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NCEA Level 2 reform - Qualification exposure, equity, and school programme implications

Year 12 Level 2 cohort analysis | 2025

Snapshot

Scale of the issue

- 64,403 Year 12 students formed the 2025 Level 2 cohort. Of these, 46,165 achieved Level 2 and 18,238 did not achieve
- A further 14,930 current achievers (32.3 percent of all achievers) are identified as potentially exposed, meaning they currently achieve Level 2 through credit combinations that may be harder to sustain under a more structured, subject-based qualification system
- This means that the reform has implications not only for students already not achieving, but also for nearly one-third of students who currently succeed under the existing system.

Equity impacts of 14,930 current achievers at risk

- Risk exposure is strongly linked to school disadvantage:
 - 18 percent of achievers in fewer-barrier schools are identified as exposed
 - 36 percent in moderate-barrier schools
 - 56 percent in more-barrier schools.
- Students in more-barrier schools are approximately three times more likely to be exposed than students in lower-barrier schools.

Māori and Pacific Peoples learners adversely impacted

- 48 percent of Māori achievers are identified within the exposure group
- 43 percent of Pacific Peoples achievers are identified within the exposure group

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- More than 4,400 Māori students and 2,300 Pacific Peoples students, currently achieving Level 2, are captured within the exposure measure.

Implications for schools

- Schools may need to redesign courses, remap standards, revise assessment programmes, adjust timetables, and reconfigure staffing arrangements
- Schools serving the most exposed learners are also likely to have the least capacity to absorb implementation pressures
- Estimated additional implementation costs are \$49 million to \$58 million nationally, excluding several extra costs that have not been quantified.

Bottom line

- The reform is not simply a qualification design issue. It creates a potential challenge for 14,930 current achievers, with impacts concentrated among Māori learners, Pacific Peoples learners, and higher-barrier schools
- Without sufficient flexibility, transition support, and implementation funding, the reform could increase pressure on schools and widen existing educational inequities.

Note on terminology and interpretation

The distinction between a school course and an NZQA-registered subject is important to the interpretation of this analysis. A **course** is designed by an individual school and may combine standards from one or more learning areas, including vocational, applied, local, or culturally grounded learning. A **subject**, as recorded in NZQA data, refers to an NZQA-registered subject and its associated standards.

As a result, a student may successfully complete a coherent school course without accumulating enough credits within a single NZQA subject grouping for that achievement to appear as an achieved subject in national subject-level statistics. Consequently, the number of NZQA subjects achieved should not be interpreted as a direct measure of the number of courses completed, the breadth or quality of learning, or the coherence of a student's programme.

There are no equivalent national course-level statistics available. However, subject-level achievement is relevant to assessing the proposed qualification structure. If achievement is required to align more closely with nationally specified subjects, students whose current pathways rely on more flexible combinations of standards will have less flexibility than they do under the current system. The analysis therefore uses NZQA subject achievement as an indicator of potential exposure to a more prescribed qualification structure, rather than as evidence that students have completed too few courses or received a narrow education.

1. The Year 12 Level 2 cohort

The analysis begins with the full 2025 Year 12 Level 2 cohort. This provides a common baseline before distinguishing current non-achievement from potential exposure created by the proposed qualification settings.

Table 1: Year 12, 2025 cohort

Measure	Students	Share
Total Year 12 Level 2 cohort	64,403	100% of cohort
Achieved Level 2	46,165	71.7% of cohort
Did not achieve Level 2	18,238	28.3% of cohort
Achieved 3+ subjects	31,235	67.7% of achievers
Achieved 1–2 subjects	13,845	30% of achievers
Achieved 0 subjects	1,085	2.4% of achievers
Potentially exposed achievers	14,930	32.3% of achievers

Level 2 achievement is not a uniform outcome. Students reach the qualification through different combinations of standards and school-designed courses. The “subjects achieved” measures in Table 1 refer to alignment with NZQA-registered subject groupings, not to the number of school courses a student has taken or completed. The data therefore provides an initial indicator of how many current achievement pathways may be affected by a more prescribed subject structure.

2. Students already not achieving Level 2

The 18,238 students who did not achieve Level 2 must remain central to the analysis. They are already experiencing qualification risk under the current system. Any assessment of reform should consider whether the new settings improve their prospects or add further barriers to qualification completion.

Current non-achievement is unevenly distributed. Māori students account for 5,761 non-achievers, Pacific Peoples for 3,048, and students in more-barrier schools for 4,041. Across Equity Index groups, non-achievement affects 16.8 percent of students in fewer-barrier schools, 22.9 percent in moderate-barrier schools, and 39.1 percent in more-barrier schools.

Interpretation

This group should not be added to the current-achiever exposure group though as both measures describe the same outcome. The first is observed non-achievement in 2025. The second is an analytical indicator of possible exposure under proposed settings.

3. Current achievers and alignment with NZQA subject groupings

A second group sits within the 46,165 students who achieved Level 2. Of these, 13,845 achieved one or two NZQA subjects and 1,085 did not achieve any NZQA subjects. Together, these 14,930 students, or 32.3 percent of achievers, are identified as potentially exposed under settings that place greater weight on achievement within nationally specified subjects (these figures refer to NZQA subject groupings, not to the number of school courses students completed).

The number of NZQA subjects achieved should not be read as a complete measure of the breadth, quality, or coherence of a student's learning. A school course may comprise a broad and purposeful combination of standards, but those standards may span several NZQA subject groupings. As a result, a student may successfully complete a school-designed course without the full credit total being recorded against a single NZQA subject.

The measure is better interpreted as an indicator of how closely a student's credit combination aligns with nationally recognised subject groupings. Students may be more exposed where the standards assembled within their school courses do not align neatly with those groupings. Their current achievement may be valid and educationally coherent, while being more difficult to reproduce under a qualification structure that requires credits to be accumulated within a smaller number of nationally specified subjects.

A substantial share of current achievers faces increased qualification risk

The 14,930 students identified in this analysis represent a substantial potentially exposed cohort within the current Level 2 achievement population. Their credit combinations do not currently produce achievement across three or more NZQA subject groupings. This does not establish that these students completed too few courses or experienced insufficient curriculum breadth. It does indicate that their existing achievement pathways may be more difficult to reproduce under a qualification system requiring credits to align more closely with nationally specified subjects.

While individual outcomes cannot be predicted, the size of the cohort means that this should be treated as a significant system-level risk rather than a theoretical possibility.

4. Risk exposure differs sharply by school context

The Equity Index results show that risk will not be evenly distributed across the student population. Students in schools serving communities with higher levels of socio-economic and educational disadvantage are substantially more likely to be affected by broader qualification requirements than students in schools facing fewer barriers. This pattern is consistent and pronounced. It suggests that changes to qualification settings have the potential to widen existing disparities in achievement, unless additional support and capacity are provided.

The exposure measure reflects alignment with NZQA subject classifications rather than completion of school courses. Students captured by the measure may be participating in broad and coherent learning programmes that are not fully reflected in subject-level statistics.

Table 2: Potential exposed achievers

Equity Index group	All students	Not achieving	Potentially exposed achievers	Exposed share of achievers
Fewer barriers	16,114	2,700	2,462	18.4%
Moderate barriers	31,330	7,181	8,650	35.8%
More barriers	10,342	4,041	3,521	55.9%

The scale of the difference is significant. In schools facing fewer barriers, less than one in five current achievers fall into the at-risk cohort. In schools facing more barriers, the share of potentially exposed achievers is 56 percent. This means that students in schools with more barriers are around three times as likely to face qualification risk than students in fewer barrier schools.

The findings suggest that broader qualification requirements may have very different consequences across school contexts. Schools already managing higher levels of learner need, attendance challenges, staffing pressures, and resource constraints would be required to support a much larger proportion of students whose current achievement patterns align with fewer NZQA subject groupings. This is regardless of the number or nature of the school courses that these students may have completed. As a result, the additional qualification challenge is likely to fall disproportionately on schools and communities that are already carrying the greatest burden.

Rather than affecting all students equally, the proposed settings could concentrate risk among those who are already experiencing the greatest educational disadvantage. The strong Equity Index gradient indicates that any increase in subject breadth requirements may reinforce existing inequities unless targeted implementation support is provided for schools facing more barriers, and their learners.

5. Māori and Pacific Peoples learners face compounded exposure

The ethnicity results show that exposure risk will not be evenly distributed across student groups. Māori and Pacific Peoples learners have the highest concentration of potentially exposed achievers, indicating that a large share of students who currently achieve NCEA Level 2 may face greater challenges under the proposed qualification settings.

Table 3: Potential students exposed based on ethnicity

Ethnicity	All students	Achieving	Not achieving	Potentially exposed achievers	Exposed share of achievers
Māori	14,950	9,189	5,761	4,423	48.1%
Pacific Peoples	8,580	5,532	3,048	2,359	42.6%
European	39,485	30,284	9,201	9,234	30.5%
Asian	12,760	9,080	3,680	2,035	22.4%
MELAA	1,781	1,226	555	359	29.3%

Almost one in two Māori students who currently achieve Level 2 fall within the exposure measure, the highest proportion of any ethnic group. Pacific Peoples learners also face a substantial level of risk, with more than two in five achievers identified as potentially exposed. These rates are considerably higher than those observed for European, Asian, and MELAA learners.

The scale of exposure is also significant in absolute terms. More than 4,400 Māori achievers and almost 2,400 Pacific Peoples achievers are identified within the screening measure, together accounting for over 6,700 students. This suggests that qualification reform may have a disproportionate impact on groups that are already experiencing lower rates of achievement.

As elsewhere in this report, the measure reflects achievement recorded within NZQA subject groupings rather than the breadth of school courses undertaken by learners. It should not be interpreted as evidence that Māori or Pacific Peoples learners participate in fewer learning opportunities or narrower programmes.

The findings highlight the importance of testing whether the proposed qualification structure continues to provide credible pathways for learners whose programmes include vocational, applied, practical, project-based, community-based, or culturally grounded learning. Without careful design and implementation, the reform could increase achievement risks for groups that are already the most exposed within the current system.

6. What teachers and principals say the numbers mean

Teacher focus groups and principal interviews consistently reiterated concerns on curriculum flexibility, narrower pathways, less local and cultural responsiveness, greater reliance on high-stakes external assessment, incomplete resources, staffing shortages, and uneven implementation capacity.

These perspectives are relevant to subject conventionality. Where schools have assembled programmes around local learner needs, vocational goals, practical learning, or culturally grounded content, the standards within a school-defined subject may not align fully with an NZQA-recognised subject. Greater prescription could therefore affect both the credit bundle available to students and the architecture of the school programme itself.

Teachers and principals consistently described these programmes as legitimate pathways to achievement. Their concern is that greater prescription may require schools to redesign courses around nationally specified subject categories, rather than around local learner needs.

7. Additional implementation costs may exceed \$50 million nationally

The modelling estimates additional implementation costs of \$49.2 million to \$57.8 million across New Zealand's 487 secondary schools. Relief-teacher coverage accounts for around 70 to 74 percent of the quantified total. As the estimate excludes several costs, including additional professional learning, wider curriculum redesign, administration, IT changes, travel, and change management, actual implementation costs are likely to be higher.

Implementation pressures are unlikely to fall evenly across the system. Many reform activities, including curriculum mapping, programme redesign, planning, and policy updates, are required regardless of school size. This means that smaller schools face higher costs relative to their staffing and resources, while rural schools may face additional challenges securing relief teachers and specialist staff.

There is also an important equity dimension. Schools serving more-barrier communities are also more likely to have students identified within the potential exposure measure, while often having less capacity to absorb significant reform-related work. As a result, the schools facing the greatest learner exposure may also face the greatest implementation burden.

8. Conclusion

The analysis indicates that the proposed qualification reforms have implications beyond the 18,238 students who did not achieve NCEA Level 2 in 2025. A substantial group of achievers, estimated at 14,930 students, currently achieve through pathways that do not align strongly with NZQA subject classifications and may therefore face greater exposure under a more prescribed subject-based

qualification structure. This exposure is concentrated in more barriers Equity Index schools and among Māori and Pacific Peoples learners, raising concerns that existing achievement disparities could widen if implementation is not carefully managed.

Importantly, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence that students have completed too few courses, experienced a narrow curriculum, or followed lower-quality learning programmes. The analysis is based on NZQA subject-level statistics rather than the school-designed courses that students actually undertake. Many students currently achieve through flexible and coherent programmes that may not be fully reflected in NZQA subject classifications.

The findings also highlight that reform is not solely a student achievement issue. Schools may need to redesign courses, remap standards, revise assessment programmes, and adjust staffing and timetabling arrangements. National implementation costs are estimated to exceed \$50 million, and are likely to be higher once currently unquantified costs are considered. Smaller schools, rural schools, and schools serving communities with more barriers appear to be particularly exposed to these pressures.

The success of the reforms will depend not only on qualification design, but on whether sufficient flexibility, transition support, and implementation resources are available to ensure that successful school-based pathways can be translated into the new qualification framework. Without careful implementation, reforms intended to strengthen qualification coherence may reduce pathway flexibility for some learners and place additional pressure on schools already facing the greatest challenges.