



The Starpath Project

Study zeroes in on importance of NCEA course choices



Head Prefects, Tikipunga High School, one of Starpath's partner schools

Understanding how NCEA subjects are selected in low-decile schools is a key step in improving education outcomes for disadvantaged students.

The Starpath Project released a study in 2009 into how NCEA course choices are made by Māori, Pacific and other students in low-decile schools, and the effects of those choices.

It is one of a number of reports being produced by The Starpath Project to help design research-based interventions to raise educational achievement of Māori, Pacific and other students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Although the number of New Zealand

high school students leaving school with qualifications is increasing, there is still a big gap in educational outcomes for students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

For example, students from decile 10 schools are three times more likely to leave school with the University Entrance qualification than students from decile 1 schools.

Navigating NCEA

Starpath researchers have been identifying barriers in our education system, which can prevent academically-able students from achieving their potential at secondary school and going on to degree-level tertiary study.

Earlier research suggested the complexity of NCEA may be a barrier, in particular the long-term impacts of subject choices.

“NCEA is very flexible, which is good as it caters for a huge range of students. However this flexibility can work against you if students do not have access to good quality advice and guidance when selecting subjects,” Starpath Director Associate Professor Elizabeth McKinley says.

The research team, headed by Dr Irena Madjar, spent 12 months in low-mid decile high schools in Auckland and Northland interviewing more than 160 students, parents and teachers about NCEA subject choices. Two-thirds of the participants were Māori and Pacific.

The study revealed many academically-able students were choosing, or ending up in subjects that limited their chances of entering and succeeding in tertiary study, and which did not align with their job and career aspirations.

The reasons were varied, and included:

- The wide range of subject choice means many students are being diverted from the narrow pathway that leads to academic success;
- A focus on gaining credits, without adequate attention to the content learned and skills developed, leads some students away from subjects necessary for particular fields of university study;
- Parents don't understand NCEA and lack confidence in their ability to advise and support their children on subject choice;
- Students do not always choose their NCEA subjects. Schools determine which subjects are available and how students are selected for different versions of core subjects. Parents in some cases choose subjects.

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The challenge

- To gain a clearer understanding of the conditions in which NCEA course choices are made in some low-mid decile New Zealand high schools;
- To understand how such choices affect Māori, Pacific and other students' prospects for university education.

The study

- A qualitative study using individual interviews and follow-up focus groups with 161 students, parents and teachers.

The implications

- Parents need information tools to translate the complexity of NCEA to better advise their children;
- Schools need to recognise the critical points when a student is at risk or has fallen from the NCEA pathway which leads to their intended academic goals;
- The NCEA system works best when students are able to make fully informed decisions, with advice and support of adults who understand their academic potential, and when schools are able to act on those decisions.

A full-length report of the study, titled *Towards University: navigating NCEA course choices in low-mid decile schools* can be found on www.starpath.auckland.ac.nz

About the Starpath Project

Starpath is a Partnership for Excellence led by The University of Auckland in partnership with the New Zealand Government. It aims to address New Zealand's comparatively high

rate of educational inequality with Māori, Pacific Island and students from low socio-economic backgrounds showing significant rates of educational under-achievement compared with their peers.



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Starpath

A University of Auckland Partnership for Excellence

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