

YEA Recommendations to the Government on their proposal to replace NCEA

ABOUT YEA

YEA (Youth Employability Aotearoa) is a systems change organisation in Aotearoa New Zealand advocating for our youth to be given the skills and support to become work-ready. We represent over 500 individuals, organisations, businesses, associations, and elected members who are committed to ensuring the future workforce is equipped with the skills needed to create strong communities and a robust economy.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Government's proposal to replace NCEA is an opportunity to reform the education system to better prepare young people for a rapidly changing, skills-based global economy. To ensure our youth are prepared for the world of work, we need to shift away from traditional qualifications towards developing adaptable, holistic skills—particularly transferable skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and resilience.

These skill competencies need to be embedded across curricula, and work-based learning opportunities need to be available to all students through the creation of inclusive, diverse pathways. We call for significant investment in vocational education, robust industry partnerships, and a comprehensive career guidance framework to ensure all students have meaningful options aligned with industry needs.

Ultimately, we need a flexible, inclusive, and skills-focused education system that equips young people with the confidence, competencies, and resilience necessary to thrive in a dynamic labour market, thereby fostering a future-ready workforce for New Zealand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As advocates for youth employability, we see the proposed replacement of NCEA as a pivotal opportunity to reshape education in a way that aligns with the rapidly changing local and global labour markets.

The World Economic Forum forecasts that over one-third of all jobs worldwide—more than one billion—are expected to be transformed by technology in the next decade. Skill gaps are categorically considered the biggest barrier to business transformation by Future of Jobs Survey respondents this year. This shift underscores the urgent need for an education system that prioritises skills over traditional qualifications. By focusing on developing adaptable, holistic skills, we can help close persistent opportunity gaps and create a future-ready workforce.

The world is rapidly shifting to a skills-based economy, and this represents a fundamental transformation. Rather than focusing on traditional credentials, employers are interested in what employees can actually do. Specific abilities and practical experience are valued over academic qualifications. Transitioning to a dynamic, skills-based education system is therefore essential. The future of work extends beyond hard skills; it requires fostering attributes such as creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and resilience. Employers are increasingly seeking these “power skills” in their workforce.

Research shows that entry-level employees are inadequately prepared for their position, particularly lacking skills such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, and collaboration. International frameworks, including UNESCO’s key competencies for sustainability, emphasise the importance of skills, such as systems thinking, critical thinking, self-awareness, and strategic problem-solving.

To prepare for this future, our education system must integrate these skills throughout the curriculum. This can be achieved by embedding human-centred competencies across multiple subjects. Moreover, work-based learning—such as work experience and exposure—should be standard for all students. These experiences facilitate real-world exposure, enhance employability, and help students understand industry standards and expectations.

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We need a broad vision that offers young people meaningful options aligned with their interests, aspirations, and, importantly, industry needs. We advocate strongly for enhanced vocational education, embedded within a unified, flexible system, and would oppose segmentation of students into separate "academic" and "vocational" pathways. Such dividing lines risk limiting potential and reinforcing inequalities. Instead, schools must be resourced to offer diverse options and integrated pathways.

A future-ready system must normalise work-integrated learning for all. Schools should be equipped to partner with employers to ensure placements are valuable and engaging, providing authentic experiences and a clear understanding of the world of work. The proposed resourcing of the ISBs is insufficient to support even the current fragmented and woefully under-resourced vocational education pathways offered in schools. If the government is serious in its aspiration to provide "world-leading" VET in schools, then considerable investment will be needed. Vocational pathways in schools need to be appropriately resourced, and incentives are required to secure industry engagement.

To support students effectively and to meet industry needs, a comprehensive career education and guidance framework must be integrated into the curriculum—"early, often, and embedded"—covering self-awareness, employability skills, financial literacy, driver licensing, and workforce trends. This approach must be supported by dedicated resources, ongoing professional development, and innovative tools such as micro-credentials. Teachers will require training to deliver effective career guidance, and systems should be established to assess programme impact, making career education a core responsibility of school leadership.

In conclusion, we call for an education system that is flexible, inclusive, and skills-focused, that prepares our youth for the realities of a dynamic labour market. This entails creating a skill-based curriculum with diverse pathways, providing work-based learning opportunities for all, and embedding career guidance throughout schooling. Such reforms will equip young New Zealanders with the confidence, skills, and resilience needed to thrive, and the future-ready workforce industries need to flourish.

SUPPORTING RESEARCH

<https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/digest/>
https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/artificial-intelligence-and-the-future-of-skills/ai_capability_indicators_brochure.pdf
<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/10/skills-economy-what-is-it/#:~:text=The%20rise%20of%20the%20skills,are%20more%20adaptable%20to%20change.>
https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/10/who-will-be-the-workers-most-affected-by-ai_fb7fccccd/14dc6f89-en.pdf
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/empowering-the-workforce-in-the-context-of-a-skills-first-approach_345b6528-en.html
https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/empowering-the-workforce-in-the-context-of-a-skills-first-approach_345b6528-en/full-report.html

Yours sincerely



Emma Godwin

Director

YEA

Ph 021 056 0759

emma@yea.org.nz