COMPETENT LEARNERS ON THE EDGE OF ADULTHOOD

A summary of key findings from the Competent Learners @ 16 project

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New Zealand Council for Educational Research

Competent Learners @ 16 is the seventh phase in the Competent Children, Competent Learners longitudinal study.

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1. Overview

The Competent Children Competent Learners project is a longitudinal study which focuses on a group of about 500 young people from the greater Wellington region (Wellington, Hutt, Kapiti, and Wairarapa). It is funded by the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

The project started in 1993, when the young people were almost 5 years old and in early childhood education. Its original purpose was to look at whether—and how—early childhood education helps children become lifelong learners. The project has charted the development of the students' cognitive competencies, as well as the development of their social and communication skills.

It also explores the students' home and education experiences to find out which of these experiences may account for differences in their patterns of development and performance.

So far we have collected data on the young people at two-yearly intervals—at ages 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16; we will be returning to the young people later in 2008 and in 2009, when they are 20. This summary, *Competent Learners On the Edge of Adulthood,* presents key findings from the five research reports completed using data collected in 2005, when the students were 16.

Altogether, 447 young people took part in the age-16 phase of the project. Of these, 420 were still at school, and 27 had left school. Most were still living in the Wellington area, but 50 were living in other parts of New Zealand. Just over half the school students were in Year 12, and the remainder in Year 11. They attended a total of 72 different secondary schools.

It is important to note that our sample was not intended to be representative of all New Zealand children. Rather, it was drawn to represent the proportions of children attending the main types of early childhood education in the Wellington region in 1993. Compared to the national average, our sample has higher proportions of young people from high-income families, and with mothers who have trade and tertiary-level qualifications. Our sample also has lower than average proportions of Māori and Pacific young people, and those who attend low decile schools.

This means that some of our findings may give a slightly more positive picture than you would get from a truly representative sample of New Zealand 16-year-olds. This is particularly the case for the findings that are affected by family income and maternal qualifications.

However, the sample does have enough 16-year-olds in different situations to allow us to compare how those different situations might make a difference for their performance and experiences, so that we can provide a reasonable picture of the weight of those different situations in what is happening for 16-year-olds across the whole of New Zealand.

KEY FINDINGS

- Most —70 percent— of the 16-year-olds in this study had good school attendance and were engaged with learning, both in and outside school. However, levels of boredom and restlessness at school had risen, and a fifth wanted to leave as soon as they could. Just half the students' parents thought they were still enthusiastic about school.

- Engagement in school — feeling positive about learning and being at school— reflects both current learning opportunities, and previous positive experiences of school and learning that have built the knowledge and habits that support continued learning. Disengagement in learning—not doing work in class— often starts before students reach secondary school. If students do not have the literacy and numeracy levels they need to keep learning, plus the attitudes and skills that support learning, then they can lose motivation. Other things become more attractive, such as behaviour and friends that involve risk.

- Those 16-year-olds who had already left school did so largely because they were bored or had got into trouble. A few left to pursue work that appealed to them. Most early school leavers had low school motivation levels and low competency levels at age 14. While most of this group were optimistic about the future, female school leavers were the unhappiest group in the study.

- Most of the school leavers' parents wished they had not left school, and 59 percent of the school leavers would have liked more guidance on school subjects. But they did not want to return to school. They preferred the kind of learning they were getting now: more 'real life' and 'relevant'.

- In the classes that students enjoyed the most, teachers were more likely to: frame things clearly; show interest in them; make connections with student interests and experiences; give them feedback that helped them see what to do next; and offer plenty of practical or hands-on activities.

- In the most enjoyed classes, teachers were weaving the key competencies into their teaching. Students said they thought more about their learning in the classes they enjoyed the most.

- Student enjoyment of classes is closely linked to how engaged students are in learning. Engagement in learning is linked in turn to levels of student performance in literacy, numeracy and NCEA.

- NCEA performance is related to a student's levels of literacy and numeracy, both past and present. However, good attitudes and work habits are also important. This underlines the value of including the key competencies in teaching plans and approaches.

- There is little evidence that the students were making minimal effort with NCEA. Many got more credits than they needed to achieve NCEA levels 1 and 2. Only 6 percent of students reported taking up opportunities for reassessment, and few reported skipping assessments.

- Parents' views of NCEA were related to how satisfied they were with their child's progress at school. This suggests that for some parents, NCEA is acting as a 'lightning rod' for dissatisfaction with other aspects of the school system.

- By 16, our participants were having more adult experiences than at 14. They drank more alcohol, and they were experimenting with sex and drugs. Just under half had a paid job on at least one day a week. But most remained well connected with their family, and felt supported by them, though fewer than half shared their problems with their parents.

- Friendships continue to be important at age 16, with an emphasis now on friendships that involve support and trust. Long-lasting friendships were also more valued.

- The everyday leisure activities our participants spent the most time doing were: text messaging; watching television; hanging out with friends; using the computer, and exercise or sport. They read less, played less sport, watched a little less television and spent less time playing computer games than at age 14.

- In general our participants had a positive and open outlook towards leaving school. However the opportunities seen as the most positive—such as establishing a career and more freedom to manage money and time—were also seen as the biggest challenges.

- Young people who do well in the areas most valued by teachers and school (e.g. enjoyment of reading, being focused and responsible, high cognitive competency) are consistently more likely to see themselves undertaking tertiary study, having professional occupations, and fewer barriers to the life they desire. Those from families with low incomes and low maternal qualifications are less likely to expect to undertake tertiary studies and aspire to professional occupations.

- Participants made a distinction between having a job and a career. They identified with more traditional ideas about career, such as promotion within one workplace, but they also agreed with newer ideas such as work-life balance, and the notion of having a qualification that you can keep building on with more qualifications and experience.

- Around half of the students reported not participating in many of the key careers guidance activities typically offered through schools. For most, families were their single most useful source of career information and 41 percent of students said they had never talked to a teacher or career advisor about their future options.

- There is little evidence that the transition to secondary school has any negative impact on student performance, or changes patterns that were previously established.

Key findings reported in the age-14 round of the study continued to be evident two years later. These include:

- the difficulty of raising low levels of performance after age 8. However, it can be done; and those who make progress are most likely to do so gradually, showing the importance of continued support rather than one-off 'interventions' that are not followed up.

- the value of good quality staff:child interaction and a 'print-saturated' environment when children attend early childhood education.

- the interdependent nature of literacy and numeracy, and aspects of the key competencies. This finding supports the framework of the revised New Zealand Curriculum.

- social characteristics account for some of the difference in young people's scores, but not most of it. Parental education and income levels carry more weight here than do gender or ethnicity. That's because they are related to the kinds of learning opportunities children may have at home, as well as confidence in the education system.

- the importance of judging student need on the basis of actual performance and interests, not just on social characteristics or prior performance.

Some quick indicators that suggest a child or young person is well-placed for learning are:

- they enjoy reading
- they have interests that provide goals and challenges, and a sense of achievement
- they have interests that involve communication or the use of symbols.

Some quick indicators that suggest a child or young person is not well-placed for learning are:

- their main leisure activity is television or computer games
- they have no interests
- they are involved in bullying.

2. How the research was done

THE COMPETENCIES

At age 16, we gathered information on seven competencies, organised into two groups. The first group of competencies relates to the students' knowledge and thinking skills—their **cognitive** competencies. The second group of competencies relates to the students' approach to learning, and their social and communication skills—their **attitudinal** competencies.

There are three cognitive competencies:

- literacy
- numeracy
- logical problem solving.

There are four attitudinal competencies:

- thinking and learning
- focused and responsible
- social skills
- social difficulties.

These four attitudinal competencies are slightly different from the ones we measured in our earlier studies but, like the earlier ones, they are closely related to some of the key competencies in the revised New Zealand curriculum. The key competencies are seen as being central to the curriculum because they are linked to lifelong learning. They are: thinking; using language, symbols and texts; managing self, relating to others, and participating and contributing. They also help young people develop the kinds of skills and attitudes they need to be successful at work and in their relationships, and to make a positive social contribution.

Thinking and learning

Students with a high score for this competency are likely to often or always:

- take on new ideas
- ask questions so that they understand
- learn from teacher feedback
- ask the teacher for help and advice.

Focused and responsible

Students with a high score for this competency are likely to often or always:

- turn up to class on time with all the equipment they need
- take responsibility for their own actions
- follow class routines and rules without being reminded
- stay on topic in a conversation.

Social skills

Students with a high score for this competency are likely to often:

- respect other people's points of view or different ways of doing things
- present their own point of view in an appropriate manner, even if there is a disagreement
- be good at resolving disputes with their peers
- help or support others in the class.

Social difficulties

We measured this competency differently from the other attitudinal competencies, so that students with a high score have fewer social difficulties than those with a low score. Students with a high score for this competency are *un*likely to:

- mix with students who are anti-social, or get into trouble
- be influenced by peer pressure to do something out of character
- hassle or bully other students
- get hassled or bullied by other students.

MEASURING THE COGNITIVE COMPETENCIES

At age 16 we moved to new tests for literacy and numeracy. Previously we measured these competencies using the age-related Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs). However, these standardised tests are only available for year levels 4 to 10, and by age 16 all the young people were in either year levels 11 or 12, or had left school.

We measured literacy and numeracy using selected questions from the International Adult Literacy Survey. This survey, developed by Statistics Canada, was first carried out with New Zealand adults in 1996. Statistics Canada analysed the New Zealand results for 16-year-olds to select literacy and numeracy questions that would provide information about all levels of performance without the young people having to take the entire survey.

Once again we used the Ravens standard progressive matrices to measure the young people's logical problem solving skills.

MEASURING THE ATTITUDINAL COMPETENCIES

As in all the previous studies, we asked teachers to rate their students' attitudinal competencies. Most students were rated by three teachers—their English teacher, and the teachers of their most-enjoyed and their least-enjoyed subject. We were not able to collect this information for the 27 young people who had already left school.

We found a wide range of scores on the first three of these attitudinal competencies. However, the range was narrower for social difficulties. Only a few students had marked social difficulties (a low score) and most had few social difficulties (a high score).

COLLECTING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EXPERIENCES OF 16-YEAR-OLDS

As well as measuring competencies, we also collected information from the young people, their teachers and their parents about a range of experiences and resources that can affect young people's lives. These included:

- the students' experiences of school, including subject choice
- student attitudes to and experience of NCEA, including their record of learning (number of credits gained)
- the young people's friendships, experiences and leisure activities
- home and family life
- what the students thought would happen when they left school.

We also gathered information on family income levels, and used information previously gathered on the young people's gender, ethnicity, and maternal qualification levels.

This information helped us get a better understanding about how students experience secondary school, about how our participants spend their time, about the relationships they have with others, and about their hopes—and their fears—as they stand on the edge of adulthood.

ANALYSING THE INFORMATION

The purpose of our analysis was to look at the inter-connections between the young people's experiences and relationships, their background, their competencies, and their attitudes towards learning.

The results do not provide a recipe for individual success—or failure. They cannot be used to predict the course of an individual student, but they can be used to inform educational policy and practice so that we provide better learning opportunities for children and young people.

RESULTS

The following sections outline key findings from across the five reports. These reports are:

- Competent Learners @ 16: Competency levels and development over time
- Early childhood education and young adult competencies at age 16
- On the edge of adulthood: young people's school and out-of-school experiences at 16
- Student perspectives on leaving school, pathways and careers
- Transition to secondary school: does it affect age-16 performance?

These reports are available at www.educationcounts.govt.nz or www.nzcer.org.nz.

3. Patterns of performance

One of the questions we have been investigating in the Competent Children Competent Learners project is whether student performance changes over time, and in particular whether it is possible to lift the levels of the lowest-performing students.

We have found that both cognitive and attitudinal competency stay reasonably consistent over time. Those who performed well in the competency tests at age 5 were likely to perform well again at age 16. Those who performed poorly at age 5 were likely to still be struggling at age 16—or to have left school altogether.

However, some low-performing students did make gradual but sustained improvements. This suggests that, given the right support, students who begin school with poor competency levels can respond to changing experiences, opportunities and relationships, and build on what they achieve.

CHANGES IN COGNITIVE COMPETENCY

Our data continues to show that students' literacy, numeracy and logical problem-solving performance remains reasonably consistent over time. Overall, just under half of the students were performing at much the same level at age 16 as they were at age 5.

The students whose cognitive performance was least likely to change were those with the lowest level of performance. This lack of improvement reflects the particular challenges faced by children who begin school with low levels of cognitive competency.

We have found that the performance of low-achieving students is even less likely to improve after the age of 8. Around three-quarters of those who had low literacy and numeracy levels at age 8 still had low levels at age 16. Their age-8 performance was also closely linked to how well they performed in the secondary school qualification NCEA.

This suggests that the first three years of school are also important in helping to lift the performance of children with low levels of cognitive competency. In order to lay the foundations for future educational success, these children need ongoing learning opportunities and support between the ages of 5 and 8. These learning opportunities need to be provided at school and at home.

We also found that while some low-performing students made large gains in a short time, they did not always sustain these gains. Students who made steady, rather than sudden, improvements were more likely to sustain them. This suggests that consistent, ongoing opportunities and support are likely to be more effective in lifting the performance of low-performing students than one-off boosts with no follow-up.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDINAL COMPETENCY

Attitudinal competencies are more related to context. Teachers at different levels of the school system may have different expectations. Attitudinal competencies also appear to be more strongly related to a student's current situation: their family income, their susceptibility to peer pressure and the school culture.

Of those students who had the lowest levels of attitudinal competency at age five, only a third still had low levels at age 16. Almost a fifth had developed very high levels of attitudinal competency during that period.

Students who have high levels of attitudinal competency when they start school may not maintain them. A fifth of those who began the project with high competency had low levels by age 16.

ASSOCIATIONS WITH SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Most national analyses of student performance measure just two social characteristics —ethnicity and gender. In most cases, this is the only data on social characteristics available from schools. However, in this study we have collected information on two other social characteristics—maternal qualification and family income levels.

Analysing all four of these key social characteristics at the same time gives us a different picture from the one provided when only ethnicity and/or gender are taken into consideration.

Of the four social characteristics we measure, maternal education levels have the largest association with students' cognitive and attitudinal competencies at age 16. Students whose mothers have high education levels are more likely to start school with high competency levels, and to maintain this high level of performance.

This difference in performance is linked to the kinds of opportunities and support that the children of highly educated mothers tend to have. In this study we have found that they are more likely than the children of less-educated mothers to have experiences that expand their knowledge and skills, such as:

• talking with parents (and others) in ways that expand their vocabulary and encourage them to think and reply

• playing games that use patterns or language, such as card or board games

• singing or learning to play a musical instrument.

Gender shows a similar association as maternal qualifications with literacy levels and with some of the attitudinal competencies. Young women have higher literacy levels and better social skills than young men, and they are less likely to get into social difficulties.

However, gender is not related to numeracy or logical problem-solving-skills.

Family income is closely related to maternal qualification levels; children whose families have a high income tend also to have mothers who are highly educated. Once this association is accounted for, family income on its own has a relatively small association with competency levels. However, we found that family income at

age 5 continues to have a statistically significant association with literacy and numeracy levels at age 16. Age-16 family income levels are also associated with literacy and numeracy levels.

Ethnicity has much less association with competency levels than the other three social characteristics. Our analysis suggests that it is not ethnicity itself which creates the gaps in performance between different ethnic groups, but rather the association between ethnicity and maternal education levels and family income. Māori and Pacific children, for example, are more likely to have mothers with low levels of education, and a low family income. Low levels of maternal education and family income affect the kinds of experiences that parents can provide—and afford—for their children. They are also likely to make both parents and children feel less confident about engaging with the education system.

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS AT RISK

It is important to note that social characteristics on their own account for only some of the differences in student performance. Government policy correctly emphasises the need to improve the performance of Mäori and Pacific students. As New Zealand tackles this challenge, we also need more information on actual levels of performance for individual learners, since there are high performers in every social group.

We can also gain useful information about children's needs by looking at their interests. These can provide a guide for both parents and teachers about how well a child or young person is doing.

Some quick indicators that suggest a child or young person is doing well are:

* they enjoy reading
* they have interests that provide goals and challenges, and a sense of achievement
* they have interests that involve communication or the use of symbols.

Some quick indicators that suggest a child or young person is not doing well are:

* their main leisure activity is television or computer games
* they have no interests
* they are involved in bullying.

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN THE COMPETENCIES

One of our most interesting discoveries during this project has been that children need opportunities to develop both their cognitive and attitudinal competencies. The two types of competency feed into each other. Successful learning helps students develop a good attitude towards learning. This in turn helps them to gain more knowledge and skills.

The opposite is true for students who do not experience successful learning. Their lack of success affects their attitude towards learning, which then makes it harder for them to gain more knowledge and skills.

This association between the two competencies is reflected in our findings about how they are related over time. We have found that a student's cognitive competency at one age is not only closely associated with their cognitive competency two years later; it can also be used to predict their attitudinal competency two years later.

By age 16, this relationship is reflected in NCEA scores. A student's attitudes and behaviour are as important as their cognitive levels in how well they do in NCEA.

HOW EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS PERFORMED

Early school leavers (those who leave school at 16) tended to score lower for both types of competency. In the case of cognitive competency, this reflects differences that were already in place at the age of 5.

However, many school leavers had average scores for attitudinal competency at the age of 5, and did not show lower average scores until a few years later. This probably reflects their growing discomfort with school as their difficulties with literacy and numeracy made it difficult for them in other aspects of the curriculum, since literacy and numeracy are key foundations for much of the work of school. It is likely that as they struggled with school work they looked for affirmation outside of school.

IMPLICATIONS

Our study suggests that students who become disengaged from learning do so before they turn 12. Their lack of engagement escalates during adolescence and at secondary school.

This suggests that it is important to help students develop the knowledge and attitudes that support learning in their pre-school and early school years. Our findings have shown that this can be done by providing children with activities that build on their interests, knowledge and skills, and by taking an active interest in and supporting these learning activities.

It is also important that children start school with a solid foundation in literacy and numeracy – familiarity with letters and numbers, and an understanding that text and symbols carry meaning. This means they are more likely to develop the attitudes they need to build on that knowledge. Early school success in literacy and numeracy helps children develop perseverance, and the ability to listen and contribute. This in turn helps increase their knowledge and understanding.

This close association between knowledge and attitude is crucial. It makes it vital for parents and teachers to provide young children with activities that extend both their knowledge and their attitude towards learning— to provide children with 'two for the price of one'. Examples include games with adults and older children, and activities that provide enjoyment and interaction. It is also important that we involve children in activities that have a goal which can be achieved with concentration and effort. Like any other area of skill and knowledge, the key competencies are not innate or a matter of personality, they need to be deliberately fostered by teachers and parents.

Our findings also underline the value of including the key competencies in the revised national curriculum, and support the more integrated approach to curriculum that many schools are starting to take.

It is also important to provide continuing support for children who lack the advantages of highly educated mothers and reasonable levels of family income. One way of doing this is by providing high-quality early childhood education. Another is to help parents provide their children with richer home experiences. Other options that may be helpful are home-school partnerships that can help parents support their children's learning. Ensuring that we provide cultural and sporting opportunities in all schools and neighbourhoods should also help. Opportunities to create music, to dance, and to create art, or work in a team, towards challenging goals, allow children to develop themselves through pursuing interests that are more than passive or one-off events.

4. The continuing effects of early childhood education

Earlier studies in the Competent Children Competent Learners project found that children's cognitive and attitudinal competencies benefited from quality early childhood education.

The age-16 study found that aspects of the students' early childhood education (ECE) still had associations with their performance 11 years later. The associations were generally weaker than they had been at age 14.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY

We found that high-quality centres had a positive, long-lasting association with students' literacy, numeracy and logical problem-solving competencies, and also with their social skills.

These associations applied irrespective of their mother's qualification or their family income. In other words, high-quality ECE centres were still providing lasting benefits for the participants in our study 11 years later, regardless of their background.

In the past, we found five measures of quality in early childhood education which had enduring effects on students' performance. These five measures of quality continued to have an effect at age 16. They are:

- staff responsiveness
- staff guiding children in activities
- staff asking children open-ended questions
- staff joining children in their play
- providing a print-saturated environment.

THE EFFECT OF OTHER ASPECTS OF ECE

In earlier studies we found associations between competency after age-5 and the students' experience of early childhood education, in particular:

- the age at which they first started ECE
- the total length of their ECE experience
- the socioeconomic mix of the final ECE centre they attended.

However, by age 16, only the last of these three experience measures was still associated with competency levels. We found that young people who had attended centres with children from mainly middle-class

families were less likely to have social difficulties than those who had attended centres with fewer middle-class families. This association existed regardless of the student's own background.

IMPLICATIONS

Our findings are consistent with a growing body of international research showing that children benefit from ECE experience and, in particular, from quality interactions with staff. We have found that these benefits can extend well beyond childhood.

This body of research underlines the importance of providing children with high-quality staff-child interactions. It follows that helping ECE centres to provide these types of interactions should be a priority at both planning and policy levels. One key rule of thumb could be the question: 'Is this use of time/resources likely to improve/sustain the quality of child-staff interaction?'

Other international research provides useful information about ways to support quality staff-child interactions. These include:

- providing training that helps staff understand how young children learn, and the ways in which they can support the learning process by building on children's interests, and deepening their thinking and their use of language
- having staff-child ratios that allow staff to know children as individuals, and to work with children in ways that help them develop confidently
- having staff stability.

Parents with pre-schoolers can also use these findings to help assess the quality of the ECE service they are thinking of using. A brief guide to quality is included in the box.

RATING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION QUALITY

Staff responsiveness

Centres with a high rating on this have staff who respond quickly and directly to children, and adapt their responses to individual children. The staff provide support, focused attention, physical proximity and verbal encouragement when appropriate. They are alert to signs of stress in children's behaviour and guide children to express their emotions. Centres with a low rating have staff who ignore children's requests and are oblivious to their needs.

Staff guiding children in activities

In centres with a high rating on this dimension, staff move among the children to encourage involvement with materials and activities. They also interact with children by asking questions and offering suggestions. They offer active guidance and encouragement in activities that are appropriate for individual children. In centres with a low rating, staff leave children to choose all their own activities.

Staff asking open-ended questions

Centres with a high rating on this dimension have staff who often ask children open-ended questions, encouraging them to come up with a range of different answers. This encourages thinking and creativity. Centres with a low rating have staff who never ask open-ended questions.

Staff joining children in their play

At centres with a high rating for this dimension, staff frequently join in children's activities, and offer material, information or encouragement to facilitate play and learning around a particular theme. Staff at centres with a low rating only monitor children's play, rather than joining in.

Providing a print-saturated environment

High-rating centres on this dimension are very print-focused. They encourage children's awareness of print, have a lot of printed material at children's eye level or just above, and offer children a range of readily accessible books. A low-rating centre has few books, posters or other forms of writing available to children.

5. Engagement in school and learning

In this study, "engagement in school" is used to refer to positive feelings about the work of school, such as enjoyment of learning, and not feeling bored or restless at school.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Three-quarters of the age-16 students had good, very good, or excellent attendance at school. The rest had fair or poor attendance, and five percent had been involved in truancy.

Not surprisingly, those with good, very good or excellent attendance were more engaged with school, and enjoyed it more than those whose attendance was fair or poor. Good attenders were also more successful at school. They were likely to:

- gain more NCEA credits
- have higher competency levels
- be viewed more positively by teachers.

In many cases, those who had turned away from school were continuing patterns from the past. In other words, they started to switch off from school long before they reached 16. Fair or poor school attendance at this age is linked to several factors. These include:

- low motivation levels at age 14
- fewer interests at age 14, or only being interested in playing computer games
- experiencing an adverse event in their life during the previous year
- risky behaviour
- having friends with risky behaviour.

STUDENTS' VIEWS OF SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Between two-thirds and three-quarters of age-16 students said they usually or always liked their teachers, they enjoyed learning and they kept out of trouble.

Most students' feelings about school were as positive at 16 as they were at 14. However, they enjoyed school less than they did when they were 12. Just over a third of 16-year-olds said they were usually or always bored at school, and close to a fifth wanted to leave school as soon as they could.

After having a relatively positive attitude towards homework at 12, less than a quarter now saw homework as important, and half did not like doing it.

We found that students' experiences of the transition to secondary school were not related to their levels of engagement in school at years 11 and 12. Indeed, during this project we have found little evidence that the transition to secondary school in itself is a major issue for most students.

At age 16, most students were involved in extra-curricular activities offered by the school. Of these, team sport was the most common, followed by music and the arts. Sport also offered the most opportunities for these senior students to take a leadership role in the school by, for example, captaining a sports team.

PARENTS' VIEWS OF SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Parent reports confirmed that levels of enjoyment of school had fallen over time, with just 55 percent of parents saying their 16-year-olds enjoyed school, compared to 75 percent when they were 12. Just over half of parents—59 percent— were satisfied with their child's progress at school. This is similar to the number of parents who were satisfied with their child's progress at age 14, but lower than at age 12, when 69 percent of parents were satisfied with their progress at school.

A fifth of parents were not satisfied with their child's progress at school; the remaining parents had mixed views about their progress. However, only 10 percent of parents thought their child had very little or no support for their learning from their teachers, and 19 percent thought their child had little or no support for their emotional wellbeing.

Parents of Mäori or Pacific students were less positive about their child's secondary school experiences than others.

FACTORS THAT ARE RELATED TO SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT

Age-16 engagement in school is related to previous levels of engagement, and motivation; students who were engaged previously are more likely to be engaged at 16. School engagement is also associated with how much students enjoyed reading when they were younger, and with their previous competency scores.

However, we found that engagement at age 16 is also related to students' current experience of school. This includes the types of learning opportunities they have, and the relationship they have with their teachers. Students who were disengaged in school were more negative about these things. They also showed more risky behaviour outside school, and they had friends who were also into risky behaviour.

WHY DO STUDENTS LEAVE SCHOOL EARLY?

The most common reason participants gave for leaving school at the age of 16 was that they were bored. Many also said they didn't like the teachers, and that they got into trouble at school. However, some said they were 'pulled' to appealing alternatives, such as a particular occupation.

Most of the 27 school leavers were either working or studying, and three quarters of them said they were happy with what they were doing. However, male school leavers were much happier than female ones. In fact, female school leavers were the least happy of any group in the study.

According to their parents, male school leavers were also more likely to have left school to take up a specific job, apprenticeship or training course than female school leavers.

Most parents said they regretted that their children had left school. They were also much less likely to think that their children were happy than the parents of those who had stayed at school.

Several factors distinguish early school leavers from those who stay at school. Early school leavers are more likely to have:

- lower mathematics and literacy levels from age 5. This gap became even wider after the age of 8.
- lower attitudinal competency from the age of 10. This gap also became wider as they grew older.

As with those who have low competency levels, and who performed poorly in NCEA, the early school leavers:

- are less likely to enjoy reading between the age of 8 and 14
- have been less engaged in school at 14
- have been less motivated to complete and use their education at 14
- have poor school attendance
- have more experience of bullying (whether as a victim, a bully, or both)
- are more likely to engage in risky behaviour at age 14
- watch a lot of television between the ages of 8 and 14

School leavers are also more likely to come from homes with less than 100 books, and they currently enjoy reading and writing much less than those who stay on at school. They are more likely than those who are still at school to see having money to spend and looking cool as important, and to report friendships as one of their main interests.

But while school leavers tend to disengage from school much earlier than school stayers, just over half wished they had had better guidance on what subjects or options to take.

6. Experiences of secondary school

We were interested in finding out how students choose the subjects they study, and what kinds of teaching approaches are most likely to engage them. We also wanted to find out more about student and parent experiences with NCEA.

SUBJECT CHOICE—THE FOUR 'CLUSTERS'

By the age of 16, students have a lot more choice about the subjects they can take at secondary school than they did when they were younger. Schools try to structure their timetables to give as much choice as possible.

One of the goals of NCEA is to open up different learning pathways for students. To some extent this appears to be happening. For example, many schools now offer 'alternatives' within traditional subjects such as English and mathematics. However, we found that schools tend to organise their timetables and pathways to subjects in a way that meant we found four main subject 'clusters' among the Year 11 and 12 students. These clusters encourage students to follow the same routes they have always followed—effectively either an 'academic' or a 'practical' pathway.

We found two academic clusters—'traditional arts' and 'traditional science'. These two clusters provide a clear pathway to university or other tertiary study.

We found two more practical clusters—'contextual' and 'vocational'. These two clusters potentially limit students' opportunities for tertiary study, especially the 'vocational' cluster.

We found that students who were in the contextual and vocational clusters were more likely to:

- be less engaged with school
- have had lower motivation levels at age 14
- be among those who did not enjoy reading
- attend school less regularly.

THE FOUR CLUSTERS

Traditional arts

This includes traditional mathematics and English, as well as subjects such as history, geography, graphics or visual arts, and languages.

Traditional science

This also includes traditional mathematics and English as well as subjects such as biology, chemistry and physics, health and design technology.

Contextual

This includes a mix of traditional and alternative versions of mathematics, traditional English and subjects such as health, dance/drama, graphics, various technology subjects, Māori or Samoan.

Vocational

This includes an alternative version of mathematics, and subjects such as a food-related course, sport, computers and life skills subjects.

HOW DO STUDENTS CHOOSE THEIR SUBJECTS?

Although student choice is constrained, around 80 percent of students said they were happy with their subject mix for the year. However, a quarter said they wished they had had more guidance when choosing subjects. Just over half said there was something they would have liked to do at school but were not able to. They named a wide range of areas that interested them. The main reasons students gave for not being able to follow their interests in these areas were:

- timetable clash
- having to prioritise
- not having the course prerequisite.

The most common reason that students gave for choosing a subject was that they thought it would be interesting, or that it would lead to a career. The main reason for dropping a subject was that they did not enjoy it, or they found it difficult. Very few students said they chose a subject because of the reputation of the teacher who taught it.

Only a handful of students—2 percent— said they chose a subject because it would yield easy NCEA credits. Similarly, only 5 percent said they chose a subject because it would be easy.

OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN

We asked students about three different classes:

- the class they most enjoyed
- the class they least enjoyed
- their English class.

We wanted to find out how they viewed the learning environment in each class, and in particular how the learning environment of their most-enjoyed class differed from that of their least-enjoyed class.

We also asked the teachers of each of the three classes about their teaching practices, and the learning environment in the classes they taught.

The most enjoyed classes

Students' most-enjoyed classes included a wide range of subjects, with arts being the most popular subject. This includes the visual arts and drama. As in previous studies, students tended to prefer subjects with a strong practical component, such as art and drama, or health and sport. However, 13 percent of students said science was their favourite subject, and 6 percent nominated maths.

The least enjoyed classes

Mathematics and science were the least-enjoyed subjects, with 37 percent saying they did not like maths, and 25 percent saying they did not like science. The next most unpopular subject was English, nominated by 22 percent of our participants.

DIFFERENCES IN TEACHING APPROACHES

There are several factors which distinguished the teaching of the most-enjoyed classes from those of the least-enjoyed classes.

Teachers of most-enjoyed classes were more likely than the teachers of the least-enjoyed classes to say that:

- students do a lot of group activities and discussion
- students have the opportunity to act on issues that concern them
- students interact with people outside school as part of their school work
- students give input into the context and direction of learning activities
- students do a lot of practical activities
- the class has a lot of fun.

THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES STUDENTS MOST VALUE

Students also saw differences in the learning environment of their most-enjoyed classes and their least-enjoyed classes. The things they valued in their most-enjoyed classes included:

- being treated fairly by the teacher
- understanding their teacher's attitudes and rules
- knowing the teacher will help them when they need it
- being given clear instructions
- liking the teacher
- feeling that the teacher understands how they feel about things
- getting feedback that helps them see what to do next
- having a teacher who is interested in their ideas
- being able to make mistakes and learn from them without getting into trouble
- getting explanations more than once if they need them.

Students also said they enjoyed classes where they could see connections between what they learn and the outside world, where the teacher built on their interests and used relevant examples, and where they had lots of hands-on or practical activities.

ATTITUDES TO LEARNING

Students had a much more positive attitude towards learning in their most-enjoyed classes than their least-enjoyed classes. They said they mucked around less in their most-enjoyed classes, and they were less likely to try to annoy the teacher. Students were also more likely to say they did well in their most-enjoyed class, and that they were confident they could master the skills being taught. They were also more likely to think they would get NCEA credits in their most-enjoyed class.

The teachers of the most-enjoyed classes also viewed the students more positively—and gave them generally higher scores for attitudinal competency. The teachers of the most-enjoyed classes also had higher expectations for the student's long-term educational success.

IMPLICATIONS

Most of the young people in this sample were engaged with school. But a substantial minority—around 30 percent—had poor attendance, or they were attending school but were not actively responding to it. A small number had already left school.

Young people who are not engaged with school are the most likely to leave school without a meaningful qualification that allows them to gain reasonably-paid employment. They are also more likely to lack the

skills and knowledge they will need to cope with a period of substantial and rapid social and economic change.

We found that even some students who were performing well at school were more bored and restless than they had been in the past. This suggests that we need to keep providing support and opportunities that allow secondary school students to stretch and grow, but it also suggests that we may need to do things differently.

What can we do to improve student engagement at secondary level? We can strengthen the opportunities to learn at pre-school and primary school level, so that students coming to secondary school are more likely to have developed positive 'habits' of learning, and are strong in both the cognitive and attitudinal areas.

We can also strengthen the opportunities to learn in secondary schools.

Our findings point to the importance of learning relationships in classrooms. Students enjoy classes where their interactions with the teacher are learning-focused, and where the processes of learning receive attention, not just the products. The importance of this type of classroom environment is signalled by the strong emphasis on 'learning to learn' in the New Zealand Curriculum. (Learning to learn is one of eight principles that underpin the whole curriculum.)

Similarly, the five key competencies described for the national curriculum focus on the capabilities needed to take advantage of the learning opportunities provided. These five key competencies are:

- thinking
- using language, symbols and texts
- managing self
- relating to others
- participating and contributing.

As we have seen, students who already show strengths in these competencies tend to also show higher achievement. However our findings about how students view different teaching approaches are an important reminder that what teachers do also makes a difference. The revised New Zealand curriculum gives teachers and schools a better framework to provide students with the kinds of learning opportunities they need. The result should be that secondary students are better engaged in learning.

7.   Experiences and views of NCEA

NCEA began in 2002, three years before the students in this study reached Year 11. We were interested in finding out what students, teachers and parents thought of this sometimes controversial new qualification.

Some critics argue that NCEA encourages students to take the so-called 'easy route'. They say that:

• NCEA encourages students to do only the minimum amount of work required to gain the credits they need to achieve each of the three levels

• NCEA allows students to opt for what the critics describe as 'easy' unit standards rather than the more 'challenging' achievement standards

• NCEA puts too much emphasis on internal assessment, and in particular the opportunity for re-assessment. The critics argue that this means students will do a minimal amount of work the first time they are assessed, knowing they will get feedback which will help them improve on the second try.

We wanted to find out whether there was any evidence to support these claims. It is important to note that we carried out our research before the introduction of excellence and merit endorsements on NCEA certificates. These were first used for students who had completed NCEA requirements by the end of 2007. The endorsements were introduced as a way of countering criticisms that NCEA results were reported in a way that did not reward high-performing students.

We were also interested in finding out how NCEA results compared with the results of more traditional methods of testing, and what parents and teachers thought of the new qualification.

DO STUDENTS OPT FOR THE 'EASY ROUTE'?

We found little evidence that students were taking the easy route to NCEA by doing the minimum amount of work necessary. In fact, the more academically inclined students gained far more than the 80 credits they need to achieve NCEA Level 1, with many gaining 138 credits or more.

Nor was there any evidence that students were opting for unit standards over achievement standards. Assuming that unit standards are easier than achievement standards (and this is not necessarily the case), we found that students had little say over what type of standard is used to assess their learning. That decision is usually made by the school or the individual teacher when the course is designed.

Far fewer students took up reassessment opportunities than the criticism would suggest. While the majority of teachers said they offered the chance to be reassessed, just 6 percent of the students said they had taken up this opportunity.

There was also little evidence that skipping assessments is a common practice. The highest rate of skipping was in English, where 10 percent skipped internal assessments and 13 percent skipped external assessments.

As might be expected, rates of skipping assessments were very low in the students' most-enjoyed classes, but they were only marginally higher in their least-enjoyed ones.

ASSOCIATION BETWEEN NCEA AND THE COMPETENCIES

We found that the students who scored well in our cognitive competency tests also did well in NCEA. Similarly, students who did less well in our cognitive competency tests had less success with NCEA. In other words, it appears that NCEA gives much the same broad picture of student performance as more traditional forms of assessment.

Attitudinal competency is also important. Students with high cognitive and attitudinal competency not only gained more NCEA credits, they were also more likely to achieve those credits with merit or excellence. The one exception was the attitudinal competency, social skills. We found that a student's social skills were unrelated to their NCEA performance.

Individual student performance in NCEA was also closely related to their cognitive and attitudinal competency at age 14. This indicates the importance of previous experience and habits for subsequent performance.

Students who enjoyed reading between the ages of 8 and 14 also performed better in NCEA than those who did not enjoy reading between the ages of 8 and 14. This is consistent with the fact that success at secondary school is dependent on having good reading skills.

PARENTS' VIEWS OF NCEA

In 2006, when we collected this information, there was still considerable uncertainty among parents about whether NCEA was a 'good thing' or not. Only 49 percent of parents thought NCEA was definitely better than the previous system, with 24 percent saying it was not better than the old system and another 24 percent saying they were not sure.

On the other hand, most parents (69 percent) thought their children had a generally positive attitude towards NCEA, and all but a few said their child coped well with any assessment pressures. Just over half of parents thought their child would work hard regardless of whether a topic was being assessed or not, and 42 percent thought their child would always strive for excellence.

Parents who were happy with the new system saw it as a good way to chart progress and accumulate credits across the year. They also said it gave students more chance to succeed, and helped improve their work and study habits.

Parents who were unhappy with the new system thought it was less demanding and less motivating than the old one, and that it did not reward effort.

As a general rule, parents who were happy with their child's progress at school were more likely to be happy with NCEA, and those who were unhappy with their child's progress at school were less happy with NCEA. In other words, it is possible that for some parents, NCEA has become a 'lightning rod' for their dissatisfaction with other aspects of the education system.

TEACHERS' VIEWS OF HOW STUDENTS APPROACH NCEA

Most teachers thought their students had a positive attitude to NCEA. This is particularly true for the teachers whose students enjoyed their classes. The teachers of students' most-enjoyed classes were more likely to think that students could cope with the pressure of internal assessment, and were realistic about their likely success, than the teachers of students' least-enjoyed classes.

Only 15 percent of teachers of the most-enjoyed classes said that students in the study were not interested in work that would not lead to any credits, compared with 26 percent of the teachers of the least-enjoyed classes.

8. Out-of-school influences

By the age of 16, our participants were starting to have more adult experiences than they were at 14. They were now experimenting with sex and drugs, and embarking on romantic relationships. Half of the 16-year-olds had fallen in love in the previous year, and 34 percent had had sex, compared with just 9 percent at age 14.

They also drank more alcohol. Almost half our participants had never drunk alcohol at 14, but only 16 percent of the 16-year-olds had not done so in the previous year. And while only 19 percent of 14-year-olds had done something they regretted while drunk, that number had risen to just over 51 percent by the time they were 16.

Most participants said they had been bored at least sometimes. About two-thirds felt they did not have enough money at least sometimes, and around half thought they did not have enough freedom.

By 16, our participants were less likely to have broken a parental rule than they were at 14—but more likely to have been reprimanded if they did so. However, they continued to feel well-connected to their families, and to feel both loved and trusted by their parents.

Their leisure activities remained similar to those at age 14, but they read slightly less, watched slightly less television, played less sport and spent less time playing computer games than they did when they were younger.

On the other hand, 45 percent of them had paid work at least one day a week. That compares with the 34 percent who had some paid work—largely informal—at age 14.

LEISURE ACTIVITIES

We wanted to find out how our participants spend their leisure time, what they enjoy the most and what is most important to them. The five leisure activities they spent the most time doing were:

1. Text messaging

Text messaging was the most common leisure activity among 16-year-olds. Almost all of them had a cellphone, and 74 percent said they texted most days.

2. Watching television

Television continued to be a regular part of their daily lives, with 66 percent saying they watched television most days. By comparison, only 27 percent say they read most days—compared with 42 percent at age 14. Another 24 percent said they read one or two days a week.

Those who had left school watched slightly more television than those who were still at school—an average of 2.4 hours a day compared with 2.1 hours. Overall, the study participants watched slightly less television than they did when they were 12 and 14.

3. Hanging out with friends

Friends continued to be very important to their lives, with 53 percent describing friends as one of their main interests. However, the things they did with their friends had changed slightly since they were 14. They were more likely to hang out at a friend's house, or to go to parties or on holiday with their friends than they were at 14.

4. Using the computer

The young people in our study are mostly 'digital natives'. Two-thirds of them had computers in their homes from the age of 8. By age 16, 93 percent of them used a computer at home, 47 percent on most days.

They now used the computer more than they did when they were younger. At age 12, for example, they used a computer for an average of 3.8 hours a week. By 16, they were using a computer for an average of 7.2 hours a week.

The top five computer-related activities were:

- downloading music and pictures etc
- surfing the net for fun
- chatting online
- emailing friends
- getting information about jobs or education.

5. Exercise and sport

Active participation in sport had dropped back since the age of 14. Only 33 percent of 16-year-olds said they played sport for fun most days, compared with 50 percent at age 14. However, doing exercise and physical training continued to be a regular part of the lives of about two-thirds of our participants.

RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND DIFFICULT EXPERIENCES

Our participants were much more likely to engage in risky behaviour at 16 than they were at 14. They drank more alcohol and they were much more likely to have had sex. Almost a fifth said they had got into trouble with the police, and 30 percent said they had been involved in a physical fight. Half of our participants said they had got into trouble at school.

A quarter of the young people reported being hassled about their body shape and size, and 46 percent reported feeling left out at times. Almost a third of Māori and Pacific students said they had been hassled

about their culture in the previous year, compared with just 13 percent of Pakeha and Asian students. Just under 5 percent said they had been hassled about their sexuality.

Relatively few students had experienced difficult events such as an ongoing health problem. However, 17 percent had experienced a family breakup, and 20 percent had experienced the death of a friend.

FRIENDSHIPS

As in the past, friends were an important part of our participants' lives. However, there have been changes in what they most value in a friend. At age 12, it was having fun together. By age 16, they saw support and trust as being more important. Long-lasting friendships had also become more important than they used to be.

We found three different patterns of friendship:

1. 'Solid' friendships with a high level of trust and respect. Around 80 percent of our participants had this kind of friendship.

2. 'Extending' friendships, where their friends share their concerns and their thoughts about the future. About half had friends who pushed them to do well, introduced them to new things and listened to what they have to say.

3. 'Risky' friendships, where their friends are likely to drink, take drugs, smoke cigarettes and get into trouble. Around a fifth had these kinds of friendships.

We also found that 16-year-olds were more likely to listen to their friends, rather than their parents, than they were when they were younger. Only a third of 12-year-olds said they would disobey their parents to do something their friends wanted them to do. By the age of 16, more than half said they would disregard their parents in favour of their friends.

VALUES

By the age of 16, our participants saw enjoying what they do, and doing well at school, as being more important than when they were younger. They were also more concerned about having money to spend than they were at ages 12 and 14.

However, they were now less concerned about wearing the right clothes and looking cool, and they were also less concerned about having lots of friends. Success at sport had become less important than it used to be.

Looking ahead, they continued to see having a happy family life as being the most important aspect of adulthood. However, many more 16-year-olds than 12 and 14-year-olds saw having an interesting job as being important.

FAMILY LIFE

Most of our participants continued to have a warm and loving relationship with their parents, and to feel included in their families. They trusted their parents, and felt they could get help from them if they needed it—though fewer than half shared their problems and troubles with their parents.

Relatively few—less than 20 percent—felt pressured by their family, although about a third thought their family worried too much about what they did with their friends.

Almost all of the young people (92 percent) had family rules about drug use, and 85 percent had rules about alcohol use. Rules about language, doing housework, doing homework, and what time they have to go to bed were also common. But the 16-year-olds said their parents had fewer rules and expectations about their behaviour than they did when they were younger. However they were more likely to be told off or lectured if they did break a rule than they were at 14.

More than a third of the 16-year-olds came home to an empty house—up from 25 percent at age 14, and just 15 percent at age 12. However, 59 percent said that they were greeted by a parent when they get home.

A fifth of the young people spent at least some time living in two different houses, and half of them said the rules were different in each home.

Parents, too, generally felt happy with the relationship they had with their 16-year-olds. Most felt it had become more adult or closer than it was at 14. Parents said they were more likely to negotiate about things they disagreed about than they were in the past. However, 15 percent of parents said their relationship with their child had become more distant.

Just over half the parents had no concerns about their child, and a third had only low-level concerns. The thing that worried the largest number of parents (35 percent) was their child's learning at school. On the other hand, 59 percent of parents were satisfied with their child's progress at school.

9. Looking ahead—the transition from school

By the age of 16, students are nearing the end of their secondary schooling. Of the 447 participants in the age-16 study, 27 had already left school. Most of the others planned to stay at school until the end of Year 13.

Life beyond school offers many possibilities, and we were interested in finding out how our participants saw their lives unfolding in their first year of leaving school. We were particularly interested in three aspects of their post-school life:

- their plans for tertiary study
- their career aspirations
- the support and information they get to help them plan for the future.

These three issues are important in the current youth transition landscape, which emphasises individual choice at a time when the pathways and possibilities are constantly expanding. However, students may not necessarily have been taught the skills or have the capacity to successfully navigate the options and make the required decisions.

FEELINGS ABOUT LEAVING SCHOOL

We found that in general our participants had a positive and open outlook towards leaving school. In particular, they were looking forward to:

- earning money
- having more freedom
- being able to study what they want
- making their own decisions
- meeting new and different people
- establishing a career.

However, they also saw leaving school as a challenge. In fact, many of the things students thought would be best about leaving school were also the things they thought would be hardest about leaving school. They include:

- establishing a career
- working out what they want to do
- learning how to manage their time and money.

Female students were more anxious than male students about what life would be like once they left school. Females were concerned about things such as maintaining old friendships and starting new ones, and about practical matters such as managing their money and developing tertiary study skills.

INTENDED ACTIVITIES AFTER LEAVING SCHOOL

Students identified a range of activities they would be likely to undertake in the year after they left school. The four most common were:

- further study
- travelling
- earning-while learning
- working fulltime

Half the students planned to undertake only one of these four options, and half said they would combine two or more of them. This suggests they were looking at different ways of following their interests, and were factoring in possible changes of direction, such as finding a new interest or failing to get into the course of their choice.

Further study

The majority of our participants—72 percent—were planning to undertake further study once they left school. Of those, more than two thirds (69 percent) expected to go to university, and another 19 percent expected to study at a polytechnic. Most expected to study fulltime.

Pakeha and Asian students were more likely to be planning fulltime study than Māori or Pacific students. Girls were slightly more likely than boys to be planning fulltime study.

Students from high decile schools, and those whose mothers had high educational qualifications, were much more likely to say they planned to go to university rather than another kind of tertiary institution. Students from low income families and whose mothers had low educational qualifications were less likely to aspire to any kind of tertiary study.

More than half the students expected to study more than once in their lifetime, usually to deepen their expertise in a particular area.

Travelling

About half of the students thought they would travel during their first year after school. Two quite separate groups of students were most likely to travel:

- those who were most engaged in risky behaviour
- those with university-qualified mothers.

More females (58 percent) than males (44 percent) expected to travel during their first year after school.

Earning while learning

Relatively few students (23 percent) expected to undertake a 'learn-as-you-earn' option, such as an apprenticeship or an industry cadetship. Twice as many males than females were considering this option. This probably reflects the male domination of most apprenticeships, which tend to be in the trades area.

Working fulltime

Just over a fifth (22 percent) of students expected to work fulltime in the first year after leaving school. More males (29 percent) than females (16 percent) expected to do so, and more Māori and Pacific students (30 percent) than Pakeha and Asian students (13 percent).

FAVOURED OCCUPATIONS

Students' most-favoured occupations fell into two broad areas:

- technical and associated professional
- professional.

Students were more likely to be interested in a professional occupation if they had high cognitive and attitudinal competencies, a high number of NCEA credits, and their mothers had high educational qualifications.

Far more males than females were considering a trade occupation—24 percent of males compared with just 3 percent of females.

Almost two thirds of students said their future career choice was 'strongly connected' or 'quite connected' to the subjects they had taken at school. About half said they thought their career choice was a job that would pay well, though relatively few said that this was the reason they were interested in it. Instead, they were more interested in a job that was personally rewarding and enjoyable.

CAREER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

We wanted to find what activities and sources of information students found most useful when they were thinking about careers and pathways from school. We asked them about a wide range of career-related activities, including things such as talking with a school careers advisor, as well as non-school-based activities such as media advertising.

They identified many of these career-related activities as useful, but not necessarily as very useful. In addition, many of the students had not taken part in most of the common school-based careers activities we

listed. This is disturbing given that schools are mandated through National Administration Guideline 1.6 to provide appropriate career education and guidance for all students in year 7 and above.

For most students, families were their single most useful source of career information. More than 80 percent said that talking with their family about their future options was either 'very useful' or 'useful'.

Talking with their friends was their next most useful source of career information.

Just half of the students said that talking to teachers or a careers advisor was useful or very useful. Rather worryingly, 41 percent of students said they had never talked to a teacher or career advisor about their future options, and 45 percent had not taken part in related activities such as visiting a tertiary institution or attending a career expo.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE CONCEPT OF 'CAREER'

Young people are faced with many more career possibilities than their parents. They have more subjects to choose from at school, and many more tertiary institutions at which they can study. There are also many more types of career available to them, making career decisions a fundamentally more difficult proposition.

Ideas about what a career is have also started to change. More people now expect their working life to offer fulfilment and satisfaction, rather than simply being a way of earning money. People change jobs and careers more often during their lifetime, and they develop and specialise their skills. There is also much more interest in issues such as work-life balance, flexible working conditions, and the use of fixed-term contracts rather than having a fulltime position.

 We wanted to find out whether these emergent trends were reflected in the way students thought about the concept of 'career'.

We found that they did tend to see a 'job' as being different from a 'career', and that they recognised that simply having a job was not a sufficient condition for having a career.

But they were more likely to agree with traditional rather than emergent ideas about what a career is. Thus they were more likely to see a career as a job you can do well, and where you get promoted to higher positions in the same workplace, rather than as a something that allows you to travel and get work somewhere else, or to use the same skills to get different kinds of jobs in different workplaces.

The students did show a high level of agreement with two emergent career ideas. These were that a career means:

- having a qualification you can keep building on with more qualifications and experience in the same area
- being in paid work and having enough time for family friends and leisure activities.

However, we believe that the careers education currently being offered in schools means that students will struggle to get to grips with the shifts between traditional and emergent ideas about career. The new New Zealand Curriculum may help address this problem by shifting the way we think about knowledge, teaching

and learning. For example, there may be potential for career decision-making skills to be taught through the key competencies.