



Secondary School Pathways and Transitions to VET and Employment

Phase 2: Policy Review

PREPARED FOR: Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence

PREPARED BY: Josh Williams
Arthur Graves

DATE: 10 October 2024



Introduction

The Secondary School Pathways and Transitions to VET and Employment Project was commissioned by Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (Food and Fibre CoVE) to understand and seek evidence of the effectiveness of the ‘ecosystem’ between secondary school and the food and fibre sector.

An [interim report](#) incorporating the results of the data enquiry was published in March 2024. It found significant evidence of effectiveness of secondary-tertiary interface programmes, particularly Trades Academies. It found that young people completing a food and fibre secondary-tertiary programme were more likely to enter the food and fibre industry, more likely to stay in the industry, and to earn higher incomes over time.

This report provides the second part of the research programme: an environmental scan policy analysis of the current school to industry interface. In other words, we are interested in system-level enablers and constraints that make up the stewardship and operating environment of the school to work ecosystem¹.

A good deal of this report is based on the observations and stakeholder engagement in our first phase, including what we have seen and heard, as well as international comparisons.

We are purposefully focussed on how the school to work ecosystem operates regarding the food and fibre sector, however, given this is a system-level look, we consider that much of what we have observed and learned can be applied to other industries, or pan-industry.

There are also two sides to the school-to-work story. For an effective ecosystem between school and work, schools, tertiary providers, and workplaces need to be active participants and collaborators.

It can be tempting to ‘blame’ schools for perceived or real shortcomings in new entrants to industries. But if there are shortcomings, it is equally unreasonable to expect schools to address these on their own. Achieving a true school to work ecosystem with an effective interface, will require active participation and true collaboration between industry and education – spoiler alert: we think a new and shared industry-education engagement framework should be developed to support that.

This report also provides recommendations around actions employers can take as part of a shared project to support young people to make successful transitions to work.

Ultimately, our research has convinced us that the final three years of school should be primarily conceived of as a supportive and structured interface – not a handover, and in terms

¹ Also known as the secondary-tertiary, education to employment interface.

of ‘transition’, the desired outcome is a managed and supported process. This places equal if not greater onus on employers and industries to communicate, demonstrate, and participate as active partners with our secondary schools.

The final phase of our work will take a future-focussed look, including several case studies. These will set out where we see practices and models that demonstrate an ecosystem approach in practice – efforts and initiatives that show promise, and where both education and industry stakeholders have reframed their approach to the post-compulsory phase of secondary education. Unfortunately, we have also found that these are pockets of innovation, rather than default behaviour, or a strategic response.

We are also disappointed to report that there remains a thoroughly misguided stigma associated with employment-facing opportunities or pathways, in terms of which students such pathways are designed for, or suited for. The conscious or unconscious realisation that all senior students are on a pathway to the workforce is somewhat evident, but a strategic or curriculum-led response to that realisation is much less evident.

Current Policy Landscape

As outlined in our earlier report, New Zealand maintains a suite of different initiatives to support young people to undertake alternative learning options while enrolled in school.

Beginning in 2010, these schemes have been assembled under the ‘Youth Guarantee’² umbrella – but in fact have separate histories, and policy intentions underpinning them. As such, the co-ordination of these programmes under a policy umbrella was an attempt to:

- improve coherence between different interface opportunities and permutations of vocationally-oriented programmes;
- align the intentions of all such programme to provide coherent learning with respect to vocational pathways;
- achievement of purposeful and relevant NCEA qualifications, particularly Level 2, the subject of one of the government’s ‘Better Public Services’ targets.

This harmonisation involved rebranding and reviewing older programmes, such as STAR and Gateway, and aligning requirements in and between interface programmes, - such as requiring interface programmes to achieve 20 credits aligned with one or more vocational pathways.

² Youth Guarantee also includes a ‘fees free’ foundational education scheme also referred to as ‘Youth Guarantee’ (YG), with an associated fund administered by the TEC. YG provides opportunities for young people to gain Level 2 qualifications that have not previously attained them. However, this scheme offers foundational education to young people that have already left school, and as such is not a school-to-work initiative.

Programme	Established	Description	Government Spend	Agency
STAR: (Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resource)	2001 (Reviewed 2015)	Largely untagged funding to purchase tertiary education programmes. VP alignment encouraged but not compulsory.	Top-up to roll-based school operations grants. Approximately \$35m per annum.	MoE
Gateway	2001 (Reviewed 2015)	Funded places to support work experience including assessment for NZQA credits	\$25m	TEC
STP (Trades Academies)	2012	Per-place funding to support learners undertaking dual learning programmes in school and tertiary environments.	\$101m	MoE

Youth Guarantee was certainly an attempt to broaden the range of ways and places that young people could experience the senior phase of secondary school, as well as consolidate these alternative programmes within a more coherent framework of sector-based pathways. However, limitations on student places and eligibility for the schemes, and words like “vocational”, and even “youth” can collide with mindsets and perceptions that such opportunities are ‘alternative’ in a pejorative sense.

It is also absolutely the case that YG opportunities were advertised to engage learners that might otherwise be disengaging with learning opportunities they would perceive as relevant. Equally, it was stressed that all students nearing the end of the schooling chapter of their life were looking for purpose, relevance, and quality guidance in terms of their next steps. There

was therefore an attempt to closely connect between the secondary-tertiary programmes policy, and work on careers information advice and guidance, particularly through development of the Vocational Pathways framework and associated resources.

There are three main issues as we see it: a lack of strategic coherence and perceptiveness, leading to what we perceive to be a ‘clutter of schemes’, and the ‘tack-on syndrome’ as the operational result and symptoms.

1: The lack of strategic coherence and perceptiveness

System leadership, schools and tertiary providers are often constrained by accepted customs and norms regarding academic value, assumed operational constraints, and understandings about what are the outcomes they should be delivering. This can often lead to default operational behaviours connected to funding opportunities or lack of them, and/or “extemporaneous” and “as necessary” decision-making. The impact of system stewardship – led and guided by government policies and agencies - is also an important factor in the level of strategic capability.

2: The clutter of schemes

The prevalence of differently named transition initiatives, with different eligibilities and entitlements, is a legacy of reinventing the wheel, Minister by Minister, and government by successive government. All such initiatives, one way or another, involve a learner still enrolled at school, but doing something else somewhere else for some or a lot of their time.

You don’t really need a scheme for that. This doesn’t require - and does not benefit from - a specially named initiative with limited places, some new permutation of eligibility and entitlements. This mostly serves to create a new set of constraints, a new set of outliers, and a new set of compliance costs.

Instead, we simply require flexibility and discretion in resourcing, and effective partnerships between schools and their neighbouring tertiary providers and their local employers.

The great news is we think that can all be achieved within the existing Legislative framework since the 2010 Amendments to the Education and Training Act (2020) which enabled secondary-tertiary programmes (STPs), so young people can be dual enrolled in approved programmes, involving a lead provider and partner providers. To date, this very enabling legislation has been limited to the approval of 14 official ‘Trades Academies’, and an associated fund in Vote Education that currently supports just 10,500 (6%) of students to participate.

In practice, without changing a word of the legislation, all secondary schools could opt to have a cohort of their senior students funded as STP students and supported to undertake a programme involving school-based and tertiary components.

“They are about to step into the big wide world: we should probably show it to them”

- School Careers Practitioner

Remember, once aged 16, young New Zealanders are legally allowed to leave school completely. They are also legally able to be employed in paid work. Conceptually, therefore, we can reframe the senior phase of secondary school as an ecosystem designed to create an effective interface between secondary school and next steps settings such as tertiary education and employment. Dual enrolment should therefore be considered a live option and opportunity for every student. Effectively, we would like to see senior phase students, by default, engaged in a well-structured and progression to their potential next step, involving that next step, whatever that is.

In the meantime, the system clutter fragments resources, and increases the compliance and transaction costs faced by schools, especially its careers advisor, pathways co-ordinator, Head of Careers, or Gateway co-ordinator. As often as not, all those jobs seem to belong to one human being trying to be and do all of those things. That person is attempting to co-ordinate limited budgets, multiple funding streams, relationships with multiple agencies, and programmes replete with different eligibility and entitlements, and trying to make it all work in the interest of the students.

A few such folks have self-described to us as feeling they have limited influence over school management, or 'mainstream' curriculum development in the schools. Their day-to-day seemed to them to be about trying to find options for young people who have been 'sent' to them because they are at risk of disengaging or alienation.

2: The 'tack-on' syndrome.

Strongly related to the above, and insidious in several ways, is the notion that interface schemes are separate from mainstream school and/or curriculum frameworks and delivery. In short, the interface programme is seen as separate, or on top of a learning programme. Or, even worse, the interface scheme is seen as an 'alternative' option to a 'normal' learning programme.

This occurs both at a scheme-by-scheme level, and a within-scheme level. For example, in the case of Gateway, we have heard about students being required to undertake their work placements on weekends or during school holidays, so it does not interfere with their schoolwork. Far too often we have heard they are required to catch up on schoolwork missed while on Gateway.

Gateway *is* their schoolwork, but not always adjudged as such. The work experience is part of their overall learning programme – it should not be treated as not an add on or on top of an existing student workload. Ideally, it should be seen as integral to that learner's learning plan, and complementary to and part of their wider learning programme.

At the scheme level, as above, the creation of a number of limited-place initiatives also reinforces the notion that these schemes are 'alternative' options designed for 'non-academic' students. While, in one sense this may be true, the language is unhelpful and diminishing of highly valuable learning, a totally inaccurate value judgement. Again, we feel this could be solved at a stroke by simply reframing the entirety of senior secondary school as an interface experience.

In such a structured interface, some students, potentially one-third, would undertake a suite of mainstream subjects drawn from academic disciplines, as part of a well-supported and assumed progression to university.

But for the other seventy percent, structured interface arrangements should be a default opportunity in the senior phase of secondary school, not a special or separate programme that a limited number of students may benefit from.

At present, the systemic pieces with around 10,500 students in formal STP programmes and 31% of students progressing to degree-level programmes serve less than 40% of senior secondary students. This means that potentially there is up to 60% or greater who do not have access to a structured interface with pathways and relevant curriculum choices.

In the following sections, based on our round of system level stakeholder engagement and related developments, we will look at the current state of play, as far as we are able to ascertain that. It is fair to say that in recent years, the direction and timeframes applying to Curriculum and NCEA reviews have become clouded and controversial.

Firstly though, it is instructive to look further afield at what a few other countries are up to.

International Comparisons

Australia

The Australian Government supports and encourages schools to implement career education and vocational education in secondary schools.

The 'Preparing Secondary Students for Work' programme (2014) replaced an earlier 'VET in Schools' framework that had been in place since 2001. The 2014 Framework sets out how vocational education opportunities can be integrated as part of secondary schooling – through collaboration between school, vocational providers and employers. These programmes enable access to vocational education programmes aligned with the post-school vocational education sector. The Framework is aimed primarily at designers of programmes to implement VET for delivery in schools or through other work experience opportunities.

In Australia, as in New Zealand, the vocational sector itself uses a range of different terminology and training concepts - within the Australian Federal system, Vocational Education is a State level responsibility, meaning practices in Australia vary from State to State. So, a deliberate goal of the Australian Framework has been to ensure there is seamlessness and articulation between the Vocational learning undertaken as part of secondary education and the 'real' VET they might experience post-school, as part of the main VET system.

Australian School-based Apprenticeships

Perhaps the most well-known vocational integration programme in Australia are the Australian School-based Apprenticeships (ASbAs) for which each State has set up a version, to match up with the requirements of their wider VET sectors.

In an ASbA, a young person undertakes paid work as part of an apprenticeship programme, generally for 1 – 2 days per week, and the rest of their time is spent at school. When the student leaves school, they have the opportunity to continue and complete their apprenticeship in full-time employment. State and Federal governments subsidise the apprenticeship components which helps offset employer costs. Positions are limited by employer opportunities, so competition for places can be high.

While we heard about logistical challenges with the on-the-ground scheduling and co-ordination between schools and employers, in general, schools and government agencies are supportive of the ASbAs for supporting students' careers prospects and skills development, including employability.

New Zealand has no equivalent school-based apprenticeships programme. The closest work experience scheme – Gateway – specifically prohibits students being paid – more on that later.

Canada

Canada, both nationally and across its provinces, employs the concept of 'Co-operative education' – most often shortened to 'Co-op', to refer to programmes involving co-operation between secondary and post-secondary education providers and employers and industries.

Like the ASbAs, the workplace components can include paid opportunities – this earn and learn opportunity is advertised as a feature of the system, and is particularly attractive to students.

Dual Credit programmes:

Tertiary programmes and qualifications can be delivered in senior secondary schools in Canada through the Dual Credit programmes through partnerships between secondary schools and post-secondary institutions, such as colleges and universities.

These programmes allow senior secondary school students, typically in Grade 11 and 12, to take post-secondary college and university courses and earn credits that count towards both their high school diploma and post-secondary credential.

These courses are often taught by college instructors.

United Kingdom

The Gatsby Benchmarks are a set of eight guidelines for schools to deliver good careers guidance. These include integrating careers education into curriculum and providing encounters with employers and workplaces. While implementation varies, these benchmarks have generally led to improved careers provision in schools.

Work experience programmes have evolved over time. Previously, schools were required to provide statutory work experience, and many still to, but this is no longer stipulated.

Innovative approaches in the UK include "teacher externships" where teachers spend time in industry to bring real-world context back to the classroom. Some schools, like School 21 in

London, have students work on real projects with businesses for half a day each week as part of their curriculum.

University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and studio schools are specialised institutions that teach the curriculum through the lens of industry sectors, providing a more applied and contextualised learning experience.

'T' Levels were introduced as an alternative to 'A' Levels as part of the secondary school qualifications system, aiming to provide parity between academic and vocational routes. However, these have faced challenges in implementation, particularly around securing enough work placements.

The Careers and Enterprise Company, a government-funded but arm's length organisation, supports careers education through regional hubs that provide resources and broker connections between schools and businesses. There is also a growing focus on developing broader measures of student achievement beyond exam results, including destination data that tracks outcomes up to 10 years after leaving school and efforts to create more comprehensive learner profiles.

Analysis of Current Initiatives

As our interim report showed, the Youth Guarantee suite of programmes reflects the government's major policies and associated investments to support young people to experience vocationally-oriented learning while still enrolled in school. The government is spending approximately \$150 million per annum across these initiatives.

Trades Academies and Secondary-Tertiary Programmes (STPs)

Trades Academies, as an overall initiative, have been formally evaluated once by the Education Review Office (ERO) in 2015. Student achievement and outcomes from Youth Guarantee fees-free and Trades Academies were also the subject of Ministry of Education quantitative analyses between 2014 and 2018, when they summarily stopped.

The ERO evaluation was very positive, particularly in terms of reporting strong improvements in student engagement – Trades Academy students reported more enjoyment and engagement of school (or at least what they – and their school - perceived the 'trades academy' component of school). The MoE quantitative analyses consistently showed a significant positive size effect for student achievement.

These evaluations are becoming outdated, and, other than our earlier interim report and data enquiry, we find no other reports that quantify Trades Academy effectiveness for Food and Fibre, or any other sector for that matter. Looking back at the ERO evaluation, conducted in respect of what was then a relatively incipient initiative, it correctly identified the risk of Trades Academy programmes being seen as a 'tack-on' – and as years went by, the lack of

complementarity or integration between the school-based and tertiary-based components of the learner's overall programme would improve. Unfortunately, our admittedly unscientific polling on this suggests that the level of integration between the school and tertiary components of Trades Academy remains low, and the concurrent decline in VP awards, as a proxy for coherent NCEA achievement, is also suggestive of this.

“Trades Academy” – in the minds of students and sometimes their schools, referred to going to the local Polytechnic on Friday, not as part of the overall learning experience. The teaching, learning and assessment delivered, Monday to Friday, across the secondary *and* tertiary components of the STP were considered an extra rather than a coherent teaching and learning programme. The Vocational Pathways, which were designed to help guide that coherence, were only very recently published when ERO undertook its review.

Trades Academies – both as a brand, and the scale of the officially recognised STPs, have grown and gained significant traction. ‘Trades Academy’ is a line item in the Government Budget, and in 2024 Trades Academies funding achieved a milestone when it exceeded \$100m per year. Interestingly however, no new Trades Academies (in terms of lead providers and provider groups) have been approved since 2012, with a minor exception in 2021 when the group of former Polytechnic lead providers were combined as a single lead provider under Te Pūkenga, as part of Reforms of Vocational Education (RoVE), currently under active abandonment by the current Coalition Government.

The wider issues with the previous Government's Reform of Vocational Education are not part of our scope, though in our interviews we certainly heard that the Te Pūkenga era has not been helpful. However, as with Te Pūkenga overall, there was significant disruption, followed by delay in ascertaining an operating model, and unclear delegations and authorising environment.

Some of these providers reported to us that their budgets were cut, and their innovations put on hold, while the system sorted itself out. Schools too told us that while on-the-ground relationships with Trades Academies continued unabated, there was lack of clarity and confusion about where various responsibilities lay and where the system was going.

In terms of resourcing, we were also surprised to learn of a puzzling duplication in capital expenditure. Some large secondary schools have invested in new or upgraded facilities, operations and equipment that compares favourably with the facilities available at struggling polytechnics. This reflects the point about strategic coherence at system stewardship level made above.

Our data enquiry

Our 2023 data enquiry showed – at least with respect to Food and Fibre-related Trades Academy programmes - that completing a Trades Academy programme significantly improved a learners chances of entering the Food and Fibre industry (from 18 percent to 60 percent), staying in the industry (46 percent remaining three or more years, compared with 21 percent), enrolling in further food and fibre tertiary education (22 percent for Trades Academy students

compared with 4 percent of all students) and earnings (average income \$33,249 after three years compared with \$23,670).

Overall, Trades Academies have grown significantly since ERO's review, the number of available places has more than doubled to over 10,500, and longitudinal information would now be available to quantify the benefits of participating in and completing these programmes, beyond students' self-reported engagement levels.

For perspective though, 10,500 students represents just 6 percent of the Year 11 to 13 cohort in 2023. If these programmes work, why are these opportunities only available to very few?

To confirm these findings - and simply for good practice - we strongly recommend that the Government undertakes a formal evaluation of Trades Academies (and other interface programmes), to build evidence and develop advice to Government on effective and coherent investments in school to work pathways within a structured secondary-tertiary, education to employment interface.

Vocational Pathways

The chronology and strategic intent of the Vocational Pathways (VPs) framework was canvassed in detail in our interim report. For our purpose here, we will focus on the potential – mostly unmet – for the VPs to provide a core organising framework to underpin curriculum and assessment design and delivery, fulfilling the original promise of NCEA as a 'multiple pathways' qualification, providing flexibility across the curriculum and support for applied learning.

Through both their development and implementation, but also for pragmatic reasons, the VPs put the cart before the horse: retrospectively filtering NCEA assessment to paint a picture of future study and career possibilities. This is certainly valuable in its own right; however, as a guiding and organising framework, Vocational Pathways have far greater potential much earlier in the planning process – for both students, educators, and schools.

Through setting out which credits are valued for which sectors, VPs can inform subject selection by students, but more fundamentally, can guide the in-school design of curriculum 'packages': coherent learning programmes drawing from a range of curriculum learning areas and assessing against achievement standards drawn from a number of subject areas.

At one end of the spectrum this can support 'magnet school'³ concepts – Food and Fibre for example – where the geographic or community context suggests a school could deliver a well-rounded curriculum to learners through the context of the Food and Fibre sector. Local employment opportunities and the regional economy make that both possible and sensible – remembering that what the learner is seeking is purpose and relevance to their future and wider life.

More commonly however, we see strong opportunities for 'pathways' to be offered concurrently with and like 'subjects', as a core delivery mode within a secondary school. Many

³ A 'magnet school' refers to a school that adopts a specialised curriculum, often focussing on certain subjects, e.g. STEM, in order to attract learners based on strengths, interests, and learner diversity.

learners will undertake a suite of ‘pick six subjects’, perhaps because their post-school intention is to enrol full time in a tertiary institution. Another student might elect to follow a ‘pathway’ programme – reflecting a mix of curriculum and assessment that align with one or more pathway and delivered via contextualised or project-based learning.

Yet another possibility is to pick a blend of subjects that contribute with knowledge, understandings and skills relevant to a pathway to a particular destination in further education or on-job training, and plan for optimal benefit from the relevant elements and credits.

We are aware of several schools that are innovating in the ways described above – and referred to by officials and others as ‘pockets of innovation’, ‘early adopters’, and ‘progressive schools’. These schools are offering parallel programmes and timetables, including significant in-school vocational education options, in collaboration with other education and industry partners.

Conceptually, this reframes the entire student body in Year 12 to 13 as young people exploring possibilities and following different pathways. Some focus on one or more pathways, and for as many as possible, a soft-launch into their next steps into study and/or work through exposure and experience is ideal.

However, according to a number of system and practitioner level leaders these practices are not considered to be widespread, despite the inclusion of work-integrated learning in the National Education and Learning Priorities (NELP) that schools are currently required to give effect to.

Our engagement with careers practitioners and school relationship managers suggested that the inclusion of work-integrated learning in the NELP was helpful to the extent it provided “something with official mandate we could point to” to increase the attention of school management on careers and transitions issues. However, many stakeholders agreed the most common staffroom or School Board reaction to this worthy addition to the NELP was “we’re already doing it”. In the context of a barrage of curriculum and assessment reform, and significant contemporaneous challenges of ‘pivoting’ to Covid-related challenges to schools in terms of delivery and attendance, this particular Ministry missive was a strong contender for the back-burner, especially when most secondary schools could point to existing engagement with the likes of STAR and Gateway. Box ticked, as it were.

In the final phase of this research programme – future focussed research, we intend to provide some detailed case studies of truly integrated delivery, involving programme and timetabling innovations.

Gateway

According to the TEC, approximately 9,000 students undertake Gateway placements each year, a bit lower now than the number of learners involved in Trades Academy (10,500). We are aware too, of hybrid delivery approaches, for example, a programme in which students are with an employer as a Gateway placement for two days a week, and on three days a week with a tertiary provider, on a Trades Academy programme.

Gateway is one of the oldest interface programmes, and the best known by employers, as a result of that longevity, and especially as Gateway directly involves employers and offers formal assessment opportunity for students through workplaces.

As a scheme, Gateway was also reviewed as part of the bringing together of such initiatives under the wider Youth Guarantee. As such, it requires programmes to deliver 20 credits and align with vocational pathways. As those 20 credits are gained through the workplace⁴, they tend to be ‘sector related’ unit standards maintained by workforce development councils and associated with foundation level industry training.

As such, it supports students to gain experience as well as credits. The assessment is normally designed to support the learner to achieve vocational pathways awards, the 20 credits contribute to NCEA as well as provide a head-start on industry related learning qualifications.

The programme is popular with participating employers, as an opportunity to meet young people and potentially find their next hire, or apprentice. The workplace-based nature of Gateway also develops wider employability skills, by providing young people opportunities to learn about employer and workplace expectations and behaviours which help develop core capabilities and transferable skills.

In distinction to the other interface schemes, Gateway is administered by the Tertiary Education Commission, rather than the Ministry of Education. The reasons for this are historical, as Gateway was associated with the achievement of industry standards, which TEC subsidised as part of the tertiary education system.

However, it also makes things clunky. In order to fund things correctly, TEC treats schools as Tertiary Education Organisations, and schools are required to bid through a semi-competitive process to gain student places. This requires schools (or at least their careers person or department) to deal with another government agency with separate requirements, increasing their administrative costs, transaction costs, and compliance responsibilities.

Current Gateway funding rules are also constraining in at least two specific ways: firstly, young people are prohibited from being paid while on Gateway and secondly, the move by TEC to prohibit the achievement of micro-credentials.

The first funding rule constraint may suit employers, and voluntary arrangements in Gateway would certainly be acceptable, while we see no in-principle reason why a learner should not be paid while on an employer placement – likely on the starting out or training wage. The

⁴ We have seen no evidence of misrepresentation, but through this work (and over the years) there are certainly murmurs out there that not all the credits achieved or reported as part of Gateway programmes arise via the work experience component. We go no further with that, except to suggest that more broadly across the set of interface schemes, there needs to be both flexibility and accountability for what and where and how students learn – our recommendations reflect this.

learner is legally of an age where they can take on part time work, or full-time employment if they left school.

The policy around payment of learners in on-job experience arrangements should be reviewed and strongly reconsidered. For example, we heard about Trades Academy students also working supermarket checkouts and security, because they want to work and earn money, and/or their family may need them to.

In one easy step, allowing students to be paid on Gateway could convert it into an Australian-style School-based Apprenticeship, improving the articulation between Gateway as a supplementary and/or transitional programme to a vocational or professional pathway and career. It would also fit well into a structured interface.

A second constraint, currently (July 2024) being consulted by TEC, is to prohibit the achievement of micro-credentials through Gateway. We have not been able to ascertain the policy rationale for this prohibition. Micro-credentials are credit based, and registered on the New Zealand Qualifications and Credential Framework (NZQCF), and as such can contribute to the achievement of NCEA.

This being the case, we see no good reason for this and have argued elsewhere that we believe micro-credentials in fact offer enormous potential as a ‘shared credential’ between the secondary and tertiary education systems, that can be offered through and in-between schools, tertiary providers and workplaces, and form a genuine bridge between secondary and post-secondary education.

STAR

“STAR should be a real taster – not just credit farming”

– Polytechnic Careers rep

As noted earlier, STAR is provided to schools as a top-up on their overall staffing entitlements, and provides precious scarce untagged funding to purchase offerings the school can’t offer itself. As such, STAR is seen as valuable discretionary funding that schools can use, relatively autonomously, to find engaging alternative pathways for their students – usually as an extension or add-on to their main programme of learning.

However, the lack of guardrails also leads some to suspect the funding is being directed more to bolstering NCEA pass rates – through ‘credit farming’, as opposed to supporting learners to pursue particular pathways. While schools are encouraged to direct the use of STAR funding towards (and aligned with) Vocational Pathways, this is not compulsory or monitored in any way.

Schools we have spoken to suggest this is not the case, and STAR is used in a ‘horses for courses’, and learner-centred way. The lack of alignment with STP and Gateway programmes further reinforces the “lack of strategic coherence and perceptiveness” point. Therefore, we recommend STAR be included in a wider evaluation of the range of interface programmes and

how to make best use of the resources. The lack of transparent or centralised information about the use of, and outcomes from STAR funding makes it potentially a more difficult one to grapple with but underlines the need for a more strategic approach to maximising the impact of the resource at the interface.

Every student is a STAR

In respect of our core recommendation for resourcing senior secondary students with an interface structure that is based around a STP model (on an opt-in basis) - use the successful features of Trades Academies, dual enrolment programmes, STAR and Gateway, i.e., a hybrid delivery model which gives structure and flexibility and can be integrated into a pathways framework or a traditional curriculum framework.

An example might be: the Ministry could communicate and administer this “hybrid” to allow the flexibility of “STAR-ised funding settings to be used for a cohort of their senior students, with appropriate guardrails, to provide for the purchase and/or delivery of a wider range of school-based programmes, or permutations of secondary-tertiary programmes as appropriate.

Wider Educational Issues

“Some of the kids coming through here in the last year or so have clearly missed a sh*tload of school”

- Trades Academy rep.

Our stakeholder engagement certainly confirmed many learners are benefitting from interface programmes – and many learners were reporting this was keeping them from disengaging from school. However, our discussions with STP and Youth Guarantee providers also confirmed worrying trends concerning young people’s basic skills and competencies, including literacy and numeracy.

Some put it down to the Covid period – the senior secondary students coming into the programmes has suffered significant disruption during a critical period of their schooling and were lacking ‘the basics’. For some Trades Academy providers, that meant they were needing to pick up that slack and were spending more time addressing literacy and numeracy deficits, learning difficulties, and core employability competencies as opposed to practical training.

In-school Food and Fibre-related provision

Following publication of our interim data enquiry report, it was pointed out to us that our research scope to look at the secondary-tertiary interface programmes did not include mainstream in-school unit-standards based programmes in schools, such as the extensive use of Primary ITO’s units by secondary school students, or notable Food and Fibre-related programmes such as Agribusiness in Schools. Over this time Agribusiness has expanded its range of programmes and offerings, including Level 2 and 3 achievement standards-based courses through NCEA achievement standard review development. Programmes such as this are providing important industry exposure and a pathway to higher education, as well as Food

and Fibre related and contextualised ways to achieve secondary qualifications. We understand that this area is the subject of further research commissioned by Food and Fibre CoVE.

These programmes also remind us that there has been significant and extensive use of ITO (now Workforce Development Council) unit standards for courses delivered by schools. Indeed, an Industry Training Federation analysis of the scale and breadth of this achievement was the spark that led to the Vocational Pathways Framework, because of a desire to ensure such delivery was coherent, safe, and to bring together curriculum-related and industry-related learning.

We have advised Food and Fibre CoVE that we believe this area could support its own research or evaluative effort, but equally that we believe the recommendations we are making with respect to the overall secondary-transitions area would benefit programmes like Agribusiness in Schools.

Employers and Industry

We've read and thought a lot about the education system and what it should and shouldn't do. But if there is to be a truly effective eco-system between education and industry, industry needs to change up as well. It is easy – and even explicable – why busy industries and employers externalise issues around education and training – training takes time and money, so if someone else can do it, then great.

Employer dissatisfaction with school leavers is literally as old as Socrates and has been called 'the long moan of history'⁵. Unfortunately, moaning doesn't work, and if industries really do want to attract the next generation of the best and brightest, they must be proactive across the education system as well as active in the upskilling process.

There are a range of practical suggestions for how individual employers can engage locally with schools – from opening up their doors for young people to see and experience workplaces; participating in careers expos and employer 'speed meets'; offering Gateway placements; to fully partnering with a school to deliver an industry-based programme.

What employers shouldn't do is wait for the day when schools suddenly 'get it right', whereby any young person can walk into any role in any firm in any industry and know what to do, or even know what the expectations are. As Employability Theorist Mandy McGirr has shown, employability skills are contextual and behavioural in nature, demonstrated through workplace performance rather than easily taught or assessed in classroom settings.

To illustrate, a lot of employers quickly cite "turn up on time", as a desirable attribute of younger recruits, and wonders why this is not being taught at school.

Well, certainly the importance of turning up on time for work can be explained to young people in schools, but we wonder which academic subject covers that. As an applied skill, turning up

⁵ Cf Glenn Rikowski, 2000 and 2006.

on time for class is also fairly well encouraged as a practice within secondary school, and failure to do so may have consequences, however the expectations and importance of turning up on time at a workplace are best developed – and only demonstrated – in a workplace.

Again, our final phase, and future-focussed research report will provide specific examples of some of these. There have also been encouraging signals through the recent NCEA review that the Ministry of Education is keen to ensure that industry contexts and skill needs are being considered as part of the refreshing process for assessment standards.

In the meantime, the current state analysis goes to two of our recommendations: a new and shared framework at the interface for industry-education engagement should be developed, with both industry AND education as primary audiences. The education system leaders could offer practical, step-by-step guidance and support about how schools, tertiary and training providers, and employers can jointly establish and operate learning arrangements. Also needed are the range of policy and resourcing that can enable this.

Related to this, we advocate for WDCs or their successors to develop specific school-facing ‘pathway micro-credentials’ and other new products, which are flexible in terms of possible school-tertiary-industry arrangements, but also ‘paint by numbers’ in terms of what is required to deliver the programme, who needs to be involved, the commitments and responsibilities of each party, and what happens on the programme from Monday to Friday.

In our stakeholder engagement, validating our own experience, we strongly believe that the employer and industry-facing effort has not been effectively managed by the education system. Equally, sometimes privately, we hear industry associations lament that they perceive a gap in terms of the visibility of their related occupations and careers: they know that there would be talented young people out there interested in their industry if only it were brought to their attention positively. They know that the breadth of interesting work and sophistication in their industry is much wider and greater than young people or careers advisors or parents know, and yet they struggle to promote themselves, r compete with other industries or tertiary education options. Meanwhile, resources to produce promotional materials and campaigns are scarce, and effort is significantly fragmented across adjacent industry lines. More on this in the next section, and what the Vocational Pathways framework was trying to achieve.

Part of the problem is that schools and providers are input-centred and less outcomes-focussed. Consequently, the important contribution employers should be making in a learner’s journey and experience, and as a natural “customer” of the education outputs (graduating learners), is not factored into the settings or operational strategies of schools, or nearly enough employers.

Unfinished business: Vocational Pathways

A case in point: the Vocational Pathways are colour coded by sector, as core to their role as an aid to navigation between education and employment: If they have referred to the VPS, then young people (and their teachers) know which NCEA credits are recommended for Food and Fibre, and know which jobs are part of Food and Fibre.

Originally, when the colours were divvied up during their initial development, Sector Working Groups allocated the green slice of the ‘wheel’ to Primary Industries, without controversy or alternative bid. It signified the land. With the emergence of Workforce Development Councils in 2021, Food and Fibre became deep red, to match Muka Tangata branding. It doesn’t terribly matter what the colours are, but the colours do matter, and we certainly shouldn’t change them too often. We are not privy to the process for allocating WDC’s branding, which also distinguishes by colour, but green certainly seemed the natural choice when the VPs were conceived.

Much more importantly, the colours were meant to help the employers too – employers can now see on a vocational profile or record of achievement what a student has achieved in areas recommended for and related to Food and Fibre.

However, to the best of our knowledge, the Ministry of Education did not communicate this to employers – at the time not a natural audience for the Ministry of Education.

From shortly thereafter - until the most recent public sector restructure - significant improvement occurred in this regard, via the Ministry of Education’s Parents and Communities division, with highly committed staff administering education to employment connection initiatives.

In the main, communications and resource material about Vocational Pathways was addressed to school management, but according to several members of the Careers and Transitions Educators Association (CATE) we have spoken to, the VP material went straight from the principal’s inbox to their pigeonhole. Pigeonholing indeed.

So, employers never got the memo, except that luckily a few employers also happen to be parents, so a few of them found out about it via their own kids, and some schools – including high decile schools - talked to their parent communities about the VPs, or included information about them on websites. But it was pretty much osmosis.

The other in-school group that also risked missing out when the VP material was sent to the Careers Advisor were the Heads of Department, Deans, and Curriculum design teams.

There was certainly strong interest from some subject associations relating to which standards had been recommended by which sectors, and through the initial implementation phase, some significant investment by the Ministry of Education in good practice guidance, programme design, and contextualised assessment resources. But it appears that here – like in a few other examples – the ongoing commitment to implementation, or funding for implementation support, runs out of puff, and runs out of money.

A decade or more later, NZQA School Relationship Managers told us that they perceived schools were much more focussed on the need to offer a wider range of options. They believed everyone would have at least heard of the VPs, and that they remained strong advocates for them, including some school management teams.

However, they, and careers practitioners we interviewed were equally sure that the initial impetus around VPs had gone considerably off the boil, particularly in the wash of wider

Curriculum reform and NCEA review, including an ill-conceived proposal to create a “vocational entrance” award, thankfully scrapped.

The decline in numbers of VP awards since 2019, discussed in our previous interim data enquiry report, bears that out. We do not believe the COVID period fully explains this drop, but rather the messaging and impetus around the importance of coherent NCEA qualifications has faded into the background, which the concern about NCEA pass rates and school league tables has not.

The more pressing concern, particularly given the real effects of the COVID period and overall drop in NCEA achievement, is that more young people are again achieving incoherent qualifications – with enough credits maybe, but with little direction and lacking foundation skills.

Implementation Considerations

Resource implications

Creating a genuine ecosystem with a structured interface connecting secondary schools, tertiary providers, and workplaces would take strategic insight, operational design and resourcing.

For example, designing and resourcing an interface structure for senior secondary students and leavers could be based around a “hybrid STP model” (on an opt-in basis) - use the successful features of Trades Academies, dual enrolment programmes, STAR and Gateway, i.e., a hybrid delivery model which gives structure and flexibility and can be integrated into a Vocational Pathways framework or a traditional curriculum framework or even alongside a traditional framework.

A full analysis of delivery and access costs involved (e.g. travel) would be required. Flexible funding solutions would need to be found for dual enrolments and credit programmes. It will be vital to lead with outcomes focus to the delivery settings including funding, pastoral and learning support, assessment, qualifications and instruction that will be used. Early benefits analyses focused on the outcomes for learner, employer, schools and providers, and we expect this would flow through into improved productivity and workforce capability.

It is certainly the case the per-student funding for STP students is currently higher than for general secondary education – but not of a massive order of magnitude more. Running the NCEA years as a system of pathways that can be delivered through secondary and tertiary settings simply makes that resourcing more fungible across the sectors. Meantime, both sectors are giving themselves the chance to retain learners in education and training who would otherwise have left all together.

Our hypothesis is that young people who are retained in education by dint of being engaged in fit-for-purpose programmes and a joined-up system from school to employment represent more resources and better outcomes for the education system, not less. This sets the

resource focus on the learner, not the provider and the viability focus on the system, societal and economic benefit (retention and outcomes).

A practical operational example is seen in dual enrolments. For example, a learner in school three days a week represents more staffing entitlement than a student that has left because there was no relevant or engaging programme to keep them at school. Tertiary providers are masters of the art of managing part-time funding, and running cohorts of learners who spend the rest of their week somewhere else – STPs along with many traineeships and apprenticeships are structured along these lines.

From both a societal and economic lens there are obvious positives. Significantly scaling up the numbers of 16- to 19-year-olds in STPs (in a structured interface) might cost more in terms of education and training funding, but from a social investment perspective it would be a much better problem to have than the long-term societal and economic liability of NEETs, or low-skilled employment, health and housing outcomes and low wages provide an expensive burden. The strategic argument is investment in lifelong viability versus lifelong cost.

We also believe this burnishes the argument for paid work experiences, such as the Co-op programmes in Canada or Australia's School based Apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships which start in school.

Summary of Recommendations

Our basic premise/problem definition is that New Zealand's education system lacks a "structured interface" which connects secondary schools with tertiary education (especially VET) and employment.

There have been many attempts and well-intentioned products put in place to support "handovers" and "transitions" as the solution or to encourage learners to continue their learning. These are processes which have become add-ons to the system rather than systemic bridges. The learner journey and experience, therefore, is a stop-start activity rather than a seamless progression with pathways, funding, access to learning programmes which originate in school and are completed in on-job or provider-based settings.

A final comment is that we are out of step with good international practice at how we connect school-tertiary, and employment. Where there are well structured systems, there appears to be better employment and income outcomes.

The following recommendations are deliberately sequenced, because the do-ability and change management matters a lot. We believe these steps could provide a road map as well as an overall package to implement what we see as the logical strategic solution.

1a Conduct a Formal Evaluation.

The Ministry of Education should conduct a formal evaluation of Trades Academies, Gateway, and other interface initiatives, with a view to updating the Government's evidence of effectiveness and outcomes.

As part of this, a tracer study, utilising matched data, could also provide extremely useful information to individual schools about the destinations and outcomes of their students, for example further qualifications and industry destinations. Many schools have reported to us they would find this extremely valuable.

Schools receive a data report annually on their achievement and progression results which could be upgraded and has potential to inform strategic awareness but appears to be underused by schools and officials.

1b Then.... Consolidate the Current Interface Programmes

Presuming effectiveness is proven, and as a staged approach, the current resourcing for STAR and Gateway should be consolidated and administered by the Ministry of Education as part of a harmonised, flexible and expanded STP policy, whereby learners that opt-in to interface programmes have their funding entitlements pro-rated between the school, and providers involved in the delivery.

There is a huge opportunity to aggregate funding resources at the interface and join together the strengths of STAR, Gateway, STPs, Vocational Pathways and dual enrolment programmes into a structure which supports strategy and system focus on destinations for learners and workforce skills for employers and consequent benefits for New Zealand's economy, productivity improvements and social outcomes.

1c Then... Universalise dual enrolment from the age of 16.

In principle, we believe all post-compulsory (from age 16) learners should be entitled to dual enrolment in a secondary-tertiary programme, because current legislation already enables this.

Any STP student would remain enrolled in secondary school, but undertaking part-time study or work-based learning (including in paid employment), all occurring as part of their overall entitlement to funded education up to the age of 19. At this point, rather than a number of disjointed schemes, students over the age of 16 are simply able to be funded as a dual enrolled student, in any permutation of an approved secondary-tertiary-workplace programme.

2. Develop specific 'pathway' micro-credentials to underpin and support programmes across secondary-tertiary-workplace.

WDCs, or their successors, should design 20 credit micro-credentials that can be offered as pathway-based 'subjects', to be offered in school, or through interface programmes.

These should fully integrate curriculum- and industry-related learning and assessments. They should count for NCEA, as well as provide a genuine head start on an industry pathway.

These micro-credentials should be able to be offered fully in-school, to fit with a normal timetable – e.g. “pick five subjects and a pathway” but preferably would be delivered via a training arrangement with an employer, polytechnic, or private training establishment.

3. Create a new and shared framework (a structured interface) for industry-education engagement, pathways and curriculum design, building on the Vocational Pathways.

A framework for industry-education engagement, similar to the 2014 Australian example, should be developed and promulgated as part of wider Curriculum developments. This framework would build on the existing Vocational Pathways structure and provide practical ‘how-to’ advice in terms of designing and structuring pathways programmes, a framework for industry-education engagement.

The framework would support effective integration and co-ordination between secondary schools, vocational education providers, and employers.

4. Include pathways and interface curriculum design as a priority area for Professional Development for teachers, and school leadership and governance.

Pathways-related curriculum design should be made a priority for teacher professional development, to support teacher confidence with contextualising learning and assessment in relation to Vocational Pathways.

Supporting the strategic leadership of schools and tertiary providers to reset the interface for their organisations, learners and employers with the programmes and pathways that are relevant and provide opportunities for seamless progression whether to VET or degree-based delivery.

Since 70% of learners are not following degree-level pathways, we also see a compelling case for senior-secondary curriculum design and innovative delivery to be added as a priority area for teacher professional development, especially to underpin the implementation of the new framework and structured interface described above.

5. Ensure employers are a key user group for any new Careers tools, such as Tahatū

Some private sector online services, such as Youth Employer Success, Youthhub, and MyMahi, have provided extremely useful platforms for employers, schools and young people to engage directly, and to broker engagement, work experience, and careers information. However, there are no systematic platforms for engagement between employers and schools.

Tahatū is currently being piloted with a small number of schools and is expected to be progressively rolled out to more schools. As time of writing, the full rollout is now slated for June 2025 – a date that has been pushed out several times. This strongly suggests that while careers are lifelong, the national careers website will be schools and youth-facing.

Therefore, we recommend that employers are also seen as a critical user group for Tahatū, the new ‘interactive’ national careers website, that has been developed with considerable investment and has had an incredibly long gestation

That being the case, along with providing young people with information about occupations and career opportunities, we suggest that Tahatū’s interactivity supports direct connections between schools and local employers – firstly to provide helpful ‘on the ground’ information

systematically – e.g. which employers offer Gateway placements or have recently taken on apprentices.

This engagement should be two-way – whereby employers and industry bodies offer ‘in-reach’ services to schools: speeches at assemblies, work experience and internships, mock interviews and CV reviews.

6. Allow learners in workplace-based learning and interface programmes to be paid.

7. Where appropriate, training agreements should be used – to support apprenticeship, cadet or internship pathways.

8. Address esteem issues through Promotion, Ambassador and Mentoring concepts.

To raise the status of vocational options and pathways, schools-facing campaigns should support curriculum choice and reforms to the senior curriculum delivery model (not just career guidance).

We note without surprise that unlike Australia, UK, Canada, USA and China, Aotearoa has no National Skills Week, or Skills Ambassadors programme, to celebrate success and highlight these learning and career opportunities to young people.

Acknowledgements

Once again we are enormously indebted to those who gave us their time and their patience, while we organised our thoughts and sentences.

We're deliberately not naming too many names, as the inputs to this report range from a conversation in a skybridge, to structured interviews that struggled to stay structured, through to reading an inspiring student essay outlining their experience of stigma in terms of their decision as a "smart" student to undertake a pathways programme.

We're also not naming names because we want to honour the openness and frankness of many stakeholders that ventured opinions when they didn't have to, or when their role in the system prefers them not to.

Another pretty obvious source for this phase of the research was our own fading and fallible memories, so we also need to thank each other for many in-depth and insightful conversations, much going over old ground but also humbly offering a few new thoughts.

We will single out Hamish Davidson, a highly experienced Careers Practitioner who provided an outstanding and insightful peer review of our final draft. Hamish is well known to many in the Careers profession from his time on the CATE Executive, and an erstwhile colleague of Arthur and Josh at the Ministry of Education. But it is difficult to get an appointment to thank him properly, because he is booked up solidly with student appointments.

So, this report is dedicated to the Careers Profession, those like Hamish supporting young people on the ground every day to find their hopes and dreams and pathways. We look forward to a time when you are working as part of a much friendlier ecosystem between the world of school and the world of work.

Lastly, we sincerely thank Fiona Windle, Paul Hollings, and the whole team at Food and Fibre CoVE for the opportunity to undertake this research programme.