CONCORE TŪHURA

A Background to the Emergence of Skill Standards

Good practice in the development and implementation of skill standards-based qualifications

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NZQA SUPPORT FOR THE GUIDES

NZQA supports ConCOVE Tūhura's approach in developing these guides to help standard setting bodies and end-users develop a deeper understanding of skill standards.

As the building blocks of vocational qualifications and micro-credentials, skill standards have huge potential to support consistent graduate outcomes and meet industry needs. We envisage that the toolkit approach to the good practice guides will be particularly useful to the target audiences, some of whom may be new to standards-based qualifications and programmes. – NZQA

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- Rigging
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- Glazing
- Painting
- Structural Detailing
- Ringa Hora Services Workforce Development Council
- Toi Mai Workforce Development Council

Their collective knowledge and experience have been invaluable in shaping this resource to support assessment practice in vocational education and training.

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS RESOURCE

Good practice toolkit

In late 2023, skill standards began replacing unit standards, becoming compulsory components, where they exist, of the programmes leading to New Zealand national qualifications. The first skill standards were approved and published by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority in 2024. National qualifications and programmes of learning developed from 2024 onwards will be based on skill standards.

This is the introduction to the 'toolkit' of good practice guides. The toolkit audience is those involved in the process of developing and implementing skill standards-based credentials and qualifications:

1. standard setting and qualifications development;
2. learning programme development;
3. learning programme delivery;
4. assessment of learning; and
5. moderation of outcomes.

These roles sit within Work Based Learning Organisations (WBLOs) , Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs), Private Training Establishments (PTEs) and wānanga for programme development and delivery (including assessment); Standard-setting Bodies (SSBs) for standards and qualifications development and moderation of outcomes; and industry and other stakeholders for advice on qualifications and programmes.

There are six guides in the toolkit:

1. A Background to the Emergence of Skill Standards
2. An Overview of the System
3. Standards and Qualifications Development
4. Programme Development and Delivery
5. Assessment and Consistency Measures
6. Industry Stakeholders and Advisory Work

The guides were developed with research and input from sector entities and teams. Each guide discusses the most challenging issues and sets out guiding principles, illustrated with practice interpretations. It is designed to help standard-setting bodies (SSBs) and tertiary education providers deepen their understanding of what skills standards should be and do in order to achieve the quality and consistency that will meet the needs of industry and learners.

FOCUS AND AUDIENCE

This guide is a background resource to build understanding of standards and standards-based assessment (SBA) in the wider context of New Zealand's vocational education system. It explains:

- What skill standards are, and what they do and don't do;
- How standards-based assessment works, where it is used and why;
- Changes to the qualifications context;
- Where the potential lies for skill standards to underpin better skill definition and recognition, and more consistent qualification outcomes.

The guide is for those working in vocational education who develop qualifications and who implement (deliver, assess and moderate) them in learning programmes. It would be ideal for managers and leaders in SSBs, tertiary education providers and WBLOs to 'workshop' the guides with their teams.

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT SKILL STANDARDS

The abstract idea of skill standards is not new. Skill standards are defined under the 2020 Education and Training Act in an almost word-for-word incorporation of a definition of skill standards from the 1992 Industry Training Act. In both Acts, the reference is to standards that are specifically useful to industry. Unit standards have fulfilled this role since the 1990s.

However, a significant proportion of the unit standards produced took an over-specified and fragmented approach to framing skill and competence. They often articulated skills as lists of atomised tasks, which in turn drove an assessment-by-checklist approach (echoed in moderation). This also framed knowledge as entirely separate, making it easy to overlook it as underpinning, and forming part of, skills. Feedback to NZQA's 2021 Consultation on Simplifying Qualifications also referenced these issues. [1]

The new skill standards initiated by NZQA's 2022 change in Rules are designed to be "more holistic and less atomised", and improve the ability to gather evidence about learning.[2] The principal goal of the move to skill standards is better outcomes for industry and better opportunities for learners. It is expected that qualifications will be more logical and relevant, and that providers' programmes will deliver meaningful and consistent experiences and outcomes.

This toolkit of guides sets out good practice for skill standards-based qualifications right across the system of qualifications development and implementation through programmes of learning. It can be read alongside the NZQA Guidelines for approval and listing of skill standards.[3]

Standards, qualifications and credentials

The New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF) lists all secondary and tertiary qualifications and credentials approved by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) or Universities New Zealand. The NZCQF has in recent times replaced the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) in order to reflect the increasing use of micro-credentials and ensure they are included in the framework.

It is worth noting that the qualifications (that standards sit within) serve different purposes. For example, qualifications govern entry to the labour market, are tools for upskilling and upgrading within the labour market, and offer opportunities for social inclusion and social mobility. How these purposes are fostered and realised says more about whether qualifications are preparing learners for a regulated or unregulated occupations and the country's economic structure, and less about education not being "responsive" enough.

The skill standards emerging from the 2022 change to NZQA's Rules are one of three types of assessment standards used for New Zealand qualifications. These are shown in the following table.

Table 1 Types of standards

Type	Description and purpose
Unit standards	Almost all unit standards have a single level of attainment (achieved) as well as not achieved.[5] Unit standards are internally assessed, and as close as possible to the learning context. They have been used principally as industry standards. They can also contribute credit towards the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA).
Achievement standards	Achievement standards are linked to the National Curriculum and used in secondary schools. Achievement standards contribute to the NCEA and are used almost nowhere else. They have three levels of attainment (achieved, merit and excellence) as well as not achieved. Some achievement standards are written specifically to be assessed externally.[6]
Skill standards	Skill standards are taking over from unit standards which will gradually disappear as a new system evolves. . Skill standards may include merit and excellence grades as well as achieved where a clear reason for this can be demonstrated. (see the subsection Competence and Excellence in the Standards-based As-sessment section in this guide for further discussion). Skill standards are being listed on the NZQCF from the start of 2024 as existing qualifications are updated or revised, and as new qualifica-tions are developed and based on skill standards.

Each standard has a level and a credit value. The level shows the complexity and skill required to attain the standard. The credit value is the currency of the qualifications framework to enable meaningful comparisons between the 'sizes' of different qualifications. A simple time-based proxy for this has developed. Using this proxy, one credit represents 10 notional hours of teaching, learning and assessment.

The most recent addition to qualification type is micro-credentials. Micro-credentials can be listed at any of the 10 levels of the NZQCF, though the vast majority sit at levels 3-6. In future they will contain skill standards.

Micro-credentials are designed to do one of two things.

1. They can top up existing knowledge and skills. This is so that people who are already qualified in something can increase the range of their practice (e.g. specialist tattooing techniques, project management, working with electric vehicles); or

2. They can provide stand-alone new knowledge and skills. This is so that people who are not already qualified in something can learn a specific aspect of it (e.g. kitchen installation, CCTV inspection, care for dogs).

Micro-credentials began to be developed around 2015 in response to demand for learners to undertake, and be formally recognised for, short bursts of learning that did not fit the The New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF)[7] model of a minimum 40-credit qualification. The demand for these smaller "bites" of learning was initially driven by skill shortages in industry areas that were regarded as crucial to economic development (e.g. construction, primary and IT industries). It was argued that formal qualifications were not sufficiently nimble to cater for the growth that was needed and that any skills and knowledge gained through shorter courses ought to be nationally recognised.

[1] Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE), 'Summary of Feedback from the Consultation on Simplifying New Zealand Qualifications and Other Credentials' (Wellington: New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2021).

[2] New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 'Aide-Memoire to the Minister of Education: Changes to the Vocational Qualifications System. CR20772', 24 June 2020.

[3] New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 'Guidelines for Listing Skill Standards on the Directory of Assessment and Skill Standards' (Wellington: New Zealand Qualifications Authority, August 2024), https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Tertiary/Approval-accreditation-and-registration/Standards/Skills-standards/Guidelines-for-listing-skill-standards-on-the-DASS.pdf.

[4] Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie, 'What Should Vocational Qualifications Look like If the Links between Qualifications and Jobs Are so Weak?', in Knowledge, Curriculum, and Preparation for Work (Brill, 2018), 127–46.

[5] Technically it has always been possible to attach levels, too (e.g. merit) but this has almost never happened and was always very unlikely for reasons we discuss in the Competence and excellence section of this guide.

[6] For example, via examinations, portfolios and Common Assessment Activities (CAA).

[7] The New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) became the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF) in 2022.

In addition, the size and complexity of many qualifications was a barrier for some learners. They had, for example, family responsibilities or financial constraints. Some were intimidated as a result of previous negative experiences of the education system.

Moreover some already-qualified individuals may merely need a "top-up" to their existing skills and knowledge. This would be enough to meet the demands of the changing labour market and the needs of employers. By 2022 there were 170 NZQA approved micro-credentials. By early 2024, there were more than 400.[8]

In order to help move away from unit standards' fragmentation and small credit sizes (encouraged in part by funding settings), NZQA's Guidelines encourages larger skills standards. These are likely to be worth between five and 30 credits. It remains to be seen what impact, if any, these might have on micro-credentials. Arguably a single skill standard could be 25 credits and so could a micro-credential. A single skill standard could therefore constitute an entire micro-credential. It is also possible with NZQA's special approval to 'stack' micro-credentials up in programmes to constitute entire qualifications.[9]

There is also an argument that micro-credentials are "gig credentials for the gig economy", and actually contribute to knowledge fragmentation and undermining social inclusion by shifting our focus away from improving quality of life and quality of jobs.[10] It is beyond the scope of this paper to go deeply into these arguments. However, it is worth keeping in mind that skill standards – or any assessment standards or qualifications – operate within a wider set of systems like economy and society. They cannot alone resolve issues that sit at the level of those wider systems. Skill standards are simply a new building block for qualifications that open the door to improved practice and have great potential to help the parts of the system work together better and deliver better outcomes for learners. This Good Practice Toolkit is therefore designed to encourage, and provide guidance for, breathing life into skill standards.

The impact will be different for different entities and organisations operating in the vocational education system. For standard-setting bodies (SSBs) the requirement to revise all standards and all qualifications over time offers the opportunity to 'focus the mind' and re-evaluate and update previous work. This includes removing ambiguity, redundancy, poor conception and poor writing. The same goes for the stakeholders who assist SSBs in development work.

For tertiary education providers and Work Based Learning Organisations (WBLOs) who design and deliver programmes of learning and/or assessment to the award of the qualifications, the impacts will differ. However all will be obliged to reconsider their programmes, and to revise content and assessment design to reflect changes to qualifications and/or standards.

As a provider that was already doing well with unit standards, skill standards may make little difference to what is done or how it is done. On the other hand, where unit standards were ill-conceived or not well-written, or if programmes have not been based on unit standards, then skill standards provide an opportunity to sharpen up some areas.

[8] The field or occupational area matters. There are fewer than 50 microcredentials in the substantial fields of construction and infrastructure. These fields feature more traditional trades and apprenticeship arrangements, and learners tend to undertake programmes of learning towards whole or larger qualifications.

[9] New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 'Stacking Micro-Credentials' (Wellington: New Zealand Qualifications Authority, February 2024), https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Tertiary/Resources-for-tertiary-providers/Stacking-micro-credentials.pdf.

[10] Leesa Wheelahan and Gavin Moodie, 'Gig Qualifications for the Gig Economy: Micro-Credentials and the "Hungry Mile"', Higher Education 83, no. 6 (June 2022): 1279–95, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00742-3.

MAKING SENSE OF SKILL STANDARDS IN THE WIDER STANDARDS-BASED ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

This section introduces the wider assessment context of standards-based assessment. It will be of particular interest to tertiary education providers for whom a standards-based environment is not familiar. It will also be of interest to those who would like a deeper understanding of what standards-based assessment was designed to do, and why. The section immediately following introduces the key principles of standards-based assessment. These apply to skill standards, as they do to any assessment standards.

Norm referenced assessment and its shortcomings

A standards-based qualifications structure was introduced to New Zealand through amendments to the Education Act in 1990. Interest in using standards-based (also known as criterion-referenced) assessment first emerged during the 1970s as the shortcomings of norm referencing, especially in school-based awards such as School Certificate became clearer.

A norm-referenced approach articulates a standard very loosely through a curriculum. Precisely what is required at any one time is then interpreted by the examiner. Learners' achievement is measured on a scale that compares what they have achieved with what other people in their cohort have achieved.

Those who achieve the prescribed position on the scale 'pass'. Those below 'fail'. Fifty percent was the usual measure in New Zealand school qualifications. So 49% (or below) was a fail. And if the test didn't deliver the required proportions of success and failure, the results could be manipulated by 'scaling'.[11]

There were many shortcomings in the norm-referenced approach used in New Zealand. For starters, it was unfair. The system did not value what students actually knew and could do, if their results fell below the required norm. A significant proportion of students were failed at school despite having capabilities. These capabilities simply went unrecognised in awards or credentials if the student's score was not in the top half of all students' scores in their particular year.

The second shortcoming was that norm-referencing reduced the opportunities on leaving school for those who failed. Many school leavers in this position took up unskilled roles or occupations in the labour market – jobs such as process work in factories or workshops, road maintenance or labouring. These roles and occupations were widely understood as 'manual' and less esteemed than professional or managerial occupations. This stigma arose partly from the close association with 'failed' or disengaged learners and partly from the way earlier societies and industrial economies were organised in separate streams of work (and maintaining this "equilibrium" was the point of using a norm-referencing approach).

This situation helped foster low *self-efficacy*[12] in school leavers. That is, the situation contributed toward learners having low levels of self-belief and confidence in their ability to achieve an objective. This is significant because self-efficacy is a key contributor to people's learning performance and also their motivation to learn. Low self-efficacy means learners do not expect to be successful and become reluctant to even try. This becomes even more problematic when it comes to upskilling, re-skilling and/or accessing formal education.

A final shortcoming emerged alongside technological change in industries from the 1960s: the supply of 'unskilled' jobs for those school leavers began shrinking. There were fewer and fewer options for school leavers who ended up in the 'failed' category for school achievement.

[11] For a history of how this worked for the main secondary school qualification of 'School Certificate', which preceded the emergence of the standards-based National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2002, see Rosemary Hipkins, Michael Johnston, and Mark Sheehan, NCEA in Context (Wellington: NZCER Press, 2016).

[12] Albert Bandura, 'Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change', Advances in Behaviour Research and Therapy 1, no. 4 (1978): 139–61.

INTRODUCING STANDARDS-BASED ASSESSMENT

Standards-based assessment (SBA) emerged to address the shortcomings of norm-referenced approaches, particularly in the context of changing knowledge and skill demands in the world of work. The underlying concept of a standard is that a certain, required competency is clearly articulated by an unambiguous description.

New Zealand adopted the term 'standard' in 1991 to mean the physical description of the competency (i.e. the piece of paper where the competency was described in writing). This usage has led to a certain amount of confusion – is 'the standard' the expression of skill or knowledge (i.e. the criterion or the competency) or is it this piece of paper?

Individuals who have met the requirements described are awarded the standard. So if everyone meets the requirements, everyone can be awarded the standard – not only 50% of the cohort or the top-ranked members of the cohort as with norm referencing. In other words, the required outcomes are clearly defined. As a learner, if you know and can do what is described in the standard, this will be recognised with a 'pass'.

Competence and excellence

As a general rule, a higher level of skill achievement is recognised through another standard placed at a higher level on the Framework. The merit and excellence grades used in achievement standards are now available for use as SSBs develop new skill standards. NZQA is clear that these additional grades may be approved where there is "a clear reason and support from stakeholders" for them.[13]

It is comparatively easy to construct three meaningful levels of achievement if focused on theory or in an 'academic' context. Schools are used to this with achievement standards in programmes leading to the award of the National Certificate in Educational Achievement. For example, a school student may be asked to articulate an understanding of a historical event, and they may 'describe' it, 'explain' it or 'analyse' it to reach the different levels of achieved, merit or excellence.

It is far more complex to do this in the case of a practical skill. Many would argue that there are no half-way houses. For example, either learners can complete the calculation of volume, or they can't. On the other hand, in a kitchen setting, there might well be readily defined levels of success in decorating a cake. However there would not be different levels involved in being hygienic in the kitchen, or in observing safe practices.

There are different views on the meaning of expertise and excellence in competence development. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore them. However it is worth noting that views range from seeing standards as a minimum level of competence that discourages excellence and encourages a check-off approach to views that competence going beyond the minimum can be set at a higher level of effective performance.[14]

Competence does suggest there may be additional opportunities to develop to a higher level but this would have to comply with level descriptors and quotas in New Zealand.

Recognising people's existing knowledge and skills

One natural outcome of the shift to clearly defined criteria is that there's no inherent need for an individual to undertake a course of study or training. If someone already has the knowledge or skill, they can rightfully expect to be awarded the standard. Hence systems have emerged to deliver recognition of prior learning (RPL) and recognition of current competence (RCC).

[13] Note that, while credits from unit standards or skill standards with only 'achieved' grades contribute to the award of the NCEA, merit and excellence grades are required if those standards are to contribute to the 'endorsement' status of NCEA certificates.

[14] R. Kirby Barrick, 'Competence and Excellence in Vocational Education and Training', in Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work (Springer Suiza, 2018), 1–12, https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7100637.

The logic of lifelong learning makes the concept and processes of recognising prior learning more important than ever. More people are re-skilling and bring experience and skills into learning programmes, moving between them at different times in life.

The concept of RPL rests on the principle that learning takes place outside formal education, or has occurred in previous learning contexts. So individuals presenting for enrolment in a programme of study may therefore already be proficient in some or all of the knowledge and skills required.

The availability of RPL differs significantly between institutions and between different disciplines or fields. Some RPL constraints are related to how knowledge is structured – hierarchically and with strong boundaries (concepts and skills are built up cumulatively) or horizontally with weaker boundaries (concepts and skills are additive and expand scope).[15] It is also about what counts as knowledge (e.g. the debate about mātauranga Māori and science) and how closely it is tied to points of application ("real-world contexts"). It is complicated by the requirements of regulatory and professional bodies that may make it hard for people to access employment and experiential knowledge that could subsequently be creditable through RPL.[16] Many of the dispositions that allow meaningful application of knowledge and skill can only be cultivated in the workplace,[17] which is not necessarily RPL-friendly.

However there are also restrictions around RPL that rest on narrow interpretations of funding rules and differences between the detail of programmes. These have often been prompted by inter-institutional competition and have tended to conspire against straightforward shifts between institutions.

There can be attitudinal barriers as well: it is not uncommon for teaching staff to regard attendance at the course as a compulsory rite of passage regardless of learners' pre-existing knowledge and skills. At its worst this belief sees RPL as a form of cheating.

The RPL process could be an ideal vehicle for recognising mātauranga Māori and indigenous knowledge where providers are sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to undertake meaningful assessment. The major shortcoming in this approach appears when mapping the assessed skill and knowledge to an applicable qualification regime.

Within the new environment of skill standards there are opportunities for the system to recalibrate in ways that support the recognition of existing learning. The increase of specification within skill standards themselves should deliver more consistency amongst providers' programmes and more deliberative planning for catering for a diversity of learner capability. NZQA is clear in its encouragement to SSBs to design standards that are overtly transferable between contexts.

Thinking differently about assessment

Typically tests and exams were far removed from the context of the learning. With SBA, the focus shifted to identifying opportunities for 'naturally occurring evidence' – observation of activities as they occur, over time and in contexts such as learning programmes, performance in the workplace or everyday life. Assessors started to think about assessment as a process rather than as an event. And as they did so, it became clear that both formative (assessment for learning) and summative assessment (assessment of learning) are 'points on learning trajectories' and provide 'windows on episodes of practice'.[18]

[15] Basil Bernstein, 'Vertical and Horizontal Discourse: An Essay', British Journal of Sociology of Education 20, no. 2 (1 June 1999): 157–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/01425699995380.

[16] Cooper, L., Harris, J., and Ralphs, A. (2018) 'Understanding Transitions between Work and Formal Qualifications: The Case of RPL', in Knowledge, Curriculum, and Preparation for Work, 228–48, https://brill.com/downloadpdf/book/edcoll/9789004365407/BP000020.pdf.

[17] Vaughan, K. (2017). 'The Role of Apprenticeship in the Cultivation of Soft Skills and Dispositions', Journal of Vocational Education & Training 69, no. 4 (October): 540–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820.2017.1326516.

[18] Eraut, M. and Hirsch, W. 'The Significance of Workplace Learning for Individuals, Groups and Organisations' (Oxford: ESRC Centre on skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE), 2007), 17.

THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF SBA

Outcomes are clearly identified

A standard identifies what a person is able to do (including applying underpinning knowledge) in order to be awarded the standard. A standard is not a curriculum nor a programme. However, well constructed skill standards can and should provide clear guidance for the development of programmes. They can and should also set out expectations about what constitutes appropriate assessment design and delivery.

Assessment occurs close to the learning context

There is general consensus that assessment is best placed as near as possible to the learning context or environment. For example, an assessor observes an apprentice on the job and asks questions to draw out understandings. Pen and paper tests may be fine for evaluating progress against standards that are about reading and writing. But they are seldom valuable or credible for assessing practical skills.

The Assessment Specifications in skill standards should be used to encourage education providers to ensure that their assessment practices are principled and valid, that is, they assess the knowledge or skill that they set out to assess. An Assessment Specification aimed specifically at ensuring valid assessment within sensible boundaries might be, "Learners may be assessed in a real-life situation using naturally occurring evidence or in a realistic simulation such as a role play". We discuss the implications of this for classroom-based providers in the Programme Development and Delivery Guide in this Good Practice Toolkit.

There are more opportunities to succeed

Success is not rationed in an SBA environment. Within practical limits, people should be permitted more than one opportunity to show what they have learned or can do. In a formal test situation, learners can 're-sit' or 're-attempt'. In workplace-based learning situations, they can continue working towards the required level of competence.

The bottom line is: if they achieve the requirements of the standard, they should be awarded the standard. Not only can people keep trying to achieve, there is no limit to the number of people who are expected or allowed to achieve the standard nor to the number of times, within common-sense boundaries, a person may attempt to demonstrate competence.

Transferability

This principle is one of the foundations of the concept of transferability (also known as portability). That is, once a person has been deemed competent, they should not be required to continue providing evidence. Standard design can help with this, by incorporating different contexts.

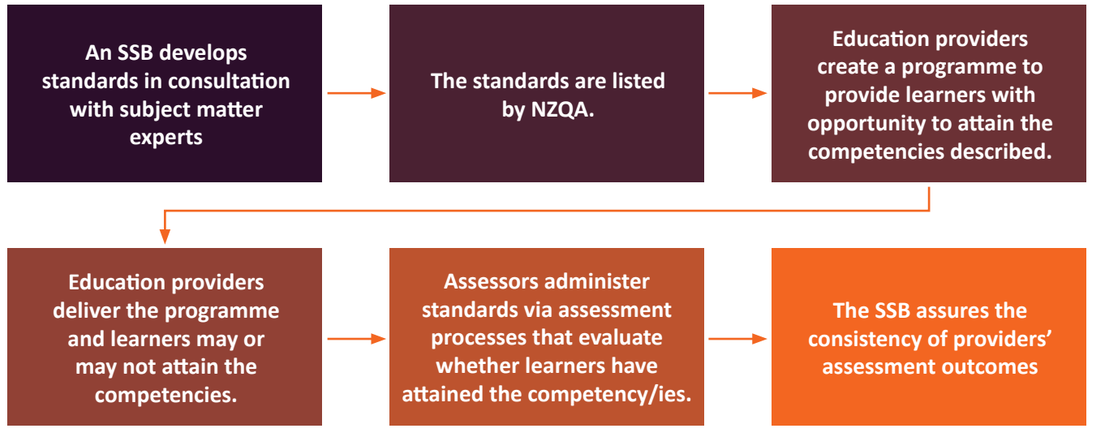
This requires that SSBs and their stakeholders take the approach of considering what is similar about different industries and their skills, rather than what is different about them. Assessment Specifications can encourage education providers to think of assessment as a flexible process, rather then as a constrained event, which can support this principle.

In a similar way, learners who have attained a particular standard should not be required to prove, at a later date, that they are competent in some parallel, or lower-level activity.

The standard expresses the competency; the programme delivers it

In the New Zealand context, an assessment standard is the written expression of a required competency, regardless of whether it is a unit standard, achievement standard or skill standard. So the written expression is all it is. A standard cannot itself be 'taught' or 'delivered'. That's the function of the learning programme.

The following diagram illustrates the roles that different bodies have with respect to the standards.



STANDARD-SETTING BODIES AND REFINING THE SYSTEM AROUND STANDARDS

Workforce Development Councils

The Ministry of Education develops achievement standards and is the SSB related to the New Zealand Curriculum and Te Mātauranga o Aotearoa. Workforce Development Councils (WDCs) are the SSBs for skill standards and national qualifications for vocational education. Prior to this, Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) were the standard-setting bodies for unit standards and national qualifications within vocational education and training. At the time of writing this guide in 2024, the Government was consulting on a proposal that might return the standard-setting role to bodies similar to ITOs.

WDCs were established by the 2020 Education and Training Act to: provide skills and workforce leadership for the specified industries[19]; provide employers with brokerage and advisory services[20]; and take into account the needs of employers and employees while also considering national and regional interests.[21]

The WDC's Order-in-Council 2021 gives further guidance about the relationship. It provides that WDCs must facilitate the voices of industries to lead the development of a more sustainable, globally engaged, and adaptive workforce.[22]

All provisions give clear instructions of a series of partnerships with industry, providers and others in which a WDC is equipped and expected to provide a leadership educational role.

Industry Training Organisations

Before the establishment of WDCs, Industry Training Organisations, or ITOs, were the SSBs for industry qualifications and the first developers and users of unit standards, national qualifications and, in many cases, learning programmes. In their current form, and reflected in these guides elsewhere, we refer to them as Work Based Learning organisations (WBLOs) as they are part of the national provider network, Te Pūkenga, at the time of writing.[23]

Crucially, under the 1992 Industry Training Act, ITOs were owned and controlled by their industries. Under the 1992 Act, ITOs were to: set national standards; arrange (i.e. purchase) training; and quality assure the training providers and training. The emergence of WDCs marked a change in the nature of the standard-setting relationship with industry because industries no longer own the standard-setting bodies.

Industry bodies (typically industry associations) could apply for recognition as an ITO and at the peak 52 had been established. Some ITOs were specifically focused on single industries while others covered disparate groups of industries.

The manner in which industry qualifications were delivered differed according to accepted practices and traditional partnerships, industry needs and capacity and the impact of regulatory requirements. In 'arranging' the training, ITOs often developed programmes and then usually assessed them. Employers played the part of education providers, delivering the learning programme through their workplaces. This approach was sometimes also supplemented by classroom-based learning at Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs). In some cases the entire delivery programme was purchased from ITPs. In still others, ITPs set up their own programmes to compete with the ITOs.

[19] s.366(1)(a). New Zealand Government, 'Education and Training Act 2020' (2020), https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html.

[20] s.366(1)(i).

[21] s.369(2)(a).

[22] clause 7(1)(a).

[23] Te Pūkenga is being disestablished. It is likely that ITOs will be re-established in some form.

Shortcomings in the ITO system

A number of shortcomings in the ITO system provided the impetus to move responsibility for standard-setting to the WDCs.

The original idea of ITOs was that the private sector (in the form of various industry bodies) was best-placed to determine its own skill and qualification needs and how best to meet those needs. Industries were thought less likely to act out of self-interest by enrolling or 'signing up' trainees in the way that universities had adopted a 'bums on seats' approach to student enrolments in order to compete with other universities and gain more funding for their own institutions.

However, the results were patchy. There is no general agreement on what went wrong or why[24], but the issues were systemic. For example, it was initially envisaged in 1992 that there would be "seven or eight" ITOs. Successive governments regarded the eventual 52 ITOs as heavy on resources, constraining flexibility (such as transferability between qualifications) and stretching expertise. On the other hand, as successive governments sought to rationalise the number of ITOs, many resulting industry groupings were regarded as illogical and unproductive.

There was also, in many ITO cases, an imbalance between industry knowledge and educational capability with perceived detrimental effects on qualification quality. There was a perception that industry self-interest overwhelmed educational values.

This was exacerbated by explicit linkages between the credit values of standards and funding. It led to suggestions of 'bulking-up' qualifications to bolster ITO incomes. There were also perceptions of 'shallow and narrow' learning as many standards were developed with low credit values, in many cases driven by funding benefits.

The targeted review of qualifications

Perceptions of a proliferation of similar qualifications with ensuing confusion amongst the public prompted NZQA to launch a 'targeted review of qualifications' (TRoQ) in 2009. It was believed that the qualifications system lacked coherence, user-friendliness and clarity. TroQ focused on qualifications below Level 6 and aimed to identify better ways of ensuring that qualifications met the current and future needs of learners, industry and other stakeholders.

In 2002 NZQA established an index of all of those awards that existed at the time which were specifically not qualifications as established under the then s253 of the Education Act.

The Minister of Education at the time was keen to have university degrees linked to the levels and credit values of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)[25] so people could have straightforward comparators.

However, degrees did not constitute the bulk of the entries on the register. Rather, the great majority were 'local courses' that had been developed by ITPs and PTEs, and approved by NZQA under the then s258 of the Education Act. These were not on the NQF because, not being qualifications, they were not required to comply with the rules of the Framework.

As well as not being qualifications as described by the Act, local courses were not qualifications in the technical sense either. They were courses of learning, i.e. inputs rather than sets of defined outcomes. Institutions with approved courses were able, under the then s263, to 'grant an award to a person who has completed the course stating that the course was an approved nationally recognised course.' Between 1991 and 2010 NZQA had approved more than 5000 of these local courses. Their owners were under no obligation to submit to quality assurance but could nevertheless issue 'awards' to people who attended the entire course.

[25] This later became the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) and more recently has become the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework (NZQCF).

In the meantime the SSBs[26] developed qualifications and unit and achievement standards which were submitted for registration on the NQF. The idea that there was duplication of qualifications has been hotly contested, and there was no evidence of duplication amongst the national qualifications. This was in part because it makes no sense for standard-setters to commit resources unnecessarily and in part because NZQA's Framework Registration had strictly-applied rules preventing 'overlap' between qualifications.

In July 2010 NZQA combined the NQF and The Register into the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF). This had the effect of elevating the 5000+ approved local courses to the status of qualifications. It was only once this had occurred that 'proliferation' became an issue. Pre-trade courses in Carpentry provide an apt example. There had never been a national qualification developed in the pre-trades area. Nevertheless most ITPs and a significant number of PTEs had pre-trade courses which were based mostly on selected outcomes from the knowledge components of the National Certificate in Carpentry.[27] After 1990 they had these 'course-approved' by NZQA. After the establishment of the NZQF in July 2010 there were therefore as many 'qualifications' in pre-trade carpentry as there were organisations that had applied for course approval. In August 2011 the status of qualification-equivalence was retrospectively cemented by the Education Act amendment.[28]

Amongst the notable TRoQ outcomes were the requirement for mandatory periodic reviews of qualifications to determine whether they are still fit-for-purpose, and the instruction to strengthen recognised industry involvement in qualification development.

TRoQ may be regarded as one of the steps along the evolutionary path referred to at the start of this guide. The signal from NZQA was that the agency wished to be more active than it had been previously in scrutinising how SSBs undertook qualification development.

Present changes confirm this intention. There is scope for WDCs to collaborate with each other to avoid the standards and qualification proliferation, and to consider skill areas in common across different sectors (e.g. health and safety).

The significance of the Review of Vocational Education

Though the Review of Vocational Education (RoVE) will be familiar to most readers, it worth recapping to draw attention to context in which skill standards are being, and will be, used. At a high level, RoVE sought to increase national coherence across the vocational education system and improve vocational education's status and encourage vocational education-based careers. It began in 2018 , sparked by the need to address a number of pressing problems:

- The financial unsustainability of nearly all 16 ITPs;
- An outdated funding model differentiating between ITPs and ITOs for the same programmes;
- Inconsistencies across programme quality and inadequate attention to learner completion of qualifications (particularly for underserved learners);
- Industry frustrations;
- Mismatches between demand for, and supply of, skills; and
- Entities competing and needlessly duplicating provision

[28] S159 (1)(a).

[29] RoVE also pulled together two other policy workstreams at the time – the VET System Review and the ITP Roadmap 2020.

Following sector consultation, the Education and Training Act 2020 ushered in an ambitious range of changes:

- Disestablishment of ITOs
- Establishment of Workforce Development Councils (WDCs) to develop and set standards; provide skills and workforce leadership; moderate assessments and endorse programmes; and provide guidance to the TEC on funding for programmes
- Establishment of a national vocational education provider: Te Pūkenga, integrating 16 ITPs and 11 ITOs[30]
- A unified funding model.

Sector consultation indicated strong support for RoVE's principles and overarching aims. However significant criticisms included: that RoVE didn't consult for long enough; that community assets were appropriated in the amalgamation of ITPs; that RoVE did not make use of expertise that was independent of government; that RoVE "lumped together" financially performing ITOs with financially underperforming ITPs; and, more recently, that Te Pūkenga has achieved very little in its three years of existence.[31] These criticisms have fuelled the 2023 National-led Government's 'undoing' of many aspects of RoVE (some of these are under consultation at the time of writing this guide).

What does all this have to do with skill standards? Less than you might think. And possibly more.

That skill standards emerged at the same time as RoVE entities and were specified under 'RoVE legislation' is something of a red herring. Skill standards were not specifically part of RoVE's improvement agenda or a 'product' of RoVE in the same way as entities like WDCs and Te Pūkenga. While they were defined under the 2020 Act, this is an (almost word for word) incorporation of a definition of skill standards from the 1992 Industry Training Act. Both Acts reference an idea of standards that are useful to industry with a generic name of 'skill standards'. So skill standards were in legislation long before the recent skill standards that emerged from NZQA rule changes.

So, technically, RoVE did not give rise to skill standards. However the context has positioned skill standards to support the principles of system and national coherence, clear learner outcomes (including qualification completion), stronger industry voice and programme consistency. Hence NZQA proposed skill standards to the Minister of Education in 2020 as "more holistic and less atomistic than unit standards, which do not always provide sufficient evidence that the learner can undertake the specific sequence of tasks and actions required in the workplace".[32]

This is strengthened by the establishment of WDCs as standard-setting bodies (SSBs), described by some as the "most significant strategic element" and "heart" of RoVE.[33] In their SSB role, WDCs are industry-serving but not industry-owned. They have a workforce leadership role. This includes a focus on future, as well as present, workforce needs, and consulting with a diverse range of stakeholders than industry alone. And on this basis, the WDCs give the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) investment guidance about what to fund and how best it could be delivered.

Skill standards are also important because unifying the system throws into sharp relief the fact that the majority of tertiary education learners are based in industry and workplaces. This disturbs the long-held association in people's minds of tertiary education being about learners on-campus and/or in ODFL (Online Distance Flexible Learning).

The idea of unified provision (through Te Pūkenga 2020-2024) has signalled the possibility for more and better integration of workplace-based learning and classroom-based learning – something that has long proven thorny due to historical and ongoing structures in the labour market and education system and also the "hearts and minds" of the public.[34] While still very challenging, there is an opportunity for standard-setters and providers to

[30] Three more types of non-statutory entity were also set up: 15 Regional skills Leadership Groups (RSLG) to advise on regional workforce development; two Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE) to provide vocational education research and leadership; and Te Taumata Aronui to advise government on Māori–Crown education partnerships and responsiveness to the needs of Māori learners and communities.

[31] As of 2024, the National-led Government is disestablishing Te Pūkenga.

[32] New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 'CR20772'.

[33] Nicholas Huntington, 'The Reform of Vocational Education 2: Looking to the Future', in Reshaping Vocational Education and Training in Aotearoa New Zealand, ed. Selena Chan and Nicholas Huntington, vol. 34 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 73–93.

[34] Karen Vaughan, 'The Integration of Work and Learning in New Zealand', Working paper (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research, June 2012).

(re)connect with thorny issues of vocational pedagogy and practice often sidelined by "production of a bewildering list of atomised skills and tick-box assessments".[35]

Finally, this context has reinvigorated a desire and aim to increase the status of vocational education. Skill standards could be harnessed here to promote greater rigour and credibility. Achieving parity of esteem for vocational education remains a persistent issue in New Zealand (as it does around the world[36]). It can be seen in the "well-lit" school-to-university pathway,[37] universities' influence over the secondary school curriculum and what is worth learning,[38] comparatively weak education-labour market links and confusion about school-based career guidance being for "second best" learners and options.[39]

Of course skill standards cannot directly improve the status of vocational education, nor resolve pedagogical and assessment issues or address the fundamentally awkward relationship between the vocational education system and the labour market. However an eye to the bigger picture around skill standards does offer opportunities for the entire system – from standard-setting to programme development and delivery and to assessment and moderation – to work well together for better learner and industry outcomes.

[35] Margaret Gregson and Brian Todd, 'Realizing Standards of Practice in VET', in Handbook of Vocational Education and Training: Developments in the Changing World of Work (Springer Link, 2019).

[36] Stephen Billett et al., 'The Standing of Vocational Education and the Occupations It Serves: Current Concerns and Strategies for Enhancing That Standing. Professional and Practice-Based Learning. Volume 32.', Professional and Practice-Based Learning, 2022.

[37] Lesley Patterson, 'Tracks to Adulthood. Post-School Experiences of 21-Year-Olds: The Qualitative Component of Competent Learners @ 20' (Ministry of Education, 2011).

[38] See the "washback effect" in Hipkins, Johnston, and Sheehan, NCEA in Context.

[39] Karen Vaughan, 'The Potential of Career Management Competencies for Renewed Focus and Direction in Career Education', New Zealand Annual Review of Education, no. 20:2010 (2011): 24–51.

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