

## #4 Credits and the NCEA

### Introduction

Credits are the currency of the NCEA qualification. Generally speaking one credit represents ten hours of learning and assessment. This includes teaching time, homework and assessment time.

Students need a total of 80 credits for each NCEA qualification:

- NCEA Level 1 – 80 credits at any Level, including credits in literacy and numeracy.
- NCEA Level 2 – 60 credits at Level 2 or above, plus 20 credits from Level 1 or above.
- NCEA Level 3 – 60 credits at Level 3 or above, plus 20 credits from Level 2 or above.

### How many credits do students achieve?

Now that NCEA has been in place for some years we have evidence about how many credits students gain and their attitudes to completing NCEA qualifications.

The chart below shows the distribution of credits gained during 2010 by year 11, 12 and 13 students.

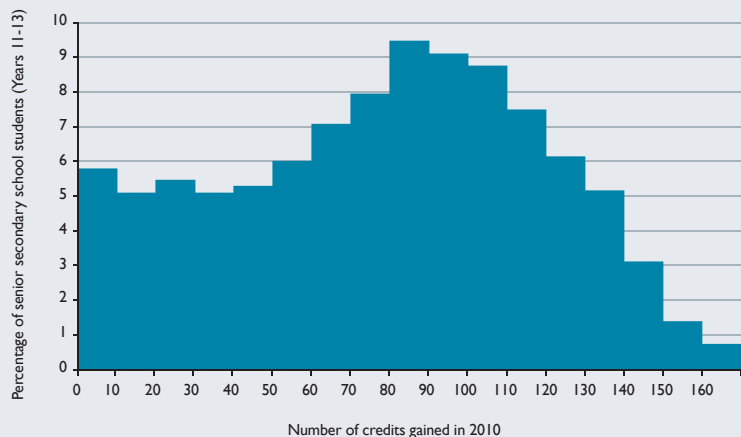
In 2010:

- More than half of all students completed at least 80 credits.
- The median number of credits gained was 82.
- About 9.5% of students gaining between 80 and 90 credits.
- One third of students gained at least 100 credits.

### The learning experience

“Increasingly due to rank score systems at universities, year 13 students are very focused on their top 80 credits. I see this as a good thing as it’s shifting the focus towards quality rather than quantity.”

Richard Dykes, Associate Principal,  
Pakuranga College



Note – Students do not have to complete NCEA qualifications within a single school year - they can accumulate credits towards qualifications over any number of years. A typical course generates between 18 and 24 credits – so over five subjects, a typical student could aim for up to 120 credits. But schools can and do run courses that assess standards totalling as few as 12 credits, with others assessing 30 credits or more.

## Are there “easy” credits?

The alignments of achievement standards to the new New Zealand curriculum has meant that all achievement standards are linked to the correct curriculum benchmark.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education published findings from the [Competent Children Competent Learners](#) project. A longitudinal study was undertaken by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER).

Researchers found little evidence to suggest students were making minimal effort with NCEA:

“ Only a handful of students — 2 percent — said they chose a subject because it would yield easy NCEA credits. Similarly, only 5 percent said they chose a subject because it would be easy. ”

“ We found little evidence that students were taking the easy route to NCEA by doing the minimum amount of work necessary. In fact, the more academically inclined students gained far more than the 80 credits they need to achieve NCEA Level 1, with many gaining 138 credits or more. Nor was there any evidence that students were opting for unit standards over achievement standards. ”

“ Parents who were happy with the new system saw it as a good way to chart progress and accumulate credits across the year. They also said it gave students more chance to succeed, and helped improve their work and study habits. ”

Note – The writers acknowledge this research had a higher proportion of young people from high-income families and lower portions of Maori and Pasifika students, and students from low decile schools, compared to the national average. Full report can be accessed on the [Education Counts website](#).

“ Students regularly compare their results with each other and compete on both the number of credits, number of Excellence grades and a grade point average. Course and career advice is given to ensure students are doing the right subjects at the right level. Motivation in NCEA does have to be more intrinsic and this does require a more subtle approach by teachers than by simply using fear of failure. Teachers are working with students to encourage them to set their own personal goals. ”

David Hodge, Principal, Rangitoto College. Open letter to parents, 2011

## The learning experience

“ Students (and their teachers and parents) need to focus on quality, not quantity. They should be aiming at Excellence and Merit grades, not just accumulating more and more credits. Otherwise, there’s a danger of over-assessing. ”

“ The 80 credit milestone isn’t an issue in our school. In fact, it can be quite the opposite – we actively discourage students from just going for more and more credits. We want them to look at the quality of their results, the Excellence and Merit grades. Students do get quite strategic, especially in year 13 but they are looking at the full picture of their results and what they want to do with them beyond school, not just numbers of credits. ”

Julia Davidson, Principal of Wellington Girls’ College and Chair of New Zealand Secondary Principals’ Council