Working Knowledge

Designing Industry-Led Subjects for Students and Schools

Michael Johnston, Senior Fellow

A skilled heavy diesel mechanic earns roughly the same salary as a policy analyst, qualifies in the same time, and graduates with little or no debt, yet most New Zealanders still regard university as superior to industry training.

Working Knowledge examines the government's proposal to introduce industry-led subjects as part of its replacement for NCEA. The report identifies the challenges that must be overcome to make industry-led subjects a success, making recommendations for curriculum design, assessment, resourcing, and qualifications.

New Zealand has never had formal national curricula for vocational education at secondary level. Industry-led subjects could change that, but only if they are designed with the realities of secondary schools in mind.

Most schools are not staffed or resourced to offer strong vocational programmes. Industry-led subjects will need a new funding model to achieve the parity of esteem with university-track education that the government intends.

There is no credential for vocational education equivalent to University Entrance. An Industry Award would provide a clearly signalled pathway from school to industry training, placing vocational and university-track education on a genuinely equal footing.

New Zealand's school curriculum has long been dominated by subjects derived from university disciplines. This shapes the expectations of students, parents, and teachers, and entrenches the view that school is primarily preparation for university. The proposed introduction of industry-led subjects, developed by Industry Skills Boards (ISBs) and assessed using industry skill standards, is a significant departure from that tradition.

Under NCEA, vocational education at secondary level has been supported by Vocational Pathways, which comprise lists of unit standards deemed relevant to specific industry areas. These have no formal curricula. Industry-led subjects, by contrast, will have full curricula, developed by ISBs. This is a substantial improvement.

However, while ISBs will be well placed to write curricula that are relevant to industry, they will have little knowledge of what is appropriate for secondary students or manageable for schools. They will need to

consult closely with subject associations, school leaders, and teachers, especially those already running successful vocational programmes. Schools in remote and rural areas face particular challenges. Distance from tertiary providers, including limited staffing, and few nearby employers able to offer work-integrated learning. These schools will need additional support.

Skill standards are well suited to the assessment of industry-led subjects. They are typically more coherent and more valid than the unit standards they replace and can include criteria for higher grades. Ensuring that industry-led subjects offer the same range of grades as ministry-led subjects will be essential to their parity of esteem. If industry-led subjects remain pass-fail while ministry-led subjects offer higher grades equivalents, many students will continue to avoid vocational options.

A specific subject concern is Outdoor Education. Advocates, including Education Outdoors New Zealand (EONZ), whose petition attracted more than 50,000 signatures, have argued that designating it as an industry-led subject would narrow its curriculum and reduce its appeal. The report recommends that EONZ, rather than the Services ISB, be engaged to write the Outdoor Education curriculum, and that the Ministry either justify or reverse its decision to classify the subject as industry led.

Recommendations

The report proposes a comprehensive set of reforms to ensure that industry-led subjects deliver on their potential:

- Fund industry-led subjects through per-enrolment grants within schools' operational budgets, financed by redirecting the university component of the universal fees-free tertiary entitlement. The scheme has not increased university enrolments.
- Mandate ISBs to consult closely with subject associations, school leaders, and teachers in developing curricula and assessment programmes.
- Design industry-led subjects in pairs, each worth 20 credits, so that students completing both subjects can earn a 40-credit industry certificate in addition to their school qualification.
- Ensure that industry-led subjects include criteria for the same range of grades available in ministry-led subjects.
- Establish an Industry Award, attained by passing both subjects in an industry-led pair and one related ministry-led subject.
- Abandon the proposal for aggregate passes in NZCE and NZACE in favour of reporting individual subject results, as England does with GCSEs and A-levels, to reduce perverse incentives in subject choice.
- Engage and fund EONZ to write the curriculum and assessment programme for Outdoor Education.

AUTHOR

Michael Johnston is a Senior Research Fellow at the New Zealand Initiative. He is a cognitive psychologist by training and completed his PhD at the University of Melbourne in 1997. He commenced his academic career as a lecturer in psychology and became interested in educational assessment and measurement during a six-year tenure as Senior Statistician at the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. In 2011, he was appointed as a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington. Prior to his appointment at the New Zealand Initiative in 2022, he spent three years as Associate Dean (Academic).

P: +64 21 02273415 | michael.johnston@nzinitiative.org.nz