CONCORDE TŪHURA

ThinkPlace WāhiWhakaaro

VET in Schools – the gaps in the system

Acknowledgements

Ngā mihi

ConCOVE Tūhura and ThinkPlace WāhiWhakaaro would like to thank the subject matter experts interviewed for this project. Participants spanned industry, providers, schools and government, and kindly provided their deep knowledge and experience of how vocational education is delivered in schools. We are grateful for your time, expertise and contribution.

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Executive Summary

ThinkPlace was engaged to explore the philosophy (or 'mental models') of vocational education in schools, identifying opportunities to reframe it on the presumption that there are material barriers to success within the current model. Specifically, the intent is that this work will enable:

- an enhanced appreciation, dialogue and demand for and about VET career pathways in Aotearoa New Zealand;
- targeted investments that advance the design of and buy-in to a future-focussed model for VET in schools;
- opportunities for codesign and collaboration within and across the stakeholders in the education sector and industry;
- ConCOVE to influence and support positive system shifts, and facilitate closer alignment between schools and the construction industry.

Our assessment is predominantly the result of 15 in-depth interviews with sector stakeholders, backed-up by high-level desk research into national and international models. Broadly speaking, we were told that VET in schools currently operates as an adjunct to the academic curriculum, is fragmented, and is inconsistently applied and accessible. There is a disconnect in the motivations, expectations, investment and needs between the construction industry and schools. The capabilities and characteristics that industry needs amongst 'workforce ready' young people are not being met, and schools do not specifically prepare students for employment.

The determinants and drivers for the current state are complex, nuanced, and are inter-woven, and relate to how:

- education policies and funding regimes favour an academic focus on University Entry;
- schools, industry and other sector stakeholders do not meaningfully engage, nor understand each other's drivers, practices, approach, and constraints;
- students are not well served and supported throughout the process of exploring options and making complex decisions;

- industry and schools are ill-equipped and under-supported to transition young people into the workforce;
- scale and geography influence students' awareness of and access to opportunities;
- the eco-system and its measures of success reinforces societal perceptions of what constitutes 'achievement'.

We have also surfaced a strong desire amongst sector participants to effect significant change, including opportunities for tangible action. This discussion document summarises our assessment into five core themes, providing a structure for discussion within ConCOVE to understand the nature and magnitude of the challenges and opportunities. It also provides the basis for opening up a broader and deeper engagement process with sector stakeholders to unpick the issues, to refine and collaborate upon the proposed further actions.

Purpose

This document draws out the systemic gaps in the vocational education and training (VET) regime in schools, as a catalyst for further exploration, broader discussion and targeted action within and across the system.

Introduction

Our assessment is based on 15 in-depth interviews with school Principals and senior staff, Ministry of Education staff, industry body representatives and subject matter experts in vocational education. Importantly, almost all of the participants offered perspectives not only from their current roles but also from relevant previous roles in other parts of the sector.

The nature and magnitude of the findings and suggested next steps require an appreciation and consensus about the gap between current and potential future state, and the root causes. We anticipate that ConCOVE will consider its role and appetite for change in context of the complex eco-system, not least the sector stakeholders' interests, needs and perspectives, and current challenges for the construction industry. Broader stakeholder engagement will bring additional perspectives, explore opportunities and barriers to change, and create momentum. Optimising the timing and approach for this engagement is

important, because the most impactful actions will almost certainly require multi-party support and/or significant changes to the underlying conditions.

Gap Analysis based on the Six Conditions of change model.

We have identified a series of 'levers for change', codified against five distinct themes (below, and section 1.2) and mapped to the Six Conditions of Systems Change. This mapping is separately documented in Annex 1 'VET in Schools – six conditions of change'.

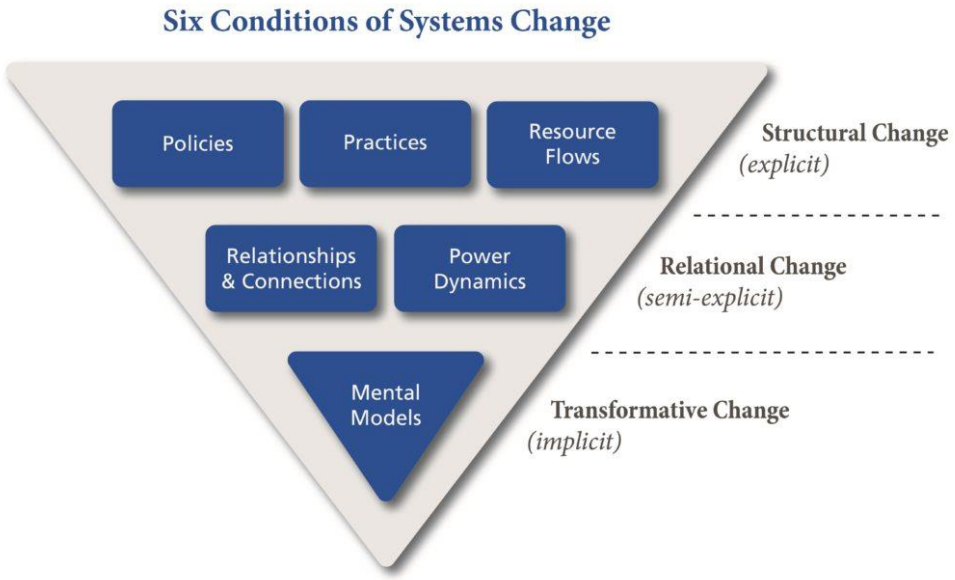

Table 1: The Six Conditions of Systems Change

Key themes examined in this paper

Section 1.2 describes what people told us within five distinct themes. Our assessment within and across these five themes is complex and heavily nuanced, and there is a high degree of subject-matter cross-over between the symptoms, evidence and root causes.

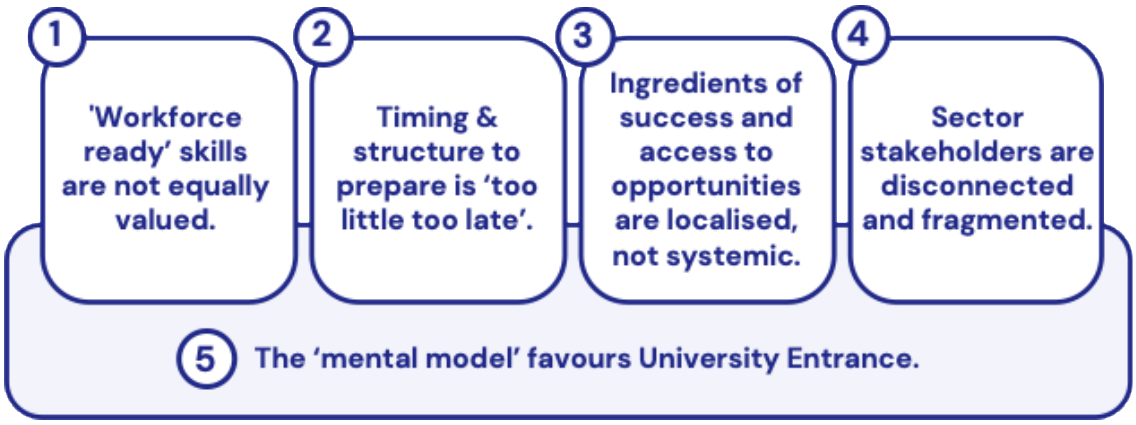

Table 2: The five key themes

Recommendations

We recommend that the ConCOVE Board:

1. **Notes** the underlying intent to better understand the drivers of the current 'mental model' for vocational education in schools, with the aim of making sense of the situation and opportunity.
2. **Notes** that while the approach undertaken in this assessment focussed on a (relatively small) sample size of sector participants from a range of backgrounds and perspectives, the nature of interviews has enabled us to surface significant depth of thinking, and demonstrates thematic consistency across the participants' contributions.
3. **Notes** that opportunities to include additional contexts and voices (e.g. te ao Māori, Pasifika, students and whānau) would need to be investigated and resourced in any future activity.
4. **Notes** that the actions and potential targeted investments are ThinkPlace's assessment and suggestions, based on what people told us and building upon their ideas.
5. **Commissions** a deeper exploration of good practice models (and their context) within Aotearoa New Zealand, as a 'no regrets' activity that will inform other actions and investments for future improvements.

1. Current state

In 2023, only 11.1% of school leavers achieved one or more Vocational Pathways Awards[1]. Acknowledging changes to the Awards criteria impacting from 2019 onwards and the impact of Covid, this has been declining steadily since 2017 and is the lowest achievement since 2013. Only 0.7% of students achieved a Construction and Infrastructure Award.

1.1 Our assessment

We have summarised what people told us into five distinct themes (Table 3). Our assessment within and across these five themes is complex and heavily nuanced, and there is a high degree of subject-matter cross-over between the symptoms, evidence and root causes.

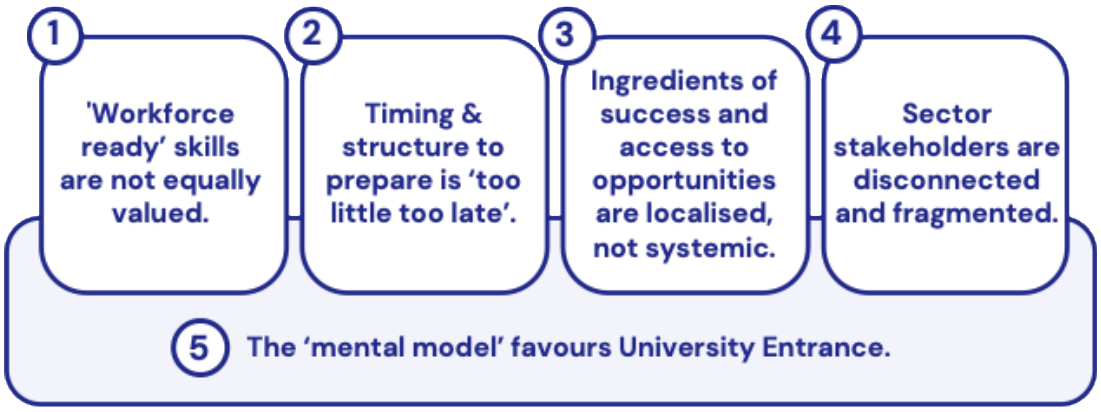

Table 3: The five key themes

Broadly speaking, we were told that VET in schools currently operates as an adjunct to the academic curriculum, is fragmented, and is inconsistently applied and accessible. There is a disconnect in the motivations, expectations, investment and needs between the construction industry and schools. The capabilities and characteristics that industry needs amongst 'workforce ready' young people are not being met, and schools do not specifically prepare students for employment.

To that end, successful vocational pathways rely on a school champion, industry and/or community connection to be valued and resourced – including funding, training and recognition. Quality and success requires the confluence of a school, industry body,

[1] Education Indicator, Vocational Pathways Awards August 2024.

community and region to make a cohesive and concerted effort - working together to create an approach that works for them and their young people.

Addressing the workforce readiness gap for industry (and more broadly across Aotearoa New Zealand) requires a multi-faceted approach involving stronger industry-education sector partnerships, increased funding and resources for vocational programmes, and a shift or perceptions to elevate the value of practical, work-based learning. Policies and practices that drive measurements of success and funding are fundamental influences within each of the five themes we have identified, but there are opportunities for positive steps within the current policy and practice regime.

1.2 What people told us

The scope and coverage of our interviews has been sufficient to surface a wide range of perspectives[2] and identify consistent thematic patterns. Our analysis of what people told us is contextualised by desk research about models of vocational education & training in New Zealand and overseas. What people told us also has a strong correlation to the student voice reflected in TEC's foundational 'Transitions from Secondary School' 2022 research paper, the 2019 New South Wales report[3] on VET delivered to Secondary Students, and the extensive CEDEFOP resources that continually assess trends and form conclusions about vocational education programmes in Europe.

[2] Note: opportunities to explore a te ao Māori context, and student voice, will be investigated and resourced in the next phase.

[3] Especially on topics of timetabling and curricular inflexibility, resources to enable cross-sector collaboration, relevance and quality of VET courses, the importance of workplace learning and industry experience, and effective support structures.

Theme 1: 'Workforce ready' skills are not equally valued

We found that 'workforce ready' knowledge, skills, and capabilities in ākonga are not equally valued in comparison to academic studies for University Entry, and are effectively 'drowned out' by the systemic focus on subjects and content that preference academic study and measures of success. Where such skills are being learned, they are not proactively recognised and acknowledged for their relevance and usefulness.

This means there is a mismatch between the skills and knowledge students acquire in school and what employers are looking for, and that potential employers do not consider young people to be 'work ready'. This mismatch intensifies the transition gap and effort, creates frustration and discord between the various actors in the system, as "industry get turned off students or even apprentices after having kids who are so far off work ready". Employers need to provide additional training and take on extra cost and risk, and it takes longer for young people to acclimatise and become productive than the current approach accommodates.

People told us that these 'workforce ready' skills, knowledge, characteristics and capabilities include things like: communication, relationship management, teamwork, recognising the value of work, self-management, independence, resilience, punctuality, reliability, attention span. Technical skills include things like: reading for understanding, problem solving, applying maths and reasoning in a work site or logistics context, understanding ICT in terms of data and the knowledge industry, or the power of systems to automate/disintermediate – noting the growing trend recognising the importance of technology[4] and digital skills[5]. Many of our interviewees cited the importance of having a driver's licence as a means to get to and from a place of work or training (subject to access to a vehicle), and also acknowledged the skills young people learn from the process of obtaining a licence.

Vocational pathways are framed in a binary discourse for students that positions them as subordinate options to academic routes for personal success. Positioning vocational pathways as a fall-back rather than an active choice that reflects a student's aspirations, interests and capabilities, means that students do not feel valued or successful at school.

[4] Royal Society Te Apārangi 'Technology and hangarau learning in Aotearoa New Zealand', 2021

[5] CEDEFOP Apprenticeships & the Digital Transition

There are no clear links from academic pathways to vocational careers, as the policies and practices for academic and vocational learning are not fully integrated nor on an equal footing, and there is no defined sequence of progression through exposure to vocational exploration and experience.

The streaming effect within the education system reinforces the discourse. We were told that academically successful students are actively discouraged from exploring vocational options, as teachers know it will "disrupt academic study" even if it may be relevant to future careers, e.g. engineering, and be "valuable to academically bright students because it enhances their next steps". This means they lose an opportunity to immediately contextualise their academic learning in a real-world setting. 'Academic students' do not get the time and space needed to make a link between the vocational skills they are learning, industry and the role they could have within it in their future lives.

Students are streamed from Year 12 (if not earlier) into vocational pathways that set them on a course rather than provide opportunities for all young minds to explore. Timetabling priorities and logistical practicalities prevent students from keeping options open, as once the vocational pathway is established students struggle to retain or return to academic studies that could prepare them for tertiary education if they subsequently decide that's what they need.

Attendance at Trades Academies or Gateway programmes means that students miss class time in at school, and (depending on the school's process) can frustrate students ability to complete other activities required towards achieving Level 1 and/or Level 2. Motivationally, the streaming effect is reinforced by the distinct (trades related) Unit Standards for those attending Trades Academies and Gateway programmes in order to obtain credits. The majority of Unit Standards recognise the highest result as 'achieved' at Level 2, whereas (academic focussed) Achievement Standards provide opportunities to obtain 'merit' and 'excellence' recognition status. We were told that "kids view vocational education as [attending] 'cabbage class'", that students return to classrooms "feeling disconnected" and are "put into 'Trades Maths' or 'Trades English' classes….which are dumbed down". This bias and stigmatisation is a disincentive for ākonga to engage with vocational pathways.

Importantly, many of these 'workforce ready' skills, capabilities and competencies are enduring, insofar as they are transversal across vocations and of broad value for students entering tertiary study. Transversal skills and capabilities (that are applicable in both tertiary education and workforce settings) are not actively targeted, recognised and valued, and yet have become a strong focus[6] in many European countries in recent years.

Theme 2: Timing and structure to prepare is 'too little too late'

The capability, capacity and quality of resources are key indicators of how vocational pathways in schools are underserved compared to academic pathways.

We were told that there is a significant lack of skilled and specialised vocational educators in a school setting, including but not limited to careers advisors, and that "quality people running these programmes gives a quality result". The people who are technically skilled and knowledgeable in the workforce also need to be able to teach because if "they're not a qualified teacher, you can turn a lot of young people off" and "tutors aren't necessarily experienced to manage teenage behaviour".

The overlap and interface between teaching and careers advice, and the people providing it, is also an issue. This includes how careers advisors "consider themselves school staff" in terms of their focus and the demands on their time, rather than as "the expert coming in". Also that in some schools, careers advice is a role given to teachers "as an adjunct", or for teachers "who aren't as good" at teaching an academic study. This is a symptom of and certainly reinforces the perception that providing careers advice and delivering relevant[7] 'work ready' content is subordinate to teaching academic subjects and/or is not considered the primary function of schools. This is reflected in budget allocation, allotted time in the curriculum and timetable, and influence of careers advisors amongst school staff.

[6] CEDEFOP Future of Vocational Education In Europe, 2022, s. 4.2.3

[7] The role of VET in context of current trends and future changes in labour workforce demand is also a policy concern within Europe. CEDEFOP Future of Vocational Education In Europe, 2022

The nature and timing of career preparation and advice was a major topic amongst what interviewees told us. The range of options, the complexity of the decision, and the magnitude of its impact are "overwhelming" and rushed for many students. During this same period, students "bear the burden of juggling two education systems at the same time" so become stressed, anxious and confused, and feel unsupported. Young people "struggle to make a decision about what's best for them", and are not made aware that skills, knowledge and experience they have already acquired or may pick up through exploration of options "will serve them well for future decisions".

Schools are typically not provided with information resources about and from industry, nor opportunities to engage and collaborate. We were told that "documentation [from the Ministry] is old, not very useful and not seen as valuable if MoE doesn't invest in it" and that "work-based training opportunities aren't visible to teachers but…glossy brochures about tertiary education are in their faces".

Interviewees told us that Gateway programmes and Trades Academies are not sufficient mechanisms, not always relevant, are variable in quality, and often hard to access – meaning that students lack exposure to what opportunities exist and what it is like to participate in the world of work. This lack of exposure includes an absence of information-based resources, little or no engagement between schools and students with people from industry, and limited opportunities to experience the world of work without compromising academic study.

In terms of timing, many people told us that preparing young people for the world beyond school starts too late, is compressed into a relatively short period, and finishes too early. We were consistently told that laying the foundations[8] for core skills, competencies and characteristics needs to commence earlier, and that it is too late and ineffective to be introducing these when the students are young adults. Importantly, many young people at Year 12 and 13 are not only unsure of what they might want to do after school, but lack the confidence, emotional and intellectual readiness to make complex decisions, especially as their brains are still developing and they are experiencing other external pressures.

[8] While the final choice of a student's pathway occurs late in the secondary school process within most OECD countries, the preparation of core skills, competencies and values can commence earlier. OECD, Managing Choice, Coherence and Specialisation in Upper Secondary Education.

Acknowledging that schools are not the only source of a young person's learning and influencing environment, we were told that for students "already experiencing a gap in educational exposure and delivery, it [the process] creates an additional barrier to even contemplating or being exposed to opportunities for learning and growth into the workforce".

Whānau obviously have a significant role in supporting young people to make decisions but are also "scared of giving the wrong advice" because they are equally uninformed. Whānau often have limited exposure to supporting resources and appreciation of opportunities that exist beyond their direct experience and perspectives.

The impact of the timing and nature of a stressful career decision making for students is compounded by the subsequent shock of a rapid and unsupported transition to the world of work.

Theme 3. Ingredients of success and access to opportunities are localised, not systemic

We have surfaced a number of consistent features and conditions for success within vocational pathways that exist at a local and regional level, but are not systemically applied, shared or accessible nationally. In these instances, people described their success "despite the system" and we surfaced how localised factors reinforce the potential for negative outcomes.

People told us (and provided examples) that the individual school's desire, capability, capacity and community relationships are make or break for a successful vocational programme, and that "we don't lack ambition [but] we lack scale".

For the school to consider vocational pathways with equal standing to UE "requires a conscious decision to value and highlight vocational education" where "every pathway is valid as long as you [the student] have a pathway". This conscious decision by the Principal competes with planning and operational decisions that are "driven by funding and staffing" to meet the dominant expectations of academic achievement.

The availability of teachers with relevant workforce and industry experience is a “rare commodity” and these resources are therefore highly sought after where the motivation and budget exists within the school. The availability of such teachers, or of equivalent skills and knowledge directly from industry, is highly dependent upon geography and scale. It is more likely to be affordable and accessible in larger cities and towns, or in regions where ‘blue collar’ work is prevalent, visible and its value more actively acknowledged. Similarly, in areas with prominent industry activity, local and regional connections are more likely to be made, from which collaborative relationships and arrangements are formed. This is about the confluence of desire, exposure and determination at a local level and can include industry bodies, local or regional councils, and community groups.

For schools that do not have these conditions, we were told it can be more about “good luck than good management” when schools can attract staff who want to “engage outside of their school” with industry and the community. Even so, the opportunities to which schools and students are exposed remain largely focussed on the specific industry within that area or region. The challenge remains of opening up students’ minds to the full breadth of career opportunities, let alone being able to experience it hands-on. For example, “kids can’t see or be inspired by the options that aren’t in their immediate domain”, and for vocational pathways to be fully effective then “students must want to be there”.

We were told that access to Gateway providers and Trades Academies is also more readily available and has fewer barriers in large cities and towns which have the advantages of scale, proximity and variety, including access to dual enrolment. For example, “schools with 200 or more students will [typically] have the scale to employ specialist staff, collaborate with tertiary providers, engage community and industry”. The developmental opportunities can result from associations with and programmes driven by Universities or other tertiary providers and/or the presence of a large employment base where there is the capacity and capability to operate vocational programmes.

Small and rural schools are disproportionately impacted in terms of ability to provide ākonga with breadth and depth of exposure and opportunity – they lack the economy of scale for funding resources and are geographically isolated. The burden falls on students or parents experiencing the ‘tyranny of distance’, which may necessitate driving several hours

and means very long days for rural students to access structured programmes and exposure to different types of work. Conversely, the aspirational value of trades are more likely to be appreciated in rural areas than in cities, where communities are more closely networked and young people see that business owners “are the ones with business signs on their utes towing the big boats”. These entrenched perceptions of stereotypical career opportunities are reinforced by the lack of effective career decision making resources available for young people in Aotearoa.

Affordability is an issue, whether it is access to a vehicle or “having the money for the bus” to get to the polytechnic or work experience, especially where household pressures or cultural norms require a young person to “get a job” rather than explore opportunities and develop their personal capabilities. The immediacy of paid work by going straight into the workforce can be more attractive or essential for some students than the opportunities for personal fulfilment and deferred (potentially greater) earning power. As with other motivational factors regarding esteem and perceived value, it is difficult for students to engage when the local, regional and societal conditions create additional barriers.

Theme 4. Sector stakeholders are disconnected and fragmented

There is a mismatch in the goals and outcomes between schools and industry, which is difficult to reconcile given the nature of their own drivers of success, fragmented relationships and lack of engagement with each other.

We were told that kaiako and career advisors do not have an appreciation for nor an understanding of the world of work, and lack “relatable work experience”. This includes how industry truly operates, or what opportunities for young people exist amongst industries.

At a systemic level, people we talked to were frustrated that “the system can’t change because it’s run by people who have no other perspective” in terms of education policy, practices and delivery. Where the skills, awareness and appreciation do exist, it’s “hard for teachers to keep up with the pace of change” in industry, and the programmes need “more input from industry to create more relevance”. It is also hard for teachers to “teach in relation to an industry setting” while they juggle the competing demands of delivering

within the curriculum framework to meet the expected educational performance, or for teachers to acquire industry-specific knowledge or qualifications required to deliver at Levels 2 and 3.

Businesses want to attract the "brightest and the best" but struggle because of the "enormity of the gap" and the streaming effect in schools. The gap between industry's expectations of the skills and experience required, and the reality of what students are being prepared for, are in part the result of a "mismatch in [expectation] of whose role it is to prepare students for work". Furthermore, people across government, schools, tertiary providers and industry "talk about VET with a subtly different definition" therefore there is a "barrier" simply in understanding what VET 'is'. The language in which VET is currently framed is not universal and engaging for all the players in the sector: students, whānau, kaiako, industry and training providers.

Teachers lack the resources and connections to industry, and can't "confidently talk about" opportunities within industry to a family in an environment where "work-based training opportunities…aren't visible" to teachers. Industry told us that "industry is invisible in the school", reinforcing this lack of mutual understanding and appreciation, which exacerbates the transition gap. As much as young people need support transitioning, "so do employers" need support, training and help understanding "the youth experience" so that they can relate more effectively and have the tools and techniques to onboard, train and acclimatise young people. This includes a fuller appreciation of "what the young person can bring to the employer….energy, family values…a different perspective on life".

The recurring message that the subject matter, content and quality of vocational programmes are not "highly regarded" by industry is exacerbated by industry's "workforce development strategies being developed in a vacuum", lacking information and context from the education sector. Reflecting the difficulty for young people to transition into the workplace, employers find it hard to "integrate youth into their business". In addition to the lack of 'work ready' skills and experience, the overhead of supervision and financial constraints make it difficult and expensive for employers to commit, while the lack of relatability between people across generational age gaps creates friction. This includes how to communicate with each other, expectations of input, reward and advancement, societal

influences and frames of reference. We heard that young people “who have already been working” or are “strongly connected to sports and community” transitioned more successfully, because they “already know how to work”, or that they have more success integrating “when they’ve grown up a bit”.

We were also told that industry and Trades Academy providers have “no appreciation for how schools operate” in terms of structuring their timetables, planning horizons and reporting requirements. This can be as simple as mistiming the production of informational resources, or not engaging and communicating in ways that a school can accommodate. The “pathway structure needs to align with the timetable structure” if the two are to run effectively in unison. Trades Academies “feel they could design and deliver better if directly funded” and don’t really understand how schools “fund the process”.

The interfaces between secondary schools, tertiary education and employers “needs an overhaul”, as there is no documented best practice model for the end-to-end process of opportunity identification, exposure, decision-making and transition. Schools “developing their own resources…create additional barriers” in a system that is “fragmented and localised” and where there is limited collaboration and sharing of ‘what works’.

Interviews with people from and connected to government agencies indicated the challenges of establishing multi-party relationships and obtaining contributions during the development of policy and the design of practices. Connections “across the sector” were described as “poor” and that “programmes only fix one angle/aspect”. We were told it was “difficult to situate VET in different parts of the sector” and that it is “hard to make the right connections to resolve the system disconnects”.

Theme 5. The mental model favours University Entrance

The perceptions surrounding what constitutes success at school (aka parity of esteem) are central to the mental models of the education system and its role in our wider eco-system, essentially that “it’s not about learning, it’s about pass rates”. This is reinforced by the extent to which education system’s levers, measures and resources are targeted towards academic study. We were told that this is evidenced in terms of:

- where and how funding is prioritised, allocated and obtained;
- the credibility with which vocational pathways are treated; and
- how measures drive behaviour.

Aspirational goals, teaching methods, study content and performance measures are geared towards University Entry, yet "the data shows that University is not for the majority, and that many drop out". Schools "aren't seen as excellent if they are strong in offering vocational pathways", in part because (in the majority of instances) the best result that can be obtained through Unit Standards "is just 'achieved'" which has "no special recognition" in NCEA. Acknowledging the current proposed changes, people told us that NELP 4 priority 7[9] "needs more focus" but in reality "didn't come to much anyway…[because the] education system doesn't value what comes afterwards".

People we spoke with appreciated that it is difficult to calibrate credits awarded for "quite different" vocational courses, and that designing and administering additional qualifications would take additional effort and funding. Nonetheless, in addition to the other factors we have identified, the focus on and the esteem associated with UE essentially means that 60-70% of students are (at best) unsupported or (at worst) set up to fail by a system that defines success at school in ways that are inaccessible to those ākonga.

VET is regarded in the minds of most system actors, including many families and communities, as a back-up pathway for young people who 'aren't smart enough for university'. Trades are not valued and are "considered to be lesser pathways [but] it's not true…", and to reposition trades that are essential for our economic and societal wellbeing, "we need to break some myths". This requires a concerted effort with schools, communities and parents. A more equitable system would give "equal weighting" whereby "you can be successful if you don't go to University", and yet "somehow we regard people in construction…or farming as somehow inferior to people in office work".

[9] National Education & Learning Priorities 'Future of Learning and Work': "Collaborate with industries and employers to ensure learners/ākonga have the skills, knowledge and pathways to succeed in work".

The encouragement from whānau and parents for students to go to University amplifies the perception gap of what is deemed success and reflects how the education system operates. Schools are "set up to prepare students for tertiary education", reinforcing these expectations and perceptions of "what is a valid career". We were told about "parental pressure" generally amongst communities and within specific cultures where students are "under pressure to go to University but are not suited to it, and will be set up to fail". Parental expectations can be derived from cultural norms, intergenerational stereotyping, ambitions for children to achieve "more than their parents" and from a lack of information and awareness of the wider opportunities available to their children to lead fulfilling careers. This can include a lack of capability, confidence and knowledge to support their children to explore opportunities and make complex decisions regarding what best suits their needs and aspirations. Tertiary education is easier to understand and carries greater kudos.

We were told that "Māori are more quickly and readily guided into Gateway than Pākehā…whether they are interested or not", and that employers "have less empathy" for cultural context. We were also told that Māori are less likely to be shown or exposed to other options. Whānau struggle to relate to a system that does not reflect the Māori philosophy of Marae-based learning and "keeping the whānau together on the journey". For Pasifika, we were told that the strong associations with family, community and sport more readily direct students towards trades. They are "motivated to follow into the family business", especially where there is a degree of "physicality" to the work that supports their social interests and reflects how "hard work" is highly regarded.

We received feedback that one of the intended purposes of vocational pathways is to help meaningfully retain students in the school system, but that the credits regime can create the opposite effect for students who do not enjoy or feel valued by that environment. For example, if "after 12 weeks [of vocational training] they can achieved 60 credits, what is the motivation to return to school?" especially when they already feel "disconnected". As a motivational driver for schools, Trades Academies help "non-academic kids achieve something…and the school looks good".

Schools are “scared of losing funding” that is based on their roll, especially as the funding model is hard to understand, navigate and administer, including how to use STAR funding and the ability to apply Ops Grant money for vocational pathways. Schools need support to “navigate and understand…how to access funding [as they are] trading Full Time Teaching Equivalent (FTTEs) for dollars”. Funding within schools and government agencies drives the ability to hire and train quality staff with relevant skills and knowledge, to design programmes or micro-credentials, to integrate pathways effectively, to define and assess performance measures, and supporting students’ exposure to vocational experience and transition into the workforce. It also influences the ability of schools, communities, and industry to engage, collaborate, establish support structures and information resources.

Funding is also interwoven with the measures of performance and success, driving prioritisation decisions at every level, including timetabling, which for a student trying to explore options means “you can’t afford [the time out of school] to do Gateway, you would lose class time”. We consistently heard about the influence of how standards are established and measured, reflecting the influence New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework Standards regime to policy, practice and funding. We heard how the curriculum framework focusses on ‘the 3Rs’ and NCEA standards, and that “it’s about pass rates, not pathways” for schools.

2. Root causes – a high-level analysis

A deep analysis of the underlying root causes would require further exploration and collaborative discussion amongst a wide range of stakeholders, so that conclusions can be drawn with confidence, and used as the basis for a deeply considered cohesive plan. Our high-level root cause analysis is intended to help frame such a discussion and prompt people’s thinking.

Schools and industry have competing priorities and measure success differently, including the definition, role and purpose of vocational education, and who is responsible for preparing students for the workforce. The material, content and topics taught in schools are not seen as relevant by industry, and industry is not visible in schools.

The education sector, schools and industry value different things, in different ways. Essentially, the educational system positions vocational education and training as the fall-back for non-academic students, reinforced by the funding model and measures of success. The system primarily values schools' ability to prepare students for University Entrance, reflecting how 'success' is measured, reinforcing and perpetuating societal perceptions that do not fully appreciate the value of alternate pathways.

Industry values 'work readiness', including a range of skills, knowledge and competencies that are relevant to the world of work. Employers struggle to afford and find it difficult to accept the time, cost, effort and risk to onboard and transition young people into their workforce. For both schools and employers, insufficient time is given to preparing for and activating the transition process. There is a lack of mutual acknowledgement, cohesive structure and ongoing support.

Economies of scale and geography are also a factor. Larger schools are more likely to be able to afford the required resources and make connections to accessible vocational programmes. Smaller schools and those in more remote rural towns are disproportionately impacted by the 'tyranny of distance' such that students are isolated from broader opportunities. Regardless of geography, teachers and students are typically only exposed to what they can see, experience and physically access within their particular community. There is a lack of information resources for teachers, students and whānau describing the full breadth and depth of vocational options and limited access to champions and role models who can inform and inspire students to explore what suits their skills and aspirations.

From a relational perspective, the various actors in the system find it difficult to communicate, engage and collaborate in the current structure, whereby it is easier (but sub-optimal) to have bilateral rather than multilateral relationships. Organisations design

programmes, delivering outputs and operating in siloes. The current framework does not support and enable relationship building mutual understanding between schools and industry.

3. A call to action

3.1 A vision for a different future

To frame the discussion within ConCOVE and facilitate broader stakeholder engagement regarding a range of potential actions and next steps, we have developed a draft vision for the future system of vocational education, in which:

Vocational education in schools provides open, integrated and collaborative pathways where learners obtain diverse, blended and contextualised learning and experience. These pathways will enable and support students to gain self-knowledge, develop their interests and understand their choices to support their decision making. The pathways will be equitable and standardised, with defined measures of success and content that are relevant for schools, students and industry.

To achieve this vision, a number of policies, practices and conditions must be in place. Specifically, our analysis of what people have told us strongly suggests that a vastly improved system would require the following elements:

1. Creating parity between Unit Standards/Skill Standards[10] relative to the Achievement Standards measurement regime, placing greater value on vocational learning in schools.

2. VET programmes are designed for, applicable to and accessible by all students, not just those who are deemed to be 'non-academic'.

[10] The progressive introduction of Skill Standards (in time replacing Unit Standards) provides an opportunity to revise and rebalance the current disparity.

3. VET programmes are resourced and funded to span a multi-year pathway and transition, commencing earlier in the school setting and progressing into the early years of joining the workforce. This includes increasing the profile of vocational education within the timetable, and 'scaffolded support' for students and employers during the transition period.

4. There are clear, equitable routes between education and employment that are easily understood and capable of being operationalised by students, their whānau and industry. The pathways highlight and reflect the aspirations, skills and talents of the students themselves.

5. Students have access to information and role models about their future work options, with opportunities to learn, explore and experience vocational pathways, regardless of where they live or go to school.

6. The application of workforce and industry experience within a school setting is valued and rewarded, delivering curated programmes and content that align industry requirements with school operating models.

7. Schools, industry and the public sector communicate and collaborate to define and operate a responsive and relevant VET system that achieves mutually beneficial outcomes for students, schools and industry.

8. Industry is supported to engage with schools, to contribute to VET programme and content, and invest in the skills and techniques to engage and onboard young people.

Having these elements in place would create the opportunity to progressively address the underlying and more complex challenges regarding parity of esteem, whereby students do not feel that they have failed, nor feel undervalued or supported because they are not academically capable or minded, but instead are supported to excel in whichever pathway they choose.

3.2 Actions and potential targeted investments

The 'levers for change' detailed in Annex 1 are by their nature bold and wide-ranging, and encompass the underlying philosophy ('mental model'), formal policies and practices, through funding models, measurement regimes, system frameworks and structures, stakeholder roles and relationships.

To provide some more practical and immediate direction, including possible further investment, we have also developed some more specific and targeted actions for consideration. These are our assessment based directly on suggestions made during interviews and desk-review, including but not limited to the Civil Workforce Forum's Developing a Skilled Civil Construction Workforce on attracting young people into the industry, and the ERO 2015 (What Works) Report on STPs calls for increased collaboration. Some of these actions could be taken-up in the short-medium term, independent of (but relevant to) broader sector engagement on matters of underlying philosophy, policy and practice. These suggestions are also influenced by known and potential changes to the current framework and stakeholder landscape, e.g. role of WDCs, and might otherwise not normally be considered within ConCOVE's role and purpose.

We recognise the existing good practices that are worthy of further examination to understand their applicability to specific circumstances, the underlying conditions for success, and ways in which good practices can be promulgated and continuously improved. The actions and potential targeted investments are proposed in that context. We anticipate that each and any action will (by default) seek to identify and recognise good practice and avoid reinventing 'what works'.

Finally, we recognise that some of the proposed actions may have been undertaken previously, whether in whole or part. We are aware of some current practices that may be discontinued (e.g. Prime Minister's Vocational Award), or previous activities (e.g. teacher work choice days, TEC's Inspiring Futures) that have not been sustained, but have not sought to undertake a 'stock take' of comparable practices. Again, lessons from previous experience should be incorporated by default in the next phase of activity.

Summary of Targeted Actions

The full list if targeted actions is provided at Appendix 1. The actions have been classified into six categories, noting that some actions will span more than one category. The categorised actions are summarised as follows:

Category	Opportunity and action in a nutshell
International best practice	Deeper and targeted research to leverage international best practice in a New Zealand context
Credibility and relevance of vocational education	Explore and design the policies and structure of how vocational education is delivered, better supporting teachers and students to appreciate and access vocational pathways.
Stakeholder relationships	Facilitate, promote and support cross-sector engagement and collaboration to build mutual understanding and enhance the ways in which vocational pathways are designed and delivered.
Introduction & transition to the work environment	Design a structured and cohesive pathway for students to progress though clear 'steps' into the world of vocational work, while supporting industry, schools and students during the multi-year transition process.
Future workforce demands	Clearly articulate current and likely future demands of the workforce, so that vocational pathways can prepare students that meet the needs of industry.
Information resources	Develop a series of informational content and channels for schools, students, whānau and industry to promote

	knowledge and understanding of the options and value of vocational pathways.

4. Next steps

ThinkPlace would be pleased to facilitate exploration of the content of this discussion document, providing additional context and explanation as required. This could include elaboration on the proposed actions and potential targeted investment, and opportunities for further sector engagement.

Appendix 1 – full list of proposed targeted actions

1.	International best practice	**Opportunity** – to accelerate the design and implementation of future best practice, in a New Zealand context. **Action** – commission deeper research into documented international practices (OECD, CEDEFOP etc) and incorporate targeted discussions with international industry bodies and education sector on key topics, including but not limited to: • the design and effectiveness of consistent, published and structured frameworks for students' progression through vocational pathways; • models for integrating or more closely aligning vocational and academic teaching within the school timetable; • models for sustainable inter-relationships between whānau, schools, community and industry; • patterns of participation and progression (increase or decline) over time, and root causes; • mid-long term future labour market requirements.
2.	Credibility & relevance of vocational education	**Opportunity** – to improve the accessibility of credible vocational education and pathways into industry, 'scaffolding' students' progress into work or further education. **Action** – commission exploration of the potential value, demand for and high-level design of 'cadetships' at a level beneath apprenticeships. Successful participants could progress into full

		time work, apprenticeships and/or additional tertiary education. This could include opportunities for students to 'opt in' to pathways towards 'cadetships' from year 11 onwards.
3.	Credibility & relevance of vocational education	**Opportunity** – to improve the breadth and value of vocational education and pathways into industry. **Action** – commission exploration of additional qualifications and/or micro-credentials[11] in, e.g. specific technologies. Work with industry, vocational programme providers and schools to identify and prioritise topics of greatest value.
4.	Credibility & relevance of vocational education	**Opportunity** – celebrate the value of entering into the work force and/or gaining a specific level of accreditation, in tangible and visible forms. **Action** - facilitate the creation and administration of an Industry body award(s) for young people who have successfully entered and settled into an industry or trade, or have obtained a recognised accreditation. Could be funded by the industry body or provider of vocational programme.
5.	Credibility & relevance of vocational education	**Opportunity** – to reflect the importance of vocational education in the planning and scheduling process, whilst removing practical barriers to access vocational opportunities without the adverse effects of losing class time. **Action** – align the pathway structure to the timetable structure, and increase the allotted time for vocational education on the timetable.

[11] The development of additional accreditations, e.g. at a technical level, is a trend in Europe. CEDEFOP Future of Vocational Education In Europe, 2022, s. 2.4.1

6.	Credibility & relevance of vocational education	**Opportunity** – to understand what is driving the reduction in the volume of school leavers obtaining Vocational Pathways Awards. **Action** – commission specific research into the perceived value, uptake and participation in Vocational Pathways Awards, and what (if any) additional or alternate model of recognition would be useful.
7.	Stakeholder relationships	**Opportunity** – to promote mutual understanding at a broad level, and create a 'coalition of the willing' for cohesive actions on specific topics requiring multi-party support. **Action** – convene and facilitate a series of on-line and in-person workshops between government, industry, schools, and subject matter experts. The series might commence with further elaboration on the findings in this discussion document, teasing out additional content and possible actions. This might be followed with national and/or regional workshops to discuss specific implementation approaches, conditions for success, related work already underway.
8.	Stakeholder relationships	**Opportunity** – to foster close relationships between industry, schools and communities at a regional level, enabling improved understanding and local actions to encourage participation in VET. **Action** – facilitate the establishment of regional networks, providing points of contact for information exchange, identifying and promoting role models & success stories, connecting people with information resources and local contacts, co-ordinating engagement (e.g. industry breakfasts, industry presence in schools) and sharing good practices.

9.	Introduction & transition to the work environment	**Opportunity** – to provide short, low-effort introductions for students to the world of work, piquing their interest and promoting the value of further exploration, e.g. of Gateway, TAs, cadetships. **Action** - sponsor (fund) and promote a series of work experience 'tasters' for students to engage industry and employers. This could involve work-place shadowing, presentations in schools, tours of work sites etc. Interested students might then go onto Gateway, TAs or straight to the work place.
10.	Introduction & transition to the work environment	**Opportunity** – to create recognised and valued qualification that provides transferable skills to a wide range of industries, for young people who are not ready to commit to a specific trade or job. **Action –** develop a 'work readiness' qualification within the existing regime, e.g. Unit Standards, or a new qualification, e.g. cadetship, that focusses on the generic skills , knowledge and competencies required of employers, tailored to industry work settings.
11.	Introduction & transition to the work environment	**Opportunity** – to provide some structure to the transition between school and work, improving confidence and creating consistency. **Action** – work with schools, whānau, students and vocational programme providers to develop a multi-step journey/process for students to walk through from Year 12 through to 1-2 years after entering the workforce. Could be in the form of a life-cycle or check-list.
12.	Introduction & transition to the work environment	**Opportunity** – to spread the financial and workload burden of taking on an apprentice. **Action** – form a network of local or regional industry bodies and/or vocational programme providers, to share the 'sponsorship' of a

		young person to undertake an apprenticeship[12]. The student would spend structured time with each member of the network, completing a generic or specific apprenticeship and commit to work for (at least 2?) of the involved organisations in subsequent years.
13.	Introduction & transition to the work environment	**Opportunity** – to better prepare employers to take-on, engage and transition young people into the workplace. **Action** – develop a series of training modules & content for small-medium businesses and self-employed tradies. Modules could include relatability, fostering teamwork, positive youth development, cultural competency, the growth mindset, building confidence and self-efficacy, communication skills etc for the employer or business owner.
14.	Introduction & transition to the work environment	**Opportunity** – increase the likelihood of success and accelerate the transition to being work ready. **Action** – directly fund (or encourage industry bodies to fund) regional 'mentors' available in person or on-line to provide pastoral care that supports students and whānau in preparation for and during the transition from school to further study or work
15.	Future workforce demands	**Opportunity** – to place potential improvements to vocational education in context of industry's future needs of the workforce. **Action** – Build on prior work by WDCs (and also under the former construction accord) to collate and sense-check existing understanding of the construction industry's current and likely future workforce needs, followed by further exploration and confirmation with/by industry.

[12] This could be undertaken in a strategic partnership with Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu to explore how apprenticeships can be better aligned with existing school structures. The findings from this programme can inform the development of new vocational pathways.

16.	Information resources	**Opportunity** - to demystify what trades actually 'are', what/how they contribute to communities and the economy, and what opportunities exist for students. **Action** - revise, develop or commission a series of on-line informational resources for schools and students about the construction industry itself, the trades, organisations and jobs within it. The aim for these resources is that students can see how their future selves could fit within this industry. This could include the kinds of roles, skills, capabilities and characteristics of those working within trades, challenges and opportunities, qualifications, the nature of the working environment, and ways in which students might enter the workforce. This would be developed collaboratively across the sector, but led by industry rather than the education sector. It would be in a voice that students and whānau can relate to, and complement TEC's upcoming Tahatū Career Navigator.
17.	Information resources	**Opportunity** – to promote career options with schools and local community bodies, whilst building relationships at a community level. **Action** – sponsor, host or facilitate a series of industry breakfasts across the country for school Principals, career advisors, teachers, vocational programme providers, community organisations and councils to meet industry bodies and employers. Would ideally include follow-up and feedback loops to encourage and support information flows into schools' wider teaching staff.
18.	Information resources	**Opportunity** – to supplement absence of subject matter expert knowledge and how the skills being taught in schools are relevant.

		Action – develop and facilitate the implementation of regional industry mentors and/or SMEs to visit schools and work with school staff and talk to students about the nature of skills, work and roles in industry, in ways that relate to what is being taught. Could either be a job or a 'trained' role for an existing job holder in industry body or large employer.
19.	Information resources	**Opportunity** – to improve mutual understanding and common appreciation of what vocational education is, and how it fits within the education context **Action** - create a taxonomy of language that simplifies and makes explicit vocational education, its links between learning at school and the transition to the world of work.