

Learners' Experiences of Certificates and Diplomas on the New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications

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1. Executive Summary

This study examined learners' opinions on the certificates and diplomas on the New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications. Learners from polytechnics, private training establishments, wānanga and one industry training organisation took part in focus groups. The purpose of this research was to learn about how learners understand and navigate the New Zealand qualifications system.

A number of key results emerged from the research including:

- Learners were unaware that there were a great number of qualifications in their chosen field.
- Nearly all the learners chose to undertake further study for financial reasons.
- Generally, learners chose their specific qualification because it was accessible in terms of cost, location and time. An exception to this pattern of choosing behaviours were industry trainees, who did not have a choice about which qualification they chose because study is part of their work training.
- Learners generally find information about qualifications from the internet and from people who work at tertiary education organisations. However, learners do not spend a lot of time comparing qualifications across different providers. Most commonly, they choose a provider and then seek information about that provider's qualifications.
- Learners generally felt the skills and knowledge that they were gaining from their qualification were useful. The skills identified as the most useful were those that were practical and applicable to employment, yet transferable into other skill set areas.
- The learners in this study had not experienced previous qualification choices acting as barriers to enrolling in their current qualification. In cases where knowledge or learning gaps impacted learners' ability to complete their qualifications, the tertiary organisation often provided a supportive learning environment that took this into account.

This qualitative research provides a snapshot of the experiences of the learners who took part in one of the seven focus groups. The results are not representative of all types of learners, but do provide insight into how some learners experience the qualification system.

2. Introduction

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) and the Ministry of Education were charged by the Skill New Zealand Tripartite Forum¹ to undertake a *Targeted Review of the New Zealand Qualifications System* (the targeted review), focusing on diploma and certificate level qualifications (Action 7, Skills Strategy Action Plan 2008). In April 2009, the Minister of Education approved the targeted review as planned with the project contributing to areas of focus and expectation of NZQA as contained in the Letter of Expectations with the Minister and NZQA's *Statement of Intent 2009-2012*. A consultation paper, proposing changes to the qualifications system, was released in September 2009 (NZQA).

The review includes the active participation of the Tertiary Education Commission, Department of Labour, Business New Zealand, the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, the Industry Training Federation, the Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics Quality, the private training establishment sector and Te Taihū o Ngā Wānanga. An objective of the targeted review was to ensure the clarity of qualifications for both industry (employers) and learners (students and trainees), as clarity is important for understanding the acquired skills and knowledge for recruitment purposes as well as potential advancement pathways.

Research for the targeted review examined the number, clarity and currency of information contained on the New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications (the "Register"). This research found that there are 5,937 quality assured qualifications listed on the Register. Just over 76 percent of these qualifications are certificates (3,455) or diplomas (1,059). Further research assessed the outcome statements of a representative sample of certificates and diplomas (628) in order to examine how clearly qualifications convey information about educational pathways, employment pathways, and skills and knowledge. Overall, just over 13 percent of qualifications surveyed provided clear information about all three.

While research has also examined employers' and qualification developers' opinions on the qualifications system, there has been little research examining learners' opinions on the qualifications system, especially at certificate and diploma level. Current learners in the qualifications system offer a key perspective as they encompass the views of people experiencing the system as it stands now. Furthermore, while a significant amount of research examines secondary school students' opinions on how they make subject choices, less research has been conducted with New Zealand tertiary students and this gap needs to be addressed.

This paper examines certificate and diplomas level learners' opinions on qualifications and the qualifications system. This was done to learn how learners make choices in the current qualifications system, what works for them, and what does not work for them. This process is guided by the Government's interest in ensuring that tertiary education in New Zealand is flexible and responsive to the needs of learners and industry.

¹ The Skill New Zealand Tripartite Forum were brought together as part of work related to the previous government's Skills Strategy. The Forum comprises government Ministers and officials, Business New Zealand, the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions and the Industry Training Federation

3. The New Zealand Register of Quality Assured Qualifications and the National Qualifications Framework

NZQA was established in 1989 with the statutory function (under section 253 (1)(c)(i)-(ii) of the Education Act 1989):

[...] to develop a framework for national qualifications in secondary schools and in post-school education and training in which –
all qualifications have a purpose and a relationship to each other that students and the public can understand; and
there is a flexible system for the gaining of qualifications, with recognition of competency already achieved.

To fulfil this statutory function, between 1990 and 1991 NZQA consulted on the development of a national qualifications framework that would include all qualifications. The outcome of this consultation was overwhelming support for a single, unified system. Subsequently the National Qualifications Framework was introduced in November 1991.

The new qualifications system was a significant shift away from the mentality of ‘one qualification for life’ to one of ‘life-long learning’ in order to maintain and enhance learners’ ability to transfer credit by the establishment of a common system of credit.

The National Qualifications Framework was predicated on ‘units of learning’ – a term that evolved into ‘unit standards’ – with a standard format, and a National catalogue. This shift to unit standards was seen as a key change to the existing qualifications system and aimed to increase the responsiveness of the education system to industry needs by focusing less on inputs, and more on learner competencies.

A record of learning was to be kept for all learners, with NZQA being responsible for maintaining it in a central computer database. The multiplicity of existing classifications was replaced by three terms for registration on the framework: National Certificate, National Diploma, and National Degree. The record of learning has since been changed to the Record of Achievement.

In 1994, the Tertiary Lead Group was tasked with incorporating degrees into the National Qualifications Framework. The Group recommended that all qualifications be incorporated into a single harmonised qualifications framework. Mechanisms were proposed for registration onto this framework at both National and provider level, specified in terms of learning outcomes and objectives, credits and levels.

However, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (NZVCC) argued that the introduction of a standards based system would remove academic freedom and innovation, and that university study was at too high a level to be broken down into small, competency based unit standards. Consequently, the NZVCC withdrew its support from the National Qualifications Framework in 1996 before its development was complete.

Originally, the National Qualifications Framework had eight levels of achievement. The National certificate was placed at Levels 1 to 4 (this was extended to Level 7 in

March 1995) and the National diploma was placed at Levels 5 to 7, degrees at Level 7 and advanced degrees and all postgraduate qualifications at Level 8. In 2001, the National Qualifications Framework was extended to ten levels as part of the development of the criteria for the Register. In the same year, the framework was further developed to allow the registration of ‘achievement standards’ for school subjects and the subsequent introduction of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) in 2002.

In 2001 the NZQA Board agreed to the policy framework and qualification definitions for the Register. The Register was made public in 2003. In May 2004, NZQA undertook a Register Compliance project to ensure that all standards and qualifications listed on the Register were reviewed against the Register’s criteria. The process was complex and involved more than 400 providers and 2,500 qualifications. During the process it was found that in many cases, provider-developed qualifications were in fact National qualifications. For this and other reasons, more than 500 qualifications were removed from the Register. The outcome was that any qualifications not compliant with the Register criteria by 1 August 2006 were removed. This deadline was extended until December 2006 due to the influx of information.

The Register was fully implemented by 2006. The inception of the Register accommodated qualifications without requiring them to be in a unit standard format by allowing providers to register a qualification that was not standards based. The comprehensive listing of qualifications on the Register aimed to provide learners and the public with information on, and to make comparisons between, qualifications.

There are a number of other information sources from which learners and the public can make decisions about qualifications. Sources such as KiwiQuals, the public-face of the Register, provide a portal into the qualifications system. How learners interact with the qualification system is connected with their experiences of learning.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Forty-eight learners took part in the study from a variety of organisations including:

- private training establishments
- polytechnics
- wānanga
- industry training organisations.

The methodology aimed to conduct one focus group at two providers for each of the provider types. It was expected that two focus groups per provider type were enough to provide data that demonstrated recurring themes and responses that may be common across all groups. In addition, and in order to have representation of learners from an industry training organisation, a group of trainees were sought out who were completing a National qualification in the field of Mining and Resources Engineering. These trainees were associated with an industry training organisation. However, only one focus group could be conducted due to availability of trainees. While this should be noted as a weakness of the research, it was decided that it was better to include one group than to have no representation of industry trainees at all.

Learners were specifically sought out from subject fields that were previously identified in a descriptive report by Vermillion Peirce (2009) as including the most qualifications². The rationale for targeting learners in a selection of these fields was that if learners are confused about the number, clarity and relevance of qualifications, there should be more evidence of this occurring in fields where there is a greater number of qualifications. Thus, learners in this study came from a range of fields including:

- Cookery (58 certificates)
- Hairdressing (74 certificates)
- Religious Studies (57 certificates and 40 diplomas)
- Business Management (73 certificates and 53 diplomas)
- Graphic Arts and Design Studies (40 diplomas).

Participants were recruited from work networks established through a previous research project (Vermillion Peirce, Baldwin, Parker, & Long, 2009). Initial contacts were made through qualification developers who had previously taken part in a study about the qualification development process. This method was used because it increased the likelihood of an organisation agreeing to take part. When the researcher established contact with an organisation that would allow access to their learners, information sheets outlining the purpose of the project were sent to a contact person. Organisations were asked to advertise the study to learners in particular fields of study. Two of the organisations contacted asked for the project to be reviewed by their internal ethics committees. In both cases the project was approved.

² Industry trainees were sought from a field that does not fall within the top 25 percent of certificates or diplomas, due to availability. It was decided to go ahead with this focus group regardless so that the trainee learner voice could be heard, as opposed to having no representation at all.

The average focus group size comprised seven people, with a mix of males and females present in each group. Individuals ranged from recent school-leavers to second-chance learners, and were selected by the providers. To ensure that the groups were relatively homogeneous, they comprised of people who were familiar with each other. This approach was taken to ensure learners felt comfortable to engage in an open discussion. Learners were grouped by qualification, as opposed to having a mix of learners from a number of different qualifications.

4.2 Materials

The questions were categorised according to five themes:

1. The first set of questions asked about how learners make choices and decisions about qualifications.
2. The second theme asked learners about the skills and knowledge that they are gaining from their qualification, and the perceived relevance of these skills for gaining employment.
3. The third theme asked about the pathways between qualifications including how past study choices affected their current qualification choice, whether they had encountered barriers to enrolling in qualifications and the importance of using their qualification to pathway to other qualifications.
4. The fourth theme asked about the learning process in terms of what learners would do differently now they have the benefit of hindsight.
5. The fifth theme asked one question regarding the number of qualifications in their fields of study.

The full interview schedule is provided in Appendix A.

4.3 Procedure

Each participating organisation was forwarded an information sheet, which outlined the background and rationale of the study, the broad research questions, and how the data would be gathered and reported. Of the 11 tertiary organisations contacted, seven agreed to take part.

Each focus group was led by one researcher and one assistant. The interviews began with an introduction to the research project, including the rationale and background of the project and how the data were going to be used. Participants were informed that the session was going to be recorded for later transcription³. Finally, all participants were asked to review an information sheet and sign a consent form. After the analysis was complete, each contact person received an electronic copy to distribute among the participants.

The shortest focus group was 50 minutes and the longest focus group was 2 hours and 35 minutes, with the average focus group extending over a period of 1 hour 24

³ The procedure deviated at two learner focus groups. The groups did not consent to being recorded, and one group wished to give their consent orally. To ensure that the information taken away from these focus groups were true and accurate representations of the conversations that took place, the two researchers present took independent notes and then compared and discussed their notes to make sure similar pieces of information were recorded.

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minutes. The next section summarises the information provided by the focus groups, as transcribed.

4.4 Limitations

The aim of the research is to gain in-depth information on learners' experiences of the qualification system. The findings of the research are not generalisable across all learners, due to the small number of focus groups held. However, as mentioned earlier, the methodology used surfaced common and recurring themes across the different groups.

5. Findings

5.1 Choice

5.1.1 Further study

Learners were asked a series of questions about their choices for undertaking tertiary study, and their choices for enrolling in their particular qualification. A key theme that emerged was that for many students **finance** was a driver of qualification choice. For example, some learners indicated that their reason for further study was to increase their skill levels. They perceived up-skilling as being good for **career progression** either by “*getting a foot in the door*”, or allowing them to move more seamlessly through the pay bands and levels in their current professions.

The learners also indicated that they took part in tertiary study in order to gain **formal recognition** for something that they enjoy doing and have a passion for. Two learners from different focus groups reasoned that they may as well gain formal recognition of having skills in a particular field, as it would likely lead to a lifestyle where those skills could be used to support them financially.

One group of wānanga learners explained that they felt that society places huge value on “*pieces of paper*” that act as a proxy for a person’s skills or knowledge. Thus, they acknowledged that in order to get to where they want to go, and achieve what they want to achieve, gaining formal recognition of their skills is necessary. However, for the wānanga learners in this study, the experience of a **learning journey** mattered most.

Similarly, another group of wānanga learners discussed that their reasons for engaging in further study were linked to a strong belief that learning is something that occurs over a lifetime and contributes to the preservation, connection to and continuation of their tipuna and tikanga Māori. They explained that learning contributes to their **well-being** as individuals by keeping the mind active, engaged and nourished (“*feeding our brain is our wellbeing*”).

Although not mentioned by all learners, two did discuss the current economic climate as influencing their decision to undertake formal study.

“I decided to study because of the recession, apparently it’s a good time to be studying... like I get some money and get to study so yeah, [that’s the] the reason I did it.”

5.1.2 Qualification choice

Accessibility to the qualification was a major factor influencing learners’ decisions to undertake their current qualification. Examples included:

- The provider’s **location** “*it’s more convenient to come to here than to go to the city.*”

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- The **cost** of the qualification at their particular provider compared to the cost at other providers “...and it’s cheap here because I found [at] some of the places you have to pay like \$5000 for everything, and here it’s only like \$3000.”
- The **timing** of when the qualification was being taught. For example, some qualifications could be enrolled in at any time of the year “[be] cause it’s ongoing enrolments here so you can kind of decide when you start, depending on when you want to finish so that made it easier for us...”
- For other learners, the learning was structured in a way that it could be completed around **full-time work commitments** “...manageability time wise. This is a very...sort of compact course at a time that I can fit in while still doing the job.”

Learners’ qualification choices were also influenced by the **reputation and credibility** of the provider. Some learners had obtained this information by ringing employers in their industries, while others were aware of the reputation from their social and work networks:

“The reason I came is here is just talking to a lot of people that were already hairdressers and things like that...everyone recommended come to [provider] to do training.”

Another key factor that influenced learners’ specific qualification choices was *not* associated with specific attributes of the qualification itself (e.g. the content, the credits, the qualification pathways). It was associated with the people they had interacted with either at an organisational level, or in their **work and support networks**. For example, some learners said that they had been hesitant at taking up their particular qualification. It was the openness, helpfulness and knowledge of the staff that they had talked with at the provider that had often been the deciding factor for whether or not they would enrol in their particular qualification:

“I find this institute much better. And like everyone says, it’s just the atmosphere here, the process of interviewing. I came in to drop my application off, got interviewed then and was accepted, where the [other provider] was a lot of forms. It was not personal at all.”

Wānanga learners’ qualification choices were influenced heavily by the **content** of their qualification and the teaching pedagogy of the wānanga being conducive to their learning needs. For example, they explained that the way wānanga qualifications are taught encompass the concept of *nohu tahi* (sitting together). Nohu tahi encourages the learners to gain knowledge and achieve not at just an individual level, but at a group level where learning and ideas are triggered by one another. If one learner in the group has not finished a piece of work, then no one on the group moves onto the next level until all learners are ready. In addition, the learning environment becomes a part of the learners who “eat and sleep education”. Wānanga learners’ qualification choices were also influenced by the fact that their qualifications are steeped in the mātauranga Māori world view which is consequently “connected back to something that is real to you”.

One group of learners that did not fit into any of the above themes were industry trainees. They indicated that they did not have a choice in which qualification they took as it simply formed a part of their job and job training. Interestingly, when asked whether they thought of themselves as learners or employees, trainees were in total agreement that they were employees. In addition, trainees indicated that not having the choice of which qualification to take was a good thing as it made the decision making process easy and straightforward.

5.1.3 Information search

Learners were asked to discuss where and how they find information about qualifications. Many indicated they use the internet to get initial information about the qualifications offered by particular providers.

Many of the learners also talked directly to people at the tertiary organisations and used the providers' information sources for extracting information about qualifications. Learners indicated that people were generally the most useful and in depth source of information. After gaining information face-to-face, learners would often contact the organisation by phone or visit directly to obtain extra information.

Wānanga students, in particular, explained that the greatest source of information for them was people and information obtained from word-of-mouth via their whānau, hapu and iwi networks. People they had encountered who had already studied or worked at wānanga, and who could pass on their knowledge and share their experiences, were highlighted by wānanga learners as being particularly informative.

Industry trainees were supplied all the information they required through their employers. However, if they had questions onsite training facilitators were available to answer any questions they had regarding their qualification.

All learners had indicated that finding information about qualifications was easy. It was either available on the internet or through people and information packs from the provider:

“Oh easy, you just call up, you tell them what you want and they send out the pack right away.”

5.1.4 KiwiQuals

Nearly all learners were unaware of KiwiQuals, which is the public face of the Register. KiwiQuals allows individuals to search for information on quality assured qualifications (40 credits or more) in New Zealand. One learner indicated that he had been on KiwiQuals purely by accident, and was unaware that site belongs to NZQA:

“...I stumbled on to it through Google or something...I always seem to get it confused with NZQA. Somehow if I'm Googling something that I want to find in the framework for NZQA, I somehow have ended up on KiwiQuals by accident if you like.”

One learner actually suggested that it would be helpful if NZQA “put up on a website all the qualifications available” so that comparisons could be made between them. Another learner agreed saying that it would be good to have a comprehensive list of

all NZQA approved qualifications. This indicated that these learners were unaware KiwiQuals serves both these functions.

5.1.5 Qualification comparisons

Generally, learners indicated that they did not spend a great deal of time comparing qualifications at different providers. More commonly, learners talked about choosing the provider that they wanted to go to for reasons of accessibility or reputation (see section 5.1.2), and consequently looking at the qualifications offered by this provider.

Wānanga learners said that they might compare qualifications across the different wānanga, but generally lifestyle choices would take precedent (such as location, travel and costs of the course). One learner had the experience of comparing approximately five different qualifications that were similar in content across different providers. The biggest hurdle that they had encountered was being able to access tutors at the different providers to sit down with them and discuss the course in a face-to-face setting. Thus, one of the contributing factors to her choosing her current course at the wānanga was that the tutor of the course spent nearly an hour with her, discussing the course and answering questions.

There was also the perception by some learners that while the teaching pedagogy and atmosphere may be different across providers, they would not expect the content of qualifications to differ greatly, thus did not see the point in comparing them.

“I would have just thought that if you were getting a level 3 it would be the same qualification whichever institute you went to - I would have just thought it was a level 3 qualification...”

5.1.6 Qualification information

Most of the learners in this study indicated three key attributes of qualifications that they would want to know about before enrolling in a qualification.

- First, learners talked about looking at the content of the qualification. This could then be used to decide whether or not the qualification would meet their needs, by either providing them with the practical skills and knowledge that they were seeking for employment, or that were sought after for their desired lifestyle.
- Second, learners also talked about the importance of the qualification being quality assured by NZQA.
- Finally, learners indicated examining information around accessibility (as previously discussed) in terms of location, cost, flexibility, and time factors.

An exception to this pattern of results was the wānanga learners. These learners explained that the most important information needed before deciding whether or not to enrol in a qualification is the prestige of the course and the mana of the kaiako (tutor). Many agreed that it did not matter if the kaiako is qualified to teach the course because they did not consider a qualification to be an indication of a person’s knowledge and abilities, especially in relation to mātauranga Māori qualifications. The learners suggested that a tutor’s abilities are actually inherent in the quality of

their work, the depth of their knowledge and their ability to share that knowledge. Thus, what was most important to the wānanga learners in this study, and what they would want to know before enrolling in a qualification, is whether the kaiako holds the knowledge that has been passed down from generations that steeps the course in tikanga and teaches that knowledge with aroha (love).

5.2 Skills and Knowledge

Learners were asked to describe the skills and knowledge that they were gaining from their qualification, highlighting the skills that were the most useful and relevant to them.

5.2.1 Useful skills

Two central themes emerged in regard to the skills that were useful. First, useful skills were identified as those that were directly applicable, up-to-date, and practical for the work that they hoped to do upon completion of the qualification:

Learner 1: *“I would say like the hotline stuff we did, which is working in the restaurant, because that is what we’re eventually going to end up doing.”*

Learner 2: *“Yeah it’s industry knowledge.”*

Learner 3: *“It’s like you’re working.”*

Second, skills perceived as useful were those that were applicable and practical for work, yet also transferable into other work or lifestyle domains:

“I’m just finding everything that I’ve done here is so useful for me, and not just for employment. I belong to a sport where I have got a major amount of responsibility and I am finding that everything I am learning here is making becoming organised so easy compared to the old way of doing things...it’s unbelievably organised, that’s what I like about it – making life a lot easier.”

The skills that learners regarded as the most enjoyable were those that challenged them, broadened their thinking and allowed them to be creative:

“If you love art you can cook; if you don’t love art you can’t cook. I mean, mostly it’s about presentation and the taste so that’s why, you know? Because I love drawing, I put my skills in the food so when it goes out there it shows your personality and whatever you produce.”

Wānanga learners indicated that they felt everything they were learning was relevant as there is no learning without a purpose. However, the skills and knowledge that were perceived as the most useful were those that could be taken back and disseminated to wider Māori community, hapu and iwi. For example, knowledge gained in economics and law could be used at an individual level in day-to-day jobs such as working in management or running a business. At a wider collective level, the knowledge could also be disseminated amongst hapu and iwi, and used to help understand and manage Treaty of Waitangi settlements.

One group of learners also echoed these sentiments indicating that “*everything is useful and relevant*”. These learners indicated that the skills they were gaining in communication were transferable into other aspects of work and life. Other skills and knowledge they were gaining from the qualification were providing them with confidence and respect for self, others and the environment.

5.2.2 Least useful and enjoyable

Industry trainees indicated that the majority of the skills they were learning were useful and relevant to their jobs. However, they did raise the issue that some industry standards had felt “*out of place*” and had taught them skills (for example using certain pieces of machinery) that they would not utilise in their actual job. Trainees also identified some skills being taught that they think will be relevant to their job in the future but are not timely in terms of when they learn them. For example, they may learn a skill but will not have the chance to put it into practice for months or even years.

In research into qualification developers’ experiences of the qualifications system (Vermillion Peirce, et al., 2009), one organisation indicated that there is sometimes not enough material to fit the 40 credits or more requirement. This was also reflected in some of the feedback from employers’ experiences where one respondent said that “*some qualifications are teaching students old techniques that aren’t used anymore and wastes their time*” (Vermillion Peirce & Parker, 2009, p. 19).

There was some frustration directed at the requirement to complete theory and bookwork before learners were able to put what they were learning into practice. Trainees indicated that the learning could be more practical and hands-on as opposed to theoretical:

“...whereas before you were told just to jump on and drive it. If you could drive it you could stay on it. If you couldn’t drive it you were kicked off to go do some bolting or something...now you’ve got to do your day in the classroom doing a unit standard, passing all the book work, before you even get to look at it.”

Similarly, polytechnic students mentioned that they found the theory the least enjoyable and useful, and did not translate it easily into a job. They did acknowledge that theory is something that needs to be learnt in order to progress to higher qualifications, and higher positions in their chosen field of work.

5.2.3 Skill transferability

Learners identified some of the more intrinsic and long-term benefits of studying their particularly qualifications. As well as gaining the ‘hard’, practical skills a qualification teaches, learners were cognisant of life-long transferable skills such as:

- confidence
- ability to expand their thinking
- motivation, interest and work ethic gained from applying themselves in study.

“Just to be involved in study, and learning new things, and being interested in gaining knowledge improves your person and your attitude, which is very important in job hunting and succeeding. And it’s sort of communicable to potential employers if they see that you can demonstrate that. Even at my age, you can demonstrate you’ve done new things and that you’re getting on with it. You’ve got to be in with a better chance, you have at least some sort of edge.”

In addition, many learners indicated that they were gaining skills from their qualification that were not only applicable to their work or the job that they hoped to do. It was important that the skills learnt could be transferred to other fields of work if they changed their minds.

Wānanga learners indicated that they were gaining skills that were relevant, useful and transferable to the people that made up their wider communities such as whānau, hāpu and iwi. The skills and knowledge learnt from their qualifications were important to take back to these wider communities to help them grow and develop in order to learn to *“fish for the rest of our lives”*.

5.3 Pathways and Portability

Pathways and portability of qualifications are central to a successful qualifications system. Pathways allow learners to progress up or across the qualifications system and contribute to the concept of life-long learning, while portability allows learners to meaningfully use their qualifications in a variety of work or life settings. To uncover key themes on pathways and portability of qualifications, learners were asked a series of questions on the importance of pathways and any barriers to reaching these.

5.3.1 Pathway importance

For the majority of learners, the opportunity to take a pathway up or across to other qualifications was viewed as important. Some learners considered the opportunity of either pathway positively because it would likely increase chances of earning potential and promotion in their industry. Other learners considered the opportunity to move horizontally positively because they could branch out and diversify their skill sets:

“The choice of this course was that their [the provider’s] previous one was very academic. This is very practical so it’s not necessarily a step up or a step down, it’s just different.”

Many learners indicated that qualification pathways were not necessarily important to them when they started their current qualification, but have become important as they have progressed through their qualification (*“I didn’t think it did when I started but now that I have enjoyed it so much I thought, ok so what can I do that will go on from here?”*).

5.3.2 Barriers

None of the learners interviewed in the current study had encountered barriers in enrolling in their qualification because of study choices made in the past. However, some recognised that not learning particular subjects at school had set them back in other ways. For example, it was indicated that not doing mathematics in school had

made it difficult re-learning, or completing units with mathematics attached to them. Similarly, being out of the education system, and thus out of a learning environment for a long time made the transition back into study difficult.

When asked if the providers take these factors into account, learners were positive. They explained that the level of the qualification entered into and the assistance they received from the tutors has given them greater confidence in the New Zealand qualifications system. Additionally, this support helped them gain the confidence to consider further study that they originally might not have thought themselves capable of undertaking. Similarly, industry trainees and polytechnic students indicated that literacy and numeracy ability had been assessed when they enrolled to indicate which level they should be at.

Learner 1: *“At the start of the [qualification], they give you like a general knowledge maths quiz, like recognise things straight out [and] practical examples too. Like if you had so much of this and had to add so much of that how much would you have? That’s a pretty simple example, but yeah.”*

Learner 2: *“Yeah and then each lecturer gets your results and then they help you learn at your own level.”*

Finally, wānanga learners indicated that they were aware of problems in relation to credit transfer and recognition of their qualifications at other tertiary organisations, especially universities. For example, an issue for these learners was that wānanga learning was not perceived as being equal to learning at other tertiary organisations. It was considered that more value needed to be placed on different learning styles if the outcomes of qualifications were the same. Wānanga learners agreed that if the outcomes and skills of a qualification were the same, the process of getting there should be irrelevant. This is whether the learning took place at a polytechnic, a wānanga or a university. If the outcomes are most important, then credit transfer should be more seamless.

5.3.3 Pathways

Learners hoped their qualifications would lead them to a variety of destinations. These were generally focused around job skills and financial benefits, including:

- competency and skills that allow growth and development in their profession and add depth to the skills and knowledge they used in their jobs (*“Off the tools. Walking round and telling people what to do.”*)
- a change in career direction, or into establishing their own businesses
- to employment in general (*“Hopefully work.”*)
- overseas (*“It will take you all over the world if you do it properly.”*).

5.4 The learning process

5.4.1 Qualification choice: what would learners do differently?

Regarding qualification choices, nearly every learner who took part in the focus group indicated that they would take the same qualification if they were to start their

learning over. In regard to doing things differently, learners indicated that their learning behaviours would change but not their qualification choice.

“...I would have started earlier as well. A lot of people that are in my level 3 did [subject] at school and they were definitely a lot quicker on the ball. It was kind of like a shove for everyone who wasn't in the course...kind of like thrown in the deep end...so I would definitely have started earlier”

Working harder at previous education organisations, including secondary school, by attending all the classes, paying attention, keeping up with homework (“*Stop mucking around, wasting time*”), were also identified as learning behaviours that they would change.

Some learners indicated that in hindsight, they would have gone straight to the qualification they are currently studying instead of going to university. Learners who had been in the university system reported experiences of:

- finding the learning environment impersonal and stressful
- costly
- fragmented (“*you have to study different disciplines to get one degree*”)
- less practical and applicable to work.

Some learners indicated that they “*wouldn't change it for the world*”. They explained that it is the learning journey that has brought them to the qualification that they are currently studying, and contributes to the knowledge they hold about themselves. One wānanga learner did indicate that if she could change anything, she would have “*gone home*” 20 years ago to learn the skills and knowledge of her qualification from her whakapapa.

5.4.2 What do learners want to know about qualifications?

Learners were asked about the information that they would want to know about before enrolling in a qualification. The answers provided here aligned with the information learners identified as influencing their decision to take their current qualification (section 5.1.1). For example:

- having clarity on what job the qualification would lead to
- information on whether the qualification is recognised by industry, employers and overseas
- the flexibility and accessibility of the qualification (cost, location, time-frame)
- the credibility and quality assurance status of the qualification.

The industry trainees were less concerned with knowing about credits, levels and titles; this information was generally organised for them and they did not have any

choice in what they took. Trainees were more concerned about knowing how long a qualification would take, who would be paying for it and how it would help them advance in their industry.

As discussed previously, wānanga learners indicated that they would want to know about the content of the course (whether it is grounded in mātauranga Māori), and whether the kaiako are experts in their field and have the mana and prestige that gives them the right to teach the qualification. Wānanga learners also indicated that the content of the course was important to ensure it met their learning needs.

5.4.3 Learners' perceptions of valuable qualifications

Learners were asked to describe the attributes of a valuable qualification. Learners identified some attributes that were extrinsic and some attributes that were intrinsic.

Extrinsic attributes of valuable qualifications related to:

- whether it leads to a good quality of life (i.e. employment and remuneration)
- whether it is recognised by industry and employers
- whether the qualification is recognised overseas.

Learners indicated that to “*get that foot in the door*” having a qualification, compared to someone who had no qualifications, would give them an edge in most situations. However, learners also recognised that a qualification is not necessarily the “*golden ticket*” in terms of getting a job; experience is also an important contributing factor. Experience, motivation and personality were also key contributing factors:

I would say that getting the paperwork, for me, would not be [more] important than actually getting in the industry and working [be] cause if you have got a whole stack of paperwork, and you get in the kitchen and you don't know how to do anything, you are going to be useless and you are going to be out of a job even though you are more qualified than anybody else. So getting in the industry, getting the experience, learning how to deal with the people is much more important than just doing the papers.

Intrinsic attributes of valuable qualifications related to:

- qualifications that provide learners with confidence about their skills and abilities
- qualifications that provide learners with skills and knowledge that learners can share with their wider communities, their whānau, hāpu and iwi
- qualifications that encompass and preserve the importance of indigenous teaching methods and indigenous knowledge including mātauranga Māori and tikanga
- qualifications that teach learners, and convey to employers, that the learner is committed and motivated.

For me, I would say do I finish a richer person because of the material? So I really do appreciate the testing of thinking...I can't buy that with money and it goes with me when I go away. So that, to me, is what makes it valuable. This particular qualification, like I said before, I don't expect anyone to say "oh look you've got that." That doesn't really worry me but the change, the challenge to my attitudes and thinking, and the changes in the new concepts and ideas to mull over are very valuable for me."

5.4.4 How could choice be improved?

Learners were asked what steps could be taken in order to make the process of choosing a qualification easier.

Industry trainees said nothing needed to be done for their particular qualifications as they had no choice in what qualifications they take, or what level they come in at. This lack of choice is not perceived negatively as it made decision making easier. The trainees knew what was needed in order to transition through their qualifications.

Polytechnic students also indicated that choosing their qualification was a relatively easy and straightforward process. In most cases it was clear to them which level qualification they needed to start with, and which qualification they would need to take in order to progress into higher levels. However, some polytechnic learners' indicated that they would like more choice. For their particular qualification, there had been no recognition of prior learning (e.g. through industry experience), so regardless of experience and expertise everyone had to come in and complete the level 3 qualification.

There was confusion with one group of learners in regard to completing qualifications through apprenticeships compared with completing qualifications through an institution. Some learners indicated that the benefit of completing an apprenticeship was being paid at the same time as studying. However, the quality of apprenticeships varied. Learners indicated that apprentices are often treated like cleaners, and taught so slowly that a three-year apprenticeship could take more than five. There was also confusion regarding how much, and when they should be legally paid. This group of learners indicated that more information could be offered around the legalities, and the pros and cons, of taking up an apprenticeship as opposed to learning in an institution.

Learner 1: "On an apprenticeship, in my first year, my boss paid two grand towards it and I paid \$800 towards it...and then they pay how much you work per hour and they have to pay you when you come to course as well... some people don't know that and then they get off it but I made sure I got paid for it..."

Learner 2: "I didn't know that aye, the boss didn't pay me."

Learners from one of the private training establishments indicated that they had been overwhelmed by the titles and levels of what were seemingly similar qualifications that they had investigated at one provider, which led them to feel confused.

“I just didn’t really understand it; I just ended up calling them up and asking them specific questions about if I do this can I then do this.”

5.5 Numbers and Clarity

5.5.1 Numbers

Learners in this study were specifically sought out in areas where there are large numbers of qualifications⁴. However, when asked whether they thought there were too many similar qualifications in their field of study, no learners agreed.

Potentially, this result suggests that learners are not fully aware of how many qualifications there are available to them in their chosen field of study. Indeed, only one learner in this study alluded to the number of confusing, similar titles of qualifications that he had sought clarification on from one provider. Results supporting this hypothesis also come from learners’ comments regarding the amount of time they spend comparing qualifications: typically learners did not compare qualifications, but went straight to a provider.

5.5.2 National vs. provider-developed qualifications

In each focus group there was generally some confusion about the differences between National and provider-developed qualifications. Typically one person in each group had a sense of the difference, but generally learners were unsure and indicated that they did not know that there was a difference. Some learners thought that National qualifications were better recognised. In addition, some learners who were actually undertaking provider-developed qualifications thought that a local certificate was “...just a little [bit of] paper that people make up.”

The results on learners’ understanding of National and provider-developed qualifications suggest that at a fundamental level, the New Zealand qualifications system is unclear to users of the system.

⁴ Apart from industry trainees

6. Conclusions

This study examined learners' opinions on a number of aspects of the New Zealand qualifications system. The discussions generated in the focus groups suggest that learners are generally satisfied with their qualification and with the qualifications system. However, this satisfaction has not led to an effective *understanding* of the qualifications system.

A key result of this study is that learners are voicing similar points of view to those of employers (Vermillion Peirce & Parker, 2009) and qualification developers (Vermillion Peirce, et al., 2009). This includes the attributes of valuable qualifications, the types of skills and knowledge they feel they should be gaining from their qualification, and the importance of having a qualifications system that produces relevant and recognisable qualifications. Together these findings produce an interesting synthesis of data. Further to this:

- Employers indicated that qualifications were viewed as useful in the hiring process, but were not the sole factor taken into account when hiring employees.
- Both qualification developers and learners consider it important for qualifications to allow for skills to be transferred.
- More could be done to promote KiwiQuals to the public as a website providing an informative and comprehensive list of all the quality assured qualifications in New Zealand.

Finally, it is important to note that with qualitative research, the results can only provide insight into learners' opinions and experiences of the qualifications system. The results should not be viewed as representative of all learners at different types of tertiary organisations.

Appendix: Focus Group Questions

Theme 1: Choice

Prompt Questions:

- i. Can you describe your reasons for deciding to undertake further study?
- ii. What were your reasons for choosing your current qualification?
- iii. Where did you go to find out information about where and what to study?
 - a. Where did you look?
 - b. Who did you talk to?
- iv. How easy was it to find this information?
- v. How easy was it to compare different qualifications from different providers?
 - a. In what way did the available information about qualifications make this an easy or difficult process?
- vi. What information about your qualification was useful for helping you decide the qualification to take?
 - a. In what way was the information useful?
- vii. What types of information would have been useful that weren't available when you were deciding what qualification to take?
 - a. Why?

Theme 2: Skills and Knowledge

Prompt Questions:

- i. In regard to the skills and knowledge you are gaining from your qualification, what do you find the most useful?
 - a. Why?
 - b. How?
- ii. In regard to the skills and knowledge you are gaining from your qualification, what do you find the most enjoyable?
 - a. Why?
- iii. In regard to the skills and knowledge you are gaining from your qualification, what do you think will be the least useful?
 - a. Why?

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- iv. In regard to the skills and knowledge you are gaining from your qualification, what do you least enjoy?
 - a. Why?
- v. In your opinion, how appropriate do you think your chosen qualification is for helping you get a job?
- vi. If you decided to change your job, has your current qualification given you skills that can be transported into other work areas?

Theme 3: *Pathways and Portability*

Prompt Questions:

- i. How have study choices in the past affected your choice to do your current qualification?
- ii. Did study choices in the past act as barriers to you enrolling in your current qualification?
 - a. In what way?
- iii. How important is it that the qualification you are currently studying leads onto further qualifications?
 - a. Did you consider this when choosing your qualification?
- iii. Where do you hope your qualification will take you? (Employment? Further study?).

Theme 4: *The learning process*

Prompt Questions:

- i. Imagine that you were going to start studying again. Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently?
- ii. Would you choose the same qualification that you are doing now? Why or why not?
- iii. If you were to start studying again, what information would you want to know before making your choice? (From whom? Where would you go to get this?)
- iv. What do you think makes a qualification valuable?
- v. What could be done to make choosing what to study easier?

Theme 5: *Numbers*

Prompt Questions:

- i. Do you think there are too many similar qualifications in your current field of study?

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