

New Zealand

International case study

Generic skills description	Key competencies; employability skills.
Generic skills in the academic and vocational curriculum	Skills education is integrated into subjects in the curriculum, not treated as isolated competencies.
Skills teaching and learning approaches	Emphasis on student-centred, inquiry-based learning approaches.
Generic skills assessment	Assessed within other subjects, and as part of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)
Teacher autonomy	Considerable autonomy in how to include skills in subject or vocational teaching

This is a case study of generic skills in 14-19 education in **New Zealand**, developed through a desk review of selected, mostly official documents. It is intended to be read alongside another 9 international case studies and an overarching summary report of the research *Sheffield Institute of Education* undertook in collaboration with *Centre for Education Systems* with funding from *The Charitable Foundation for Educational Development*. The project investigated how ‘generic skills’ are characterised, understood, and implemented across 10 jurisdictions, with particular reference to the relevance for England.

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Summary

Education in New Zealand puts strong emphasis on generic skills, which are framed as key competencies in the national curriculum. There are five key competencies:

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

These competencies extend beyond skills to include knowledge, attitudes and values which equip individuals to actively contribute to their communities. The competencies are not treated as isolated or independent; they form the foundations of learning across all areas of study.

The New Zealand curriculum sets out achievement standards and unit standards in line with the National Qualifications Framework. These standards form the basis of qualifications in years 11–13, including the National Certificate of Educational Achievement and other optional national certificates offered by schools. Key competencies are integrated into the national curriculum and assessed as an integral component of the qualifications.

Employability Skills are also delineated in the New Zealand system. Based on the key competencies, these skills are emphasised particularly in vocational education for their transferability across different domains and industries. To support young people in preparation for employment, in 2016 the Ministry of Education released the Youth and Transition Framework and the Employability Skills Framework. Both frameworks were collaboratively developed with representatives of tertiary and secondary education, employers and industry, and other government agencies.

1. Contextual Factors

This section provides an overview of the country of New Zealand, beginning with its social and economic context and its educational context in section 1.1. Section 1.2 explores the key systems and structures of the education system. Section 1.3 covers the education workforce and professional status. Finally, section 1.4 describes how policy relating to skills is formed and enacted in New Zealand. These are all discussed particularly in relation to generic skills.

1.1 Economic, social and educational context

New Zealand has historically been a stable country, anchored by a robust democratic system.¹ Its political landscape is characterised by a multiparty parliamentary system a stable governance framework and strong institutions.

New Zealand, also known as Aotearoa, maintains a constitutional bicultural identity shaped by the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, which established a partnership between Māori and the British Crown. While contemporary society increasingly values Māori voices, acknowledging their contributions and heritage, historical colonial processes have often marginalised Māori culture, a pattern that persists today.²

New Zealand is currently undergoing demographic changes, driven by steady population growth, an aging population, and migration patterns. New Zealand's labour market landscape has seen challenging shifts in the 21st century. There is an increasing shortage of skilled workers needed to meet the higher-tech needs of industry. Meanwhile, automation is predicted to affect roughly one-third of jobs in New Zealand, particularly those filled by people with lower-level or no qualifications.³ The skills gap is one of the factors driving reforms of vocational education, as outlined in the next sections.

Educational overview

New Zealand is a multicultural society, and this diversity is reflected in its educational system which has a declaimed aim of promoting inclusivity and equality for all students regardless of background. The system has established processes aiming to ensure that students receive consistent and high-quality education across all levels.⁴

¹ BBC, 2023 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15357770>

² Passey & Burns, 2023 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2231911>

³ New Zealand Government, 2023 <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/strategies-projects/vocational-education-system/>

⁴ Ministry of Education, 2023 <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/our-role-and-our-people/education-in-nz/>

Nevertheless, ethnicity continues to influence educational disparities in New Zealand – in particular, poorer outcomes for Māori students.

Schools in New Zealand communities with the lowest socio-economic indicators have very high proportions of Māori and Pasifika students and small numbers of their Pākehā (white) counterparts. The converse profile applies to schools in more advantaged communities.⁵

Recent reforms to vocational education in New Zealand have sought to give VET a more instrumental role as well as tackling the skills gap. The objective is to mitigate the impact of background factors on educational achievement and open up more effective and fulfilling pathways for young people heading from secondary school into employment. Arguably, the reforms have had only partial success, as ethnicity and socio-economic status are factors which continue to mediate participation in VET.⁶

1.2 Key educational systems and structures

Curricula, assessment and qualifications

The New Zealand curriculum has eight main learning areas: English, the arts, health and physical education, learning languages, mathematics and statistics, science, social sciences, and technology.⁷ The process of understanding the content in these learning areas is considered “valuable in itself and valuable for the pathways it opens to other learning”.⁸ The curriculum has three stages in New Zealand, beginning with the national curriculum, then interpreted by the school to establish the school curriculum, then considered by the teacher to create a classroom curriculum. The national curriculum is more of a framework than a prescriptive document. The national curriculum, combined with the qualifications framework, is the basis of the school and classroom curriculums.

The New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) governs all qualifications at secondary and tertiary levels and carries a globally recognised quality assurance mark. It specifies 10 levels of qualification:

- Levels 1-4: Certificate
- Levels 5 and 6: Diploma and Certificate
- Level 7: Bachelor’s Degree, Graduate Diploma, Diploma, and Graduate Certificate
- Level 8: Bachelor’s Honours Degree, Postgraduate Diploma and Postgraduate Certificate
- Level 9: Master’s degree
- Level 10: Doctoral degree

⁵ Ministry of Education, 2015

⁶ Strathdee & Cooper, 2017

⁷ Ministry of Education, 2023b <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum>

⁸ Ibid

School/college organisation

New Zealand's education system has the following tiers:⁹

- early childhood education: from birth to school entry age
- primary education: 5–12 years
- secondary education: 13–18 years
- tertiary education: higher and vocational education.

Students in secondary school pursue the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) which straddles NZQF levels 1 to 3. Students can choose to proceed on the general/academic NCEA route or can opt for vocational learning within or alongside the NCEA. The vocational programme options and institutions are described in the next section.

Vocational education and training in New Zealand

VET programme options start during secondary school at level 3, with schools collaborating with tertiary providers and trade academies. Tertiary-level VET is provided by Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs), Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), Wānanga (institutions providing education in a Māori cultural context), Private Training Establishments (PTEs), and within workplace settings.¹⁰ Essentially, two distinct systems are involved: on-the-job training (such as through ITOs) and off-the-job training through other providers/institutions.

The dual system has attracted criticism for being difficult to navigate and not fully reconciling industry needs with the needs of learners, as well as ITOs not having authority to shape delivery and standards of training across providers. The Reform of Vocational Education (ROVE) project, commenced in 2020, aimed to establish a cohesive and sustainable system that aligns VET provision with the evolving demands of the future workforce. As part of the reforms, New Zealand has established Te Pūkenga (New Zealand Institute of Skills & Technology)¹¹ and six Workforce Development Councils¹² each governed by the relevant industry to enhance industry leadership within vocational education.

1.3 Education workforce and professional status

In New Zealand, teaching is a graduate-only profession: to become qualified teachers, individuals are required to hold at minimum a bachelor's degree in education or a related field.

All teaching qualifications conferred in New Zealand undergo a quality approval process by NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority) and the Teaching Council.¹³ Unlike many other jurisdictions, teacher registration and certification in New Zealand does not confine teachers to

⁹ Ministry of Education, 2023

¹⁰ Skills Consulting Group, n.d. <https://skillsconsultinggroup.com/wp-content/uploads/SG0035-NZVET-Brochure.pdf>

¹¹ at <https://www.xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/>

¹² Tertiary Education Commission, 2023 <https://www.tec.govt.nz/vocational-education/vocational-education/strengthening-vocational-education/workforce-development-councils-wdcs/>

¹³ Ministry of Education, 2024 <https://www.teachnz.govt.nz/studying-to-be-a-teacher/getting-qualified/>

a specific education sector, such as early childhood, primary or secondary. Instead, employers determine if a certified teacher has the necessary qualifications, skills and experience for a teaching position. All applicants for teacher registration must have completed either an approved New Zealand Initial Teacher Education program or an equivalent overseas qualification that is pre-approved by NZQA or subject to an International Qualifications Assessment.¹⁴ Vocational teachers, who specialise in particular vocational/occupational fields, are required to have industry experience in addition to their teaching qualifications.

Professional autonomy

In New Zealand, teachers have a significant level of professional autonomy and are not bound to specific curriculum content or textbooks in a strict or inflexible way. Within the national curriculum framework and guidelines set by the Ministry of Education, teachers are encouraged to use their professional judgement to tailor content and materials to align with the needs and interests of their students and their local context. Similarly, the education framework empowers teachers to select appropriate teaching methods, strategies, and resources to produce learning environments and experiences that cater best for their students. However, this autonomy must be read in the context of a system-wide emphasis on student-centred and inquiry-based learning. In this pedagogical approach, teachers involve students actively not passively in the learning process in order to foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity.

1.4 Policy formation and implementation

New Zealand's Ministry of Education is the government's lead agency for the education system. It is responsible for developing the national curriculum and achievement standards, which together specify learning objectives and content for schools, and for setting the framework for teaching and learning across subjects and grade levels. The Ministry of Education allocates funding directly to education institutions which manage their own operations and finances under its aegis. It provides them with professional development schemes and other resources. In the primary and secondary sectors, each school has a board of trustees with responsibility for school governance – typically a board comprises the head of school, a member of staff, elected parents and community representatives.¹⁵

The Ministry of Education also performs research and monitoring activities, and stakeholder engagement is an integral part of the process of education policymaking. During policy development, the government consults with groups and individuals who are affected by the proposals, including educators, educational institutions, parents, students, and representatives of the Māori communities.¹⁶

¹⁴ Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2024 <https://teachingcouncil.nz/getting-certificated/for-over-seas-trained-teachers/moving-to-teach-in-new-zealand/>

¹⁵ Mullis et al., 2016 <https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2015/encyclopedia/countries/new-zealand/>

¹⁶ Ministry of Education, 2023a

The work of New Zealand’s Ministry of Education is complemented by other government agencies with distinct roles in the education system including implementation of policies. The key agencies are: the Education Review Office (ERO) which evaluates and reports on the quality of education in schools and early childhood education services; the NZQA which regulates and quality-assures New Zealand qualifications; the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand which is the professional body for teachers in schools (its remit including continuous professional development); the Tertiary Education Commission which oversees government-funded post-compulsory education and training; and The Correspondence School — Te Kura which offers distance education from early childhood to Year 13.¹⁷

Policy implementation

As described above, the curriculum has several different parts, and is designed to be interpreted by the school to establish a school curriculum, then by individual teachers to create a classroom curriculum. National assessments and oversight by the ERO provide a degree of accountability, but there is significant trust placed in both schools and teachers to effectively implement the fundamental elements of the curriculum, and any changes in national policies.

¹⁷ Ministry of Education, 2023c <https://www.education.govt.nz/our-work/our-role-and-our-people/education-in-nz/education-agencies/>

2. Generic skills

The New Zealand curriculum refers to generic skills as key competencies, identifying five areas of competency that all individuals, including students aged 14 to 19, should be supported to develop:¹⁸

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

These competencies encompass the knowledge, attitudes, and values, as well as skills per se, that are deemed essential for individuals to actively engage and contribute to their communities. The key competencies are integrated into the New Zealand curriculum and regarded as the foundation of learning across all subjects. They are built into subject specifications, not treated as isolated or independent areas of learning.

Assessment of generic skills – key competencies – is integrated into the assessment of the subjects/areas feeding into qualifications in years 11–13, including the National Certificate of Educational Achievement and various optional national certificates. In other words, the competencies are not assessed separately.¹⁹

Employability skills

Based on the key competencies in the curriculum, the New Zealand education system also delineates essential employability skills which can be applied across different domains and industries. These skills are promoted through the MoE's Youth and Transition Framework²⁰ and Employability Skills Framework²¹, with the primary objective of supporting young people in their preparation for employment. The purpose of the framework is to promote skills rather than to provide an assessment framework, so whilst promoted by government they are not build into statutory qualifications frameworks.

¹⁸ Ministry of Education, 2020 <https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Key-competencies/About>

¹⁹ Ministry of Education, 2023b

²⁰ Tertiary Education Commission, 2016

²¹ New Zealand Government, 2024 <https://youthguarantee.education.govt.nz/tools/employability-skills/employability-skills-framework/>

The seven key employability skills are: ²²

- Positive attitude
- Communication
- Teamwork
- Self-management
- Willingness to learn
- Thinking skills (problem-solving and decision making)
- Resilience

These employability skills are specific to tertiary education, so for those over the age of 18, but follow from the key competencies identified for education until age 18.

3. Subject and vocational skills

There are six established vocational pathways in New Zealand VET each aligned with a specific industry sector:

- Social and community services
- Construction and Infrastructure
- Manufacturing and technology
- Primary Industries (Food and Fibre)
- Service Industries
- Creative Industries

These pathways aim to help students understand the practical application of their studies and to develop the required skills and qualifications in their chosen industry.

Students in the final years of secondary education have options to gain vocational training and secondary qualifications in tandem. Alternatively, students may choose to integrate vocational courses into a more comprehensive general/academic curriculum.²³

Current reforms to vocational education may influence the content and structure of secondary vocational curricula, including the relationship between specific vocational skills and generic/transferable skills.²⁴

²³ Skills Consulting Group, n.d.

²⁴ New Zealand Government, 2023

4. Teaching and learning approaches

In New Zealand’s secondary academic pathway, teachers are expected to help students develop generic skills within their approaches to teaching and learning of subjects in the curriculum. As noted in section 1, teachers in New Zealand have considerable autonomy in how they teach, but there is an overarching pedagogical emphasis on student-centred, inquiry-based learning.

While there is no guaranteed method to ensure learning for every student in every situation, there are teaching methods outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum that may enhance student learning.²⁵ Key strategies include:

- create a supportive learning environment
- encourage reflective thought and action
- enhance the relevance of new learning
- facilitate shared learning
- make connections to prior learning and experience
- provide sufficient opportunities to learn
- inquire into the teaching–learning relationship.

New Zealand’s vocational education system is characterised by a strong integration of public and private providers, as well as employers. It embraces a flexible approach to vocational teaching and learning, which incorporates blended learning, online platforms, off-job training, and on-job learning models.²⁶

There is little known about teachers’ strategies to promote or embed different generic skills in the classroom. However, a 2019 study²⁷ conducted a detailed empirical investigation of the teaching and learning of employability skills in New Zealand VET. The study distinguished overt teaching strategies, where teachers and students are consciously and purposely developing the target skills, and covert strategies where teachers’ actions may serve to promote certain skills, but these could be outside of the students’ or the teacher’s awareness.

The researchers found that the most overtly taught skills were communication, self-management, and thinking skills. The most embedded skills were willingness to learn and positive attitude. The skills least likely to be observed at all were innovation and entrepreneurship.

²⁵ Ministry of Education, 2023b

²⁶ Skills Consulting Group, n.d.

²⁷ Fraser, et al., 2019



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