is about excellent pathways – and particularly, what makes for an excellent *flexible* pathway.

The project began with activities relating to defining pathway excellence and identifying exemplars. In February and March 2023, the project continued this work by undertaking interviews with 24 stakeholders. The goal was to test whether two previously identified problems and three related solution concepts resonated with them; and what benefits, barriers and unintended consequences they perceived.

While not discussed in this summary, findings from the interviews related to definitions can be found on pages 8. Findings related to exemplars will be included in future project outputs.

Are the problems real?

A hypothesis driving this work has been that learners / workers wish to transition between food and fibre sectors (for example, potato growing to dairy farming), and also from provider to a workplace-based learning setting. Testing within interviews suggests that:

- **Learners / workers may not be thinking about moving from sector to sector** – The majority of interviewees did not see this as a problem for learners or workers, although a smaller group of interviewees - typically those who worked across sectors - saw it as very important for the industry as a whole. When the possibility was mentioned to learners themselves, a number showed strong interest. In this sense, this problem does not appear to be learner / worker driven – even though enabling sector-to-sector movements could ultimately benefit them.
- **Few appreciated the need to bridge between provider-based and workplace-based learning** – Overall, there was weaker recognition of this problem, other than from providers. Responses from interviewees varied, from some not having had experience with this as a 'weak transition'; some thinking the Te Pūkenga merger would fix it; and one feeling the problem was not the administrative process but the overall trust in the relevancy of the qualifications.

What do people like and dislike about the solution concepts?

In contrast, the three solution concepts (interchangeable building blocks; broad and specific blocks; and blocks that can be undertaken within provider-based and workplace-based learning settings) were generally well received.



Figure 1: Solution concept 1, Interchangeable building blocks



Figure 2: Solution concept 2, Broad and specific blocks

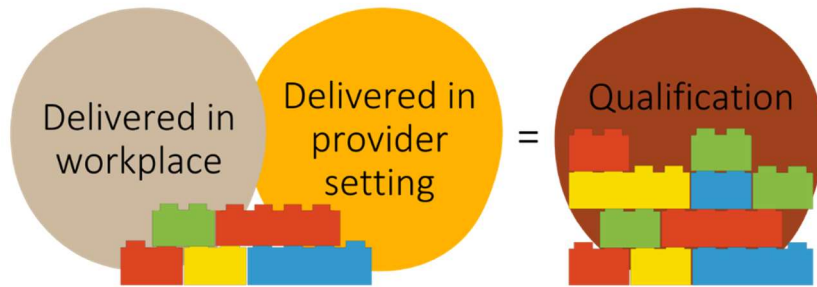


Figure 3: Solution concept 3, Blocks that can be undertaken within both provider-based and work-place-based learning settings.

The first two concepts were broadly supported, even if the reason for doing so had little to do with the two problems described above. In particular, interviewees felt that learners would:

- **Fit learning around other commitments better** – They would be able to fit their learning around other commitments due to the smaller size of blocks. This would make a difference to many learners, whose learning can be interrupted by seasons, weather, family commitments or visa restrictions.
- **Make better career choices** – They would be able to learn about a range of sectors when studying at lower levels, and then make a better choice about which sector would be right for them.
- **Enjoy learning more** – They may simply enjoy learning more due to being able to choose what they learn, learning potentially being more relevant, and being able to learn alongside people from other sectors.

While there were benefits for learners, interviewees noted barriers and unintended consequences for other parties that may need addressing before these two solution concepts could be rolled out. In particular, interviewees felt that:

- **Employers may not buy in** – While there are some benefits for employers, there appear to be fewer than for the learners. Employers may become less willing to support employee training if the training doesn't directly relate to the needs of their own business. A move away from supporting worker training is already an issue seen in some sectors, but could grow with these new concepts. Employers may also be hesitant if it means their employee could be attracted to change to another sector.
- **Providers may struggle with financial feasibility** – Having smaller, flexible, modules of training poses several challenges for providers:

- If offered smaller modules of learning, learners may be disincentivised from completing the larger courses they would otherwise have done. This would result in fewer learning hours and less funding.
 - As units became smaller, the fixed costs to enrol learners, report results and administer courses become larger relative to course income.
 - Providing more flexibility may mean that it becomes harder to plan around cohorts of students and to run courses with a viable number of students. This is particularly an issue for smaller providers.
 - Where smaller blocks of training start to resemble non-formal courses (that learners may not associate with an assessment requirement) learners may be disincentivised from completing assessments, impacting Education Performance Indicators. This situation is being faced by one interviewee.
- **Industry may not agree** – It appears that it would be challenging to have sectors agree on broad blocks. This relates to employers not wanting to invest in skills that don't relate to their own businesses, and to the fear of losing people to other sectors. It would be important that blocks are not made too broad, nor too specific, to get this right; and that providers don't double up on what other providers already offer. Sectors would also need to have an attitudinal shift to believe in sharing – particularly, sharing those who were not enjoying the industry and were likely to leave anyway.

Response to the last concept was more neutral, reflecting the fact that most interviewees did not have experience or exposure to the transition from provider-based to workplace-based learning settings. However, one interviewee – from the PrimaryITO - had certainly seen this issue. This suggests that although the problem currently exists, and is known by the providers, it only impacts a small number of learners / workers.

Overall, while the problems *on their own* may not be enough of a burning platform to recommend undertaking these concepts, the concepts themselves *appear to address several other perceived problems* in regard to flexibility.

What does this mean?

Interviews have uncovered tensions between different parts of the vocational education system. For example, in general, it appears that interviewees believed that the tested concepts would benefit learners, followed by the food and fibre industry as a whole. In terms of individual sectors and employers, interviewees thought they would perceive negatives consequences, and that convincing them of the benefits for them would take clear communication. Providers, on the other hand, have so far almost only noted challenges.

Of course, this is a small sample and cannot be conclusive at this stage. What can be said perhaps, is that these interviews suggest a need to be aware of the fact that something that benefits one part of the system does not always provide net benefits to another. For example, 'learner centred' is often idealised, but may contradict the needs of others like individual employers or the industry collectively. Likewise, just because there is a collective food and fibre industry need (such as, for workers to move between sectors rather than exit food and fibre entirely), does not mean that there will be demand from individual employers and learners / workers.

The solution concepts are learner-centred – and learner-centred is a cornerstone of the Reform of Vocational Education, and therefore must be taken as a given. However, this cornerstone should perhaps be interpreted within a systems approach. In other words, how will each change and each subsequent mitigation impact the whole system?

This will take the needs of each part of the system into account.

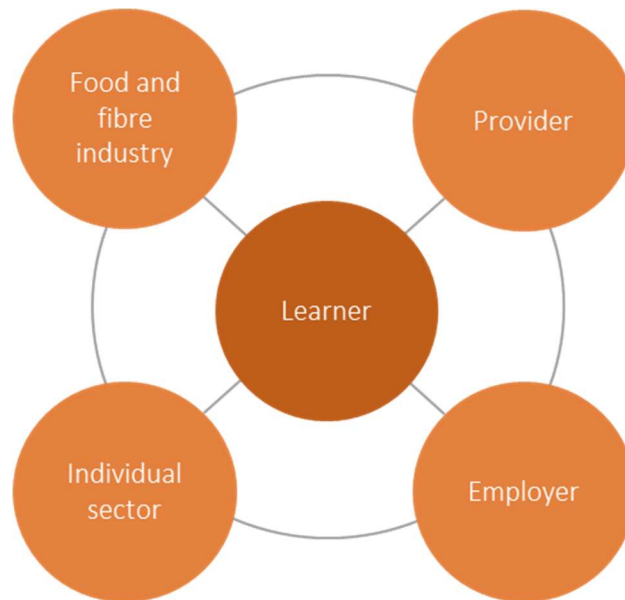


Figure 2: Diagram showing a learner-centred vocational system, with tensions between each party

What are the next steps?

The next contracted milestones of this project are:

- “Exemplars of good practice are approved by steering group” – 30th of April
- “Final report is approved by steering group, including plans for pilot (if any)” – 31st of May

However, beyond this, recommended next steps include to:

- Build solution concepts further – this will provide more tangible outputs that interviewees can respond to easier
- Undertake research with a more representative audience – methodologies such as focus groups could be used to test solution concepts and the above tensions more formally.

Introduction

Context

The 'Training and Careers Framework' (T&CF) project is a project led by Food and Fibre CoVE. The project aims to support the food and fibre sector towards better attraction, training and retention, by describing what excellent vocational pathways look like, finding exemplars of this excellence, and providing ideas on how such pathways can be developed.

Background

Training and Careers Framework

The Training and Careers Framework (T&CF) project has been underway since late 2022, with the following steps outlined in the agreed project plan:

1. Propose a consistent set of definitions to give terms such as pathways, visibility, flexibility and robustness, more concrete and specific meanings
2. Identify problems with current pathways – i.e., pathways that have weak transitions whose design currently prevent good learner and employment outcomes
3. Specify what developing, good and excellent pathways look like by creating a rubric that encapsulates learnings on excellence, and provides guidance on the inputs required to reach that excellence for different 'weak transitions'.
4. Identify examples of excellent pathways (i.e., 'exemplars') to use as 'case studies' to include on the FFCoVE Knowledgebase
5. Work with stakeholders to identify opportunities for the outputs of this project to support them further (i.e., integration / piloting opportunities).

The first three activities have been completed. This interview stage seeks to gain feedback on these items as well as input related to numbers four and five.

A New Approach to Learner Pathways

As above, this project planned to collaborate with stakeholders to identify opportunities for the outputs of this project to support them further.

Muka Tangata (People, Food and Fibre Workforce Development Council) was identified as the most suitable stakeholder to align with, considering the release of their 'New Approach to Learner Pathways' project.¹

The New Approach to Learner Pathways discussion document outlines concepts which they believe will enable the creation of a streamlined set of qualifications, standards and micro-credentials that will work for ākonga (learners), the Food and Fibre industry and particularly for Māori and Pacific peoples. Within this document, there are many principles, and the T&CF Project selected three to investigate further, which were particularly relevant to flexibility:

¹ <https://www.mukatangata.nz/latest-news/a-new-approach-to-learner-pathways/>

- Skill standards have standardised sizes – to act as **buildable blocks for delivery**
- Skill standards are less prescriptive – **provide only the level of specificity and detail required**, recognising the varied contexts in different food and fibre workplaces and industries
- Skills standards are developed and made compulsory where useful – which enables greater **learner transferability across the multiple providers and modes of delivery**.

The T&CF project used its interviews to ask stakeholders what benefits, unintended consequences and barriers they saw in these three concepts.

Purpose of this document

The purpose of this document is to provide an outline of the key themes from these interviews in a manner that protects the privacy of participants, and yet gives the Steering Committee and Food and Fibre CoVE members sufficient details of the perspectives provided by the interviewees.

The project recommendations, which will be based on the interviews among other workstreams, will be separately outlined in the Final Report.

Summarised methodology

In February and March 2023, potential interviewees were selected via the steering committee network and then through snowballing, with the aim of completing approximately 20 interviews with a range of stakeholders across the vocational education system.

This number was surpassed slightly, with 24 interviews being undertaken. This group included interviewees who represented:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Learners / workers (11/24) | • Employers (2/24) |
| • Women (14/24) ² | • Industry bodies (3/24) |
| • Māori (9/24) | • Providers (4/24) |
| • Youth (7/24) | • People who changed sectors (1/24) |

These interviews were held with each individual over teams, for approximately 30 – 45 mins, using a semi-structured questionnaire, allowing for personalisation as appropriate. One in-person group interview was held with learners.

The aim was to collate perspectives on the following questions:

- What does an excellent vocational pathway look like?
- What are the benefits, barriers, trade-offs and unintended consequences within the following concepts (proposed by Muka Tangata)?
 - Modules that can be interchanged relatively easily that act as building blocks
 - Modules that can be made specific or kept broad (made from generic skill standards)
 - Modules that can be delivered in both workplace-based and provider-based settings.

² Two of these interviewees worked for organisations focused on supporting the professional development of rural women.

- What examples of excellent vocational pathways exist?

Ethics processes were followed as had been identified during Scarlatti's internal ethics application process.

See the full methodology on page 24 for more detail.

Terminology

For the purposes of this report, the following terms are used:

- Block – A generic term to describe a unit of learning. Used to represent any of the following terms within this report - skill standard, course, programme or qualification
- Benefit – An advantage or profit gained from something
- Barrier – An obstacle or circumstance that prevents movement, access or progress
- Unintended consequence – An unplanned result or effect, that was likely unwelcome or unpleasant.

Note that the terms learner / worker are used interchangeably within this report.

High-level findings

This section summarises the key points made by interviewees, as aligned with interview questions.

The definition of vocational pathways was correct, albeit unengaging

The interviews began by discussing definitions of a vocational pathway, and the three characteristics of an excellent one (flexibility, visibility, robustness).

The definition of 'pathways' ("the sequence of work and education, and the transitions between these, that a person undertakes to achieve a learning or employment outcome") was seen as factually quite correct by most interviewees.

"I think because it is simple, it works. It reflects a lot our discussions - the pathway isn't always linear" (Career transition representative)

However, a few comments were made.

Outcomes sought can be varied or unexpected

A small number of interviewees commented on the outcomes, suggesting that people could also undertake these experiences for outcomes relating to personal development or wellbeing, their family or community. Moreover, sometimes the outcomes could be unexpected, like connection to your cohort.

This definition may be privileged

One interviewee noted that the current model was great for those who can get onto the pathway, but many would never get there. In this sense, the interviewee noted, the model is currently privileged and exclusive. They pointed out that many rangatahi Māori come from difficult backgrounds, are disenfranchised and may be facing intergenerational challenges, and both they and Pasifika need additional care and teaching to reach this path.

"People deserve to have control over their pathway, to do something they love. But young Māori and Pasifika... they need more of something called TLC. This pathway [that you have shown] assumes they have the skills to plan, but they often don't. We need to recognise that the pathway starts at birth, and that many of these people are disenfranchised, and have experienced difficult things. We have to break the circuit of these things, if they are ever to get on this pathway." (Māori kaumatua)

A definition used more widely may need to be aspirational

However, there was a general lack of engagement with the definition – potentially reflecting that while it was factually correct, it did not resonate with people.

Alternative ways of thinking of pathways were suggesting by a number of interviewees. For example:

- A jungle gym
- A web
- A kete.

“I see it more like a kete, interwoven. These things complement one another, and once they are bound in you, they never come apart.” (Youth representative)

The definition used within this project was created solely for use with the project, rather than for general use (e.g., marketing), and so a new definition is not proposed here. However, if a definition was needed for general use, further thinking may be required.

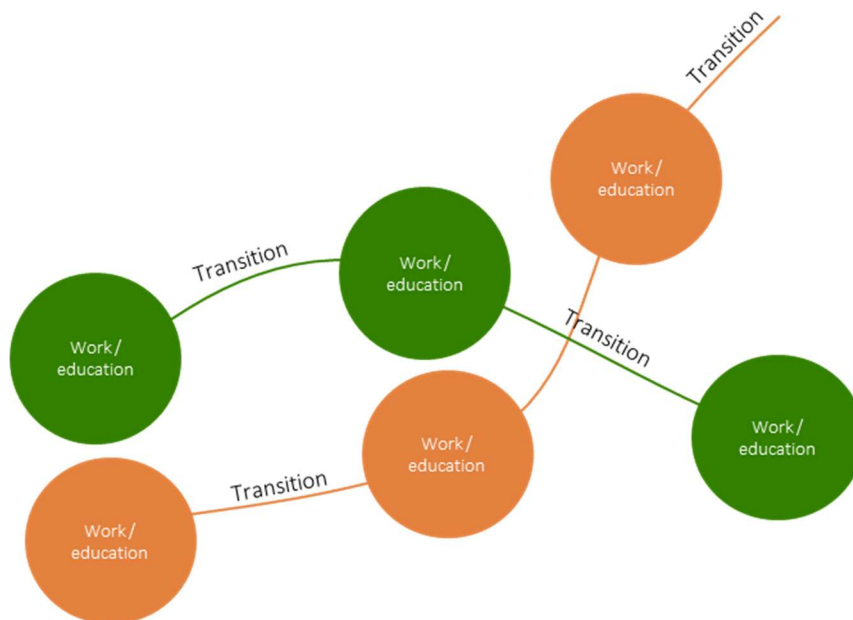


Figure 3: Visual depiction of the vocational education pathway definition

The characteristics of excellent pathways resonated with interviewees

In contrast, interviewees generally agreed with all proposed characteristics of an excellent pathway.

“I agree with this, it’s a good sound approach” (Provider)

“It’s hard to put these things into just a few words, but I suppose if you are going to, these ones are pretty good” (Career transition representative)

“I really like this, it has got me thinking. I’d be keen to see the rubric” (Women representative)

Flexibility

Of the few specific comments, some related to flexibility. Interviewees commented that:

- You need to fit around their other commitments. For example, allow the employer to call up and organise training on a rainy day; provide optional night sessions; avoid provision during school holidays etc. Allow the student to finish the credits over a longer period, as they may have to have a pause, for example for harvesting, or family reasons. In other words, the courses are sometimes made too big, and learners can’t commit to such a long course.
- Flexibility for Māori may look different. One interviewee noted that while many learners are involved with commitments outside of learning (e.g., volunteering), for Māori, the duties to whanau are more time consuming as the duty is to the whole hapu, and you cannot ‘opt out’ of these duties.



“You can’t tap out of those whanau or hapu duties. For example, if there is a tangi, even if it isn’t your direct family, you are going to go for the whole three days. But you still have deadlines for those assignments, and I’m not saying we should get extensions necessarily, but there is no effort to understand our reasons for not making the deadline, they try to make you feel guilty.” (Youth representative)

Visibility

There were also a small number of comments on visibility, with general agreement that having visible pathways through education and into roles was important.



Interviewees also noted that having visibility of someone who looked like them in the industry was important. One however noted that industry needed to value the time of those they used for visibility.

“This is important, but my concern is how this is done. At the moment, Food and Fibre exploits a few individuals. E.g., people who are finalists of Ahuwhenua... They ask them constantly to speak, to be in photos for promotions... And it feels like whenever this is a Māori person, the expectation is that they do it for free.” (Youth representative)

Robustness

Interviewees noted that robustness is about things being worthwhile or about having the bigger picture in mind. So that even if you are making something small, you think of the long-term needs of the industry.



One interviewee noted that when making something robust, Māori models should be considered to support Māori students – for example, the tuakana–teina model.

There was also mention that robustness should include a focus around quality assurance.

Interviewees noted other potential characteristics of excellence

Aside from the three characteristics of excellence, interviewees noted other potential characteristics. The most commonly mentioned was pastoral care.

Pastoral care

Many interviewees took the opportunity to point out the importance of pastoral care. Some felt that this is not given enough importance in the education system.



“Pastoral care is so key, that has been [provided] historically by family farmers, but has moved away... [Now learners / workers are more isolated.] Pastoral care is so critical, [but it is] not easy or cheap.” (Provider)

“Providers need to coordinate more generous pastoral / technical support than we’ve ever had. This doesn’t mean organise a workshop for 2 hours, this means going to the orchard, look at the pruning style of the apprentice, provide them support practically” (Industry body)

“Relationships are important – the manaaki we have from our tutors is different.” (Learner)

For interviewees, this was about supporting the learner, from life skills (e.g., communicating with managers), work ready skills (timeliness) through to reading and writing or more learning-related support.

“This is really massive... It mortifies me that it becomes my job to help them with reading and writing, and they fall through the gaps if they don’t get this help. We also help them with their driver’s license, with health issues, with purchasing gear... We have someone sit with them all day sometimes.” (Provider)

“[We have wellbeing units now, as industry kept saying to us] ‘we have these young people on farm, who don’t know how to interact with others, who don’t understand sleep, nutrition or drug effects, and are living off Red Bull’ They need more help with these soft skills, wellbeing things, at an earlier level... I honestly thought ‘Really? This is so basic’... but for a lot of these people, it has been really beneficial.” (Provider)

The timing of support also varied, differing between support while learning, to support required for learner success along a longer timeframe, including between education and employment, and employer to employer. Some noted that this pathway began at birth, and that support throughout their life was required.

One interviewee noted that trainers needed to be trained in how to provide pastoral care for Māori rangatahi.

“In general, people aren’t trained to know how to support rangatahi, so they end up doing the bare minimum. It just isn’t set up in a way that provides the support they need. It fails you, as a Māori.” (Youth representative)

Interestingly, the ‘weak transitions’ garnered different levels of support

As mentioned, a hypothesis driving this work was that learners / workers wish to transition between food and fibre sectors (for example, potato to dairy), and also from provider to a workplace-based learning setting.

Transitions between food and fibre sectors

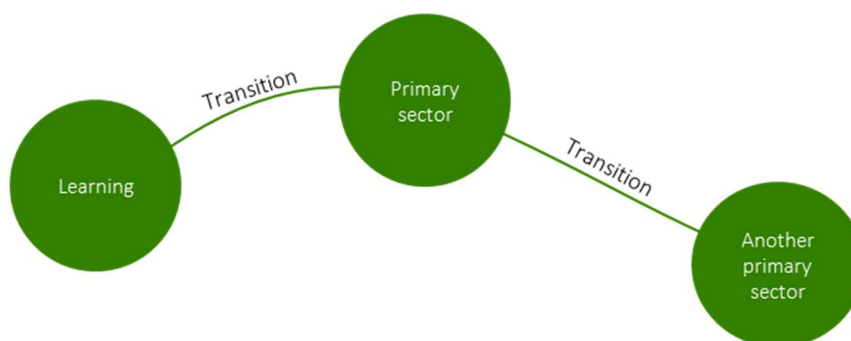


Figure 4: Visual depiction of an example transition between food and fibre sectors

With regards to the first of these, opinions varied widely. Most interviewees had not seen evidence of this weak transition (i.e., had not heard of a learner / worker wanting to undertake it).

“I’m unsure whether this is really a problem for learners / workers, and even if it is, food and fibre mainly gets people from outside of food and fibre” (Consultancy)

“I don’t know [if learners / workers want this]. For your career, it would make sense, but I don’t know if we see a lot of that. When people leave dairy [for example], we don’t hear they are

going to horticulture, we hear that they are leaving because they want to leave the rural environment... the rural lifestyle” (Provider)

Moreover, interviewees had contradictory opinions on just how similar the skill sets were between different sectors.

“I think there are limited people doing this crossing over, because sometimes the skillsets are really different, like I don’t think say someone from dairy would find it easy to go to kiwifruit.” (Industry body)

“To a large degree, there are similarities. For example, soil, water, pruning, is all the same” (Career transition representative)

Others noted there were already blocks out there that allow you to learn broadly, for example, within horticulture, or blocks on soft skills that mix multiple sectors together.

“Within hort this isn’t an issue I think, we don’t see much demand for transitioning between sectors in our region. Maybe because we don’t have much of other sectors in our region?” (Provider)

“Level 3 horticulture already does this” (Industry body)

“We mainly teach soft skills and those transfer well already” (Provider)

It appeared that most interest for changing sectors, was within horticulture.

“I’ve seen a lot of people wanting to transition from mainly ag or hort production (but also arb etc) to hort services, like nursery production, landscape and amenity. It’s because the hours are more normal, you generally don’t work weekends, and it’s probably less physically taxing... The age group of these people is typically older [and] they are after a lifestyle shift” (Career transition representative).

However, a smaller group of interviewees saw it as incredibly important. Reasons for this differed. In some instances, it was seen as important because:

- It could potentially help the food and fibre industry as a whole, by allowing more movement of workers when they found that a particular sector didn’t suit them, or when they were between seasons.
- Collaboration was in general seen to be a good thing – likely due it leading to more holistic learning
- A group of people wanted to change sectors into roles that they saw as providing a better work life balance.

“Things should be collaborative because that is aspirational, transformational, we shouldn’t just be doing it in response to the labour market.” (Māori representative)

“Absolutely without a doubt, I see this as a weak transition for people 30 and under... We need this type of flexibility because if someone tries out a food and fibre sector and they don’t like it, we need to be able to channel them to another food and fibre sector, not lose them completely... The second reason is because of the seasonal nature of things. This would prevent people from having to go on the benefit. Each sector is just thinking for itself at the moment... We need to start seeing workers as people [not labour units]... [and] we should be developing

[them] to be the best they can be no matter which sector they end up in” (Youth representative).

One hypothesis is that those who work in multi-sector organisations seem to see this transition as important, but the closer to the learners you get, the less this is noted as a problem. As such, it was not as learner / worker driven as one may imagine, even if solving it would ultimately benefit learners / workers. However, this sample is small and more investigation would be needed to be conclusive.

Transitions between provider-based and workplace-based learning

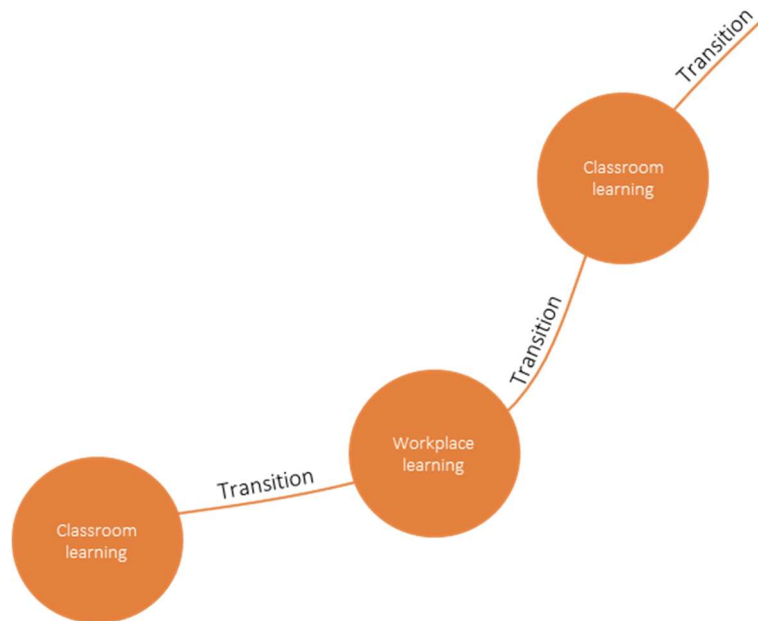


Figure 5: Visual depiction of an example transition between provider-based classroom learning and workplace-based learning

The majority of interviewees hadn't any experience or exposure to this transition.

For some, it wasn't a problem as they simply thought all learning should be workplace-based, they were already providing all their formal learning in workplace-based settings, or they didn't have learners trying to transition between providers.

"I'm unsure these are broken, maybe they are not clear, and things are fragmented and siloed, but broken probably isn't the right word" (Women representative)

"Unsure I see this one as a problem, I found it harder going from Primary ITO to university" (Youth representative)

Others acknowledged it likely wasn't easy to transition from Primary ITO to ITP as the courses were so different, but it was hoped that the Te Pūkenga merger would improve this weak transition.

One noted that it wasn't the administrative features of this transition, but the content of the courses that was the problem – due to a lack of trust from industry that what was provided was relevant.

However, there was also general confusion around what was meant by this idea – implying clearer language is needed.

“I think this one is a bigger challenge, because 90% of our education is in the workplace. It isn’t formalised. That can be challenging when you go to a new employer because you don’t know if someone has the skills” (Industry body)

“This won’t be politically correct, but I’m a straight shooter. I don’t know about other sectors but [our sector] in general doesn’t trust the [specific provider] courses – we don’t find them relevant to industry. So, it is the content that is the problem” (Industry body)

For the couple of interviewees who did have experience, the creation of Te Pūkenga, and the Unified Funding System was given as the solution to this weak transition. Although this is true in theory, there are limited examples currently of effort to resolve this transition between types of providers within the Te Pūkenga network – they are still operating as separate divisions.

“This is the unified funding system, isn't it? That will be great, if someone could start in classroom model while they look for work. Before, if you were in the polytech and got a job, it wasn't a smooth transition, but it will be now as we are all the same organisation.” (Career transition representative)

“On the West Coast with Tai Poutini... [there were] pitfalls and good bits... The funding was the big barrier. [Learners] can't transfer [easily].... If you enrol with us, we might enrol you in the exactly the same unit standards, and we will recharge you, because it is a separate funding stream.” (Provider)

A small number of learners who had undertaken a change in providers were found who had struggled with this transition.

“We were doing it by distance, and you felt like you were teaching yourself. Often you didn't understand things, and had to go ask for help. Then we transferred to [new provider] and I think we had to repeat some things? It was confusing, I'm not sure how it worked, [our new provider] arranged it all” (Learner)

Other weak transitions

A number of interviewees mentioned other transitions that they thought were weaker than the two above. While these are out of the scope of this research, it was interesting that what was often ‘top of mind’ for interviewees, was different to the two selected weak transitions.

Within and between workplaces

A common theme developed about weak transitions within and between workplaces:

- Within – Interviewees noted that it was difficult for workers to progress as there was an impression that employers did not support training, due to it using up the workers time and also due to the increased possibility that the worker may move on. One interviewee suggested that employers preferred to hire RSE workers than hire others, where there may be a greater expectation that they invest in their development. Some felt that this employer dislike for training was a growing trend.
- Between – Interviewees noted that it was difficult for workers to change between employers because things are done differently on different properties. Some employers provide support for learning while others don’t see it as their responsibility – instead expecting the learner to motivate and pay for it themselves. Another interviewee noted that the learning people had

was informal or non-formal, which had no formal recognition, making it difficult for people to change employers.

From work back to study

Aside from this, learners themselves noted that the transition from work back to study had been difficult.

“The thought of going back to school is scary if you’ve been out of the education system for a while.” (Learner)

“Taking from a book is hard for me, I’m a hands-on person.” (Learner)

Of the three concepts, interchangeable building ‘blocks’ was popular

Concept 1 – interchangeable building ‘blocks’

Description: Some blocks are mandatory while others can be selected by the learner. In this sense, there is more choice of what the learner studies. Moreover, the blocks are smaller and require less commitment.

Example: A learner could sign up to smaller credentials (say 15 credits), then take a break for harvest, before committing to another smaller credential. Eventually, these could build towards a larger qualification like a 120 credit Diploma.



Interchangeable building blocks were seen as ‘learner centred’

Learner benefits

Interviewees noted that this concept had many benefits for learners. In many cases, there were ‘knock-on’ benefits of these too, with one benefit causing another.

In terms of most direct benefits, interviewees believed that learners would have more choice in what they study and could commit to something smaller or spread a qualification out over more time.

As a result of these benefits, interviewees believed that learners:

- May be more likely to enrol as they could see the reward sooner, and could ‘try things out’ with little commitment
- May be more likely to continue learning and complete larger qualifications, because they were more relevant to them, more interesting, and more flexible to their other commitments (e.g., family, personal, seasons) – this was noted frequently by interviewees

- Could become more diverse, as increased flexibility could in particular support Māori learners, who have more family commitments, compared to other learners who may have a more nuclear family; and temporary visa holders who cannot enrol in a long course.
- Learners could more easily customise to their requirements, by choosing topics that aligned with their interests and/or workplace requirements.

A last 'knock-on benefit' was that more learners in the future may be able to transfer to new roles and sectors, due to being more likely to have a formal qualification.

“Really important to build confidence in the first year, make the blocks attainable to give the learners a sense of achievement” (Career transition representative)

“This is truly learner centred.” (Provider)

“It’s a good idea. Being able to build a little bit with different employers and do it when you have time, because we have different times of year obviously, and there are times where you just wouldn’t take something on like this... If I had done blocks like this, I would probably have a degree by now” (Industry body)

Employer benefits

Interviewees also saw a smaller number of benefits for employers - however, there was no consensus on any significant barriers. This can be seen in the examples below, where only one interviewee mentioned each point:

- May see productivity, quality and retention increase, due to their employees potentially being happier in their careers and having a more holistic understanding of their work
- Could organise to have employees trained in things that the employer themselves isn’t confident in teaching, e.g., fencing
- Might feel more willing to try out a provider (to see if the training is relevant), or try out sending a worker to learning (to see if it suits them, and whether they want to invest more in that worker).

“Love this concept - brilliant. Having some compulsory, some optional is great. Everyone benefits.” (Provider)

“A lot of employers aren’t financially backing training anymore.... They have been burnt paying for people, with those same people leaving after a few months... Having [smaller] blocks... could be an opportunity for the employer to give [the employee] a trial run, they can see how they feel about sending learners to training.” (Provider)

...And fortunately, interviewees saw minimal barriers to it happening.

Interviewees noted a small number of barriers – however, like before, there was no consensus on any significant barriers:

- Unit standards are currently stand-alone - how the options fit together would need to be made very clear, so that it would be possible to see the available pathways
- Providers may not create these smaller blocks if they are not convinced of the financial gain of doing teaser courses (this is also included as an unintended consequence below)

“We don’t get much financial gain from those teaser courses though of course” (Provider)

- One interviewee mentioned that some employers and industry bodies felt that the content of current qualifications was not right. They felt this would continue to be barrier until changed.

“The employers will have to recognise it, have faith in it. That’s the big thing.” (Industry body)

However, they saw potentially unintended consequences, if left unaddressed.

Interview analysis uncovered three potential unintended consequences of this concept.

Risk of financial infeasibility for the provider

The most commonly mentioned potential unintended consequence, was that such flexibility may cost providers more.

- As learners can enrol in what they like, when they like, providers would not be able to predict numbers and cohort sizes would be smaller, which would have knock on effects for planning and financial viability.
- Offering training in smaller blocks (e.g., teasers) potentially disincentivises learners from completing larger blocks of learning. This means there are less learning hours, resulting in less funding for providers
- Furthermore, as units get smaller, there is more transaction cost per dollar of funding, as the cost to enrol and administer largely remains fixed no matter the learning hours.

“Getting critical mass for classes - harder to administer” (Consultancy)

“It would take people longer to reach EFTs. You can’t know how many people will be enrolled, for how long, when they’ll finish, and there will be knock on effects for funding, for staffing, admin...” (Provider)

Risk of increased learner drop-out

Relatedly, there could be a risk of increased learner drop-out. While not mentioned as frequently, this is worth mentioning here due to its impacts if true.

- Learners may drop out more, because it is easier to drop out if you have only enrolled in something small, or because they don’t know how to navigate the different options

“It could get confusing – maybe you don’t know what the right thing to do is, or, you go too broad – being a jack of trades is one thing but you don’t want to be an apprentice in everything, you should be a master in something.” (Learner)

- Learners may also be less likely to do the assessments, because the value proposition isn’t great enough to convince them, when it is only for a small number of credits

“We made shorter courses (micro credentials) and completion rates fell dramatically – it’s a different psychology, people see it as professional development then, not a qual that they should finish” (Consultancy)

“The completions (for micro-credentials) have been fine [for us]. Because it is a shorter time, they manage to actually stay on track more. They can’t say ‘but I have till next August’” (Provider)

- While one could argue that if people drop out, it is likely due to the block not providing sufficient value, drop-out may occur not because of less perceived value but because of the perception that shorter training is non-formal and doesn't involve assessment.
- Knock on effects include an impact on funding for the provider and on Education Performance Indicators (EPI) with TEC, and potentially a greater need for pastoral care.
- Moreover, learners who spread their qualification out over a long time, could become tired of studying; or could forget what they had learnt and have to repeat things when they return.

"It could be hard if you leave study for too long, then go back, you might have forgotten things and you'll have to relearn it all" (Learner)

"It would take a long time to finish – I could be studying for 20 years!" (Learner)

While it wasn't mentioned by interviewees, the authors of this report note that the increased enrolments that result from this concept may make up for any increased drop-out, and / or that once these smaller blocks are better understood, and perhaps linked to a recognition framework, it may work well – however, more research would be required to understand this risk and potential mitigations better.

Risk of employer disgruntlement

The last theme was the risk of employer disgruntlement.

- Some employers pay for the employee's learning, or in other cases, they may not pay the fees but for the employee's time to undertake learning
- Already, there appears to possibly be a trend of employers beginning to see training more as the responsibility of the employee than the employer
- However, if the blocks being selected do not relate directly to the employer's bottom line, employers may not see the value of it, and may encourage training even less.

"A business needs to be able to see the value in the programme... [that is, will it] add value to the business. The block may be specific and [that may add] more value." (Youth representative).

"[You have] got to have buy in from the business, otherwise they are just doing it to get the apprenticeship money and they are setting people up to fail" (Provider)

"At the beginning of my career, I had employers who invested in me, but then 5 years ago, they didn't invest in me, I'm not sure, maybe it is because they had gone and gotten their own degrees, so they saw it as the employee's responsibility to go out and get their own learning." (Youth representative)

'Generic and specific blocks' was also received positively

Concept 2 – generic and specific blocks

Description: Some blocks that are kept broad (made from generic skill standards), and others that are specific.

Example: generic block may relate to various primary sectors (such as a block on completing an operational plan). A specific block would be focused on a particular sector, such as kiwifruit.



Some called generic and specific blocks a 'no brainer'...

Most interviewees agreed that a mix of broad and specific blocks would be advantageous to the learners. However, many noted that this depended on the topic and level (more commonality at Level 2, and then back at Level 5 and above).

Learner benefits

This concept had some similar benefits to the previous one. Interviewees noted that benefits for learners included that:

- Learners would be able to work out which industry they liked first, before focusing in on a particular skillset
- Learners would develop a more holistic knowledge of the food and fibre sector that would benefit them long-term.
- Learning would be more interesting and engaging, due to the variety of learning.

"Yes, love it. Some broad, and some specific would be good." (Provider)

"This is a great idea as well. Because you can have an introductory course, that covers a wide range of topics that are high level, then when you know what you want to do, you specialize." (Industry body)

"I don't see what... [anybody could see wrong] with this, if you are a provider, you are there to meet a need, so if this is what learners want, then providers have to deliver it... It's about a learner building their own pathway." (Women's representative)

Aside from this, there was some belief that learners simply benefited from being in a diverse group, as they connected with others they wouldn't normally connect with, and they could feel 'in it together' as a wider sector.

“A few years ago... we tried putting dairy farmers and beef and sheep farmers together on a programme, and we did some research on it, and the women were really clear that they loved it because they learnt from someone else in a slightly different sector. Although, it’s probably because our content is generally broad human skills type thing that can be relevant to multiple sectors” (Provider)

“You could learn off other people from other sectors, learn their perspectives” (Learner)

“I think there is massive opportunity if you have people in a room from different sectors, and they can learn from each other. I’ve learnt so much from interactions with seafood etc.” (Youth representative)

Employer benefits

Aside from this, one benefit for employers would be that learners / workers would be more adaptable and have a broader understanding of their work.

“I think that broader understanding would benefit employers. There is the benefit of enticing people to your sector (of course, there is the risk too of losing them, but that means you just need to do your best to make your industry as attractive as possible)” (Industry body)

“Having worked across a number of sectors in food and fibre [myself], the biggest thing that employers are looking for are adaptability and curiosity.” (Women representative)

Provider benefits

Interestingly, there was one provider benefit. If one sector created a learning methodology / training resources for a broad topic, other sectors could ‘pick it up’ and contextualise it to their own sector (called ‘white labelling’). This would save development time and potentially result in more consistent outcomes across different sectors. For example, a sector could create a ‘block’ on developing an operational plan, in a way that enables other sectors to pick it up and contextualise it.

“It would give an “ability for any provider / workplace to pick up and change to suit their businesses (white label) – making it easy for people to use common base and then adjust to context.” (Provider).

Industry benefits

While most interviewees did not think broader than this, two noted that it could mean that employees learn skills that would be applicable for multiple land uses. For example, if a dairy farm also did a small amount of forestry. This is particularly relevant considering the need to respond to climate change with land diversification.

But again, a few key barriers were noted.

On the other hand, they noted three main barriers.

Barrier of lack of agreement across sectors

The most commonly mentioned, was the challenge of getting sectors to agree on the common topics.

- Interviewees noted that getting agreement from sectors for common skills is very difficult. This has been tried for the NZ Certificate in Horticulture Production – and it has been difficult even in horticulture to get agreement, let alone trying to do it across wider Primary Industry.

“You might think that some things could be mixed, like, a soil class for horticulture and dairy – but we already got complaints from employers saying that the landscapers were doing courses with fruit growers and that they were learning about apples. To add pastoral etc to this, would make things far more difficult”. (Industry body)

- Interestingly, some comments were made that to some extent, the belief that the sectors were too different to have any shared blocks, was about identity or perspective.

“Horticulture are way more focused on their differences than their similarities, to their own detriment.” (Provider)

“Dairy and horticulture are not as different as people like to think. If you compare [them]... then you can see the commonality... People don’t realise that if you ... plonked [a good dairy farmer] onto an orchard, they would already have the skills they needed – with minor changes.” (Youth representative)

Relatedly, there is a barrier of employer buy in. This is because employers do not want to pay if the learning is not relevant to their business, but also, because they may fear losing people to other sectors.

“If their margin is constrained, they’ll want very specific outcomes if they are investing in a learning pathway... They might be thinking, someone has gone off to learn something, I want every dollar I put into you, to go into what you are doing tomorrow, into my business. So, there’s a disconnect between [the learner and the] expectations of the employer” (Women representative)

Aside from this, there was the barrier of how to decide what was in whose mandate. Interviewees noted that industries would need to decide carefully what is in their mandate, because there could be other providers already offering things, or even other WDCs. The problem would be that the broader you go, the more likely you hit the boundaries of sector and WDC. Two interviewees suggested that things should be white labelled if they already exist.

In this case, there seemed to be few unintended consequences.

Moreover, interviewees suggested that learners may leave employers, after finding another sector that suits them better. Also, that if courses would have to be made not too broad, nor too specific.

“You can’t have really specific topics that are compulsory. The compulsory ones must be more about concepts, like permaculture, sustainable practices, not things like riparian, fencing of waterways.” (Provider)

'Blocks' designed for both provider-based and workplace-based settings was supported

Concept 3 – provider and workplace-based settings

Description: Blocks that can be delivered in both workplace-based and provider-based settings, allowing learners to change between them as it suits them.

Example: A learner should be able to begin blocks of a programme on a campus or online if they don't have the option to do it in a workplace (e.g., if they currently don't have a job, are injured or their workplace doesn't have the right set up for training), and complete them in the workplace later if needed, without significant barriers.



Most interviewees weren't familiar with the problem to value the concept

This concept had less feedback from interviewees, which potentially links to fact that few had seen the transition from provider to workplace-based learning to be a problem (as noted in the weak transition section).

However, a small number of benefits were noted...

Nevertheless, those who did have something to say on the concept, noted that learners could choose the best method of learning based on their circumstances – for example, they could learn in the workplace if they had a job, or they could return to the classroom if weather allowed it, they had an injury that prevented work or if their workplaces was not equipped for the training.

“Someone could have an accident, be on ACC for three months, [and] they want to keep learning, but they have to stop [their programme] ... as they aren't working on farm. We would like them in that situation to be able to just go back to the [classroom] environment, so that they can continue learning.” (Provider)

“Depending on the industry, there are seasonal timings. You do have busy periods where you don't have time or energy to do training... [It makes more sense to] study when there is downtime. Maybe in a shutdown – 2-3 weeks, employers could use that to upskill people.” (Youth representative)

...And two barriers were seen.

On the other hand, they noted that barriers included:

- For it to be possible for learners to transition between these settings, each environment needs to be appropriately set up – this means having a mentor/trainer available, the right range of activities / tasks for the learner, and appropriate equipment. In some cases, the workplace does not have all of these.
- Getting a consistent view of “acceptable” across a wide range of employers is already difficult for accredited assessors, as managers are often part of the attestation process. Aligning quality assurance with provider-based settings as well, will make this additionally complex.

Appendix

Methodology

The following excerpt has been taken from the original methodology document.

Research questions

These interviews will be based upon the following research questions:

- What do stakeholders think of the definitions developed within the project so far?
- What do stakeholders think of the problems this project is investigating?
- What benefits do the concepts of flexibility within Muka Tangata's 'New Approach for Learner pathways' provide for different audiences?
- What challenges (unintended consequences, barriers or trade-offs) do the concepts of flexibility within Muka Tangata's 'New Approach for Learner pathways' cause or have for different audiences?
- What examples of pathway excellence exist?
- What could an ideal flexible system look like, considering the benefits and challenges different concepts have?

Proposed approach

Step 1: Conversation starters / context prompts

Before undertaking interviews, we will develop a deeper understanding of the possible characteristics, benefits, unintended consequences and/or trade-offs of flexibility, transferability and modularity to help with interviewee prompting, if required.

Step 2: Interviews with stakeholders

- Identify appropriate stakeholders for a 30-minute online interview via Teams or Zoom as preferred by the interviewee (approx. 20 interviews).

Categories suggested by the steering group include:

- Providers
- Employers
- Industry bodies
- Māori
- Recent graduates
- Workers who have recently transitioned from one sector to another
- Women.

In all cases, interviewees should:

- Be employed or studying within the food and fibre sector
- Have rich opinions on the topic
- Not be the 'usual suspects' (i.e., they should not be persons who are frequently invited to participate in similar research).

We note that a number of categories will likely overlap, e.g., someone could be an employer, and also identify as Māori; someone could be an Industry body and also represent women.

Interviewees will be found first through the steering group, then through snowballing.

In cases where interviewees do not have a vested interest in the topic of these interviews (particularly, employers, graduates and workers who have recently transitioned between sectors), we will offer a \$50 voucher as payment as a token of appreciation.

- Confirm interviewee list with the Steering Committee, seeking introductions as appropriate.
- Interviewees will be emailed a request for a meeting alongside an information sheet and consent form.
- Conduct interviews online late-Feb/early-March, recording interviews where permission is given. Interviews will be conducted by Phoebe and Kathryn, some jointly and others individually to meet the timeline.

Step 3: Write up findings

- Develop a spreadsheet of findings
- Refine lists used as context prompts based on findings
- Depending on findings, we may undertake further analysis, for example:
 - Prioritise the characteristics based on factors such as:
 - How preferred were these in interviews, and by whom? (learners, employers and/or providers)?
 - Prioritise the barrier, consequence and trade-offs to solve based on factors such as:
 - How likely is it to and how much will it prevent flexibility/transferability?
 - How difficult would it be to solve and what mandate/influence is there to solve it?
- Also depending on findings, we may be able to draft solution concept(s)
- Write up findings for approval by Steering Committee by end of March 2023

A future project

Depending on findings, a future project could undertake activities such as:

- Develop solution concepts based on previous interview findings

- Create selection criteria for further interviews or a conjoint survey with learners, with a focus on interviewing people who have a desire to or have undertaken transitions identified as ‘weak’ (e.g., school to sector, and sector to sector, etc), and on underserved learners
- Conduct research (e.g., interviews or conjoint survey) to identify whether stakeholders would choose these solutions given any consequences, barriers and/or trade-offs
- Decide where/when these concepts would be beneficial and where they wouldn’t (e.g., particular sectors, levels, topics, etc).

Interview guide

Introduction

Introductions / mihi and thank you.

Background of project and purpose of interview.

Reminder of information and consent sheet.

Permission to record, for notetaking purposes.

[Begin recording]

Main questions

Question
<p>RQ: What do stakeholders think of the definitions developed within the project so far?</p> <p>As mentioned, so far in the project, we have developed a few definitions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first is the definition of pathway: “The sequence of work and education, and the transitions between these, that a person undertakes to achieve a learning or employment outcome.” (show image) <p>Any thoughts on this?</p> <p>We then looked at what made a pathway excellent, and divided it into three characteristics (show image):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility – this is when someone can move along a pathway in the way that meets their needs and preferences. When it is excellent... • Visible – this is when someone can access the information they need. When it is excellent... • Robust – this is when a pathway is built carefully, from strong principles, and is long-lasting through changing times. When it is excellent... <p>Any thoughts on these three?</p>
<p>RQ: What do stakeholders think of the problems this project is investigating?</p> <p>Since making these definitions we have more focused on flexibility in particular.</p> <p>Two problems we are seeing with flexibility are that people can’t transition easily between (show image):</p>

- Sectors within food and fibre
- Provider-based learning and workplace-based learning.

Do you see these as problems and if so, for whom?

RQ: What benefits and challenges (barriers, unintended consequences, trade-offs) do the concepts of flexibility within the 'New Approach for Learner pathways' provide for different audiences?

There are some design concepts within Muka Tangata's 'New approach to learner pathways'. We would love to ask you what benefits, barriers, or unintended consequences you see in them.

Modules that can be interchanged

Starting with the first one (modules that can be interchanged relatively easily that act as building blocks, are customisable and stackable).

- What would the benefits be, for different audiences?
- What do you think the barriers might be for different audiences?
- What do you think the unintended consequences might be for different audiences?

Modules that focus on either transferrable or specific sector skills

Next thinking about modules that can be made specific or kept broad (including transferable topics that are relevant to many sectors, and some that are sector specific).

- What would the benefits be, for different audiences?
- What do you think the barriers might be for different audiences?
- What do you think the unintended consequences might be for different audiences?

Modules that can be delivered in workplace and provider-based settings

Finally, there is the idea that blocks should be designed in a way that allows them to be provided in the provider-based setting, but then also in a workplace setting if someone gets a job.

- What would the benefits be, for different audiences?
- What do you think the barriers might be for different audiences?
- What do you think the unintended consequences might be for different audiences?

RQ: What examples of pathway excellence exist?

Have you seen any examples of any of these concepts working well?

If so, why did this work well?

RQ: What could an ideal flexible system look like, considering the benefits and challenges different concepts have?

What could an ideal flexible system look like, considering the benefits and challenges different concepts have?

Closing

Thank you.

Check if they have any additional comments or questions, and if they would like to receive a summary of findings from this research.

Considerations and clarifications

Some interviewees noted things that weren't benefits, barriers or unintended consequences. This section lists these per concept.

Interchangeable building blocks

A few other comments included that:

- Clarifications were needed from Muka Tangata - Would the intention be that people can do courses with different providers and 'patch' these together? Do they need to be credentialled, registered?
- Learners could potentially be a part of suggesting modules, considering that it is their future.
- Courses would still need to be contextualized, must be able to 'zoom into and out of the detail'.
- Care would need to be taken to be inclusive with what you decide is mandatory. An interviewee noted that this requires us to ask what counts as knowledge / what counts as relevant.
- Communication on what blocks are compulsory and which are elective needs to be clear to both employees and employers.
- Credits would need to be a lot smaller, or possibly have a range, to avoid lengthening courses unnecessarily.
- Care would be needed to prevent something things into qualifications unnecessarily, as not everyone wants one.
- Efforts should be used to have more coordination and prevent the proliferation of blocks, not rewrite existing ones.

Generic and specific blocks

A few other comments included that:

- Block should start by teaching specific things, then go broad, before returning to being narrow again (Like a diamond).
- Block should also be joining employers and employees together, not just different sectors.
- Provider and workplace need to be able to pick up the block up and contextualise it.

Provider based and workplace-based blocks

There was no other significant feedback on this topic.