

National Qualifications Policy: SCQF levels 4 and 5 reform

International report

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Contents

Introduction	1
Wales, 14–16.....	2
New Zealand, 15–18	3
New South Wales (Australia), 14–16.....	5
Estonia, 15–18	6
British Columbia (Canada), 14–16	8
Conclusion.....	9
Appendix 1: System overviews.....	11
New South Wales (Australia)	11
British Columbia (Canada).....	13
Estonia.....	16
New Zealand.....	17
Wales.....	19
Appendix 2: Information tables.....	21
Table 1: Structures and content.....	21
Table 2: Notional learning hours	23
Table 3: Assessment approaches.....	24
Table 4: Digital technologies in education	28

Introduction

This report forms part of a series of publications exploring early thinking around the modularisation and reform of qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5.

The information in this report is not intended to be definitive or exhaustive. It aims to inform thinking and consider how elements of different international systems might influence the design of new qualifications.¹ The jurisdictions covered in this report take a modular approach to their senior-phase qualifications, have recently undergone or are in the process of reform, and have a relatively small population. Most are high performing in international educational rankings. They are Wales, New Zealand, Estonia, New South Wales (Australia) and British Columbia (Canada).

The case studies in this report focus primarily on the equivalent of S4 learners, and aim to provide a succinct overview of the general qualifications and certifications that form part of each qualification system at that stage. These vary across contexts: Wales is now in the process of rolling out distinct subject, vocational and skills-based qualifications for 14–16-year-olds; British Columbia does not provide any formal qualifications to those who leave school at 16; similarly, New South Wales does not provide formal qualifications at this lower level but does give school leavers a record of internally assessed grades for subject-based courses; in New Zealand, 15–16-year-olds take the lowest level of a multi-year leaving certificate; in Estonia, 15-year-olds take exams to graduate from basic education before most begin a senior phase with multiple modules over three years.

Jurisdictions also take a variety of approaches to balancing internal and external assessment: British Columbia and Estonia take an almost entirely internal approach, while New South Wales, New Zealand and Wales use combinations of internal and external assessments.

There is more information on the five jurisdictions in the appendices: Appendix 1 provides overviews of the senior phase system in each jurisdiction; Appendix 2 provides side-by-side comparisons detailing different aspects of each qualification system, including structure, size, assessment approaches and digital technologies.

¹ All information was correct at time of writing in 2024.

Wales, 14–16

Context

The Welsh Government has instituted wide-ranging reforms to the 3–16 curriculum, resulting in the introduction of [Curriculum for Wales \(CfW\)](#). This shares a [number of features](#) with Scotland's [Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\)](#), and was developed following the Welsh Government's response to Graham Donaldson's [2015 report](#).

The 14–16 offer

Qualifications Wales has undertaken a significant reform of its senior phase National Qualifications offer for ages 14–16 to reflect the principles and cross-cutting themes of CfW. Working closely with the Welsh Government, and building upon a wide-ranging engagement programme (including a dedicated [website](#)), the reforms have resulted in a redeveloped 14–16 offer in which modularisation, digitisation and increased use of non-exam assessment are apparent.

The 14–16 offer has [four major strands](#):

- [GCSEs](#) are available for academic, creative and technical subjects. These involve 120–140 hours of directed learning, known as guided learning hours (GLH), for single awards (240–280 for double awards), usually delivered across two years. The courses are available at levels 1 and 2 (broadly equivalent to SCQF levels 4 and 5) and are graded A*–G. Assessment approaches are subject-dependent: courses can be linear or modular, and Mathematics and Numeracy and the Sciences will offer tiered (foundation or higher) papers.
- [VCSEs](#) are a made-for-schools sister brand to GCSEs designed for 14–16-year-olds wishing to undertake work-based qualifications. Like GCSEs, these involve 120–140 GLH at levels 1 and 2. VCSEs are modular in nature and employ a pass, merit or distinction grading system.
- [Foundation Qualifications](#) for those not ready for GCSE or VCSE are designed to align with GCSE and VCSE delivery and also offer 120–140 GLH. They can be linear or modular and span Entry 1, 2 and 3 and level 1 (broadly equivalent to SCQF levels 1–4).

- A [Skills Suite](#) of flexible skills for life and skills for work courses comprises micro-credentials of 10–20 guided learning hours. A personal project option involves 60 guided learning hours. Courses can be combined to complete an award (60 GLH), a certificate (120 GLH) or a diploma (240 GLH). These courses are available at Entry 1, 2 and 3 (graded pass or fail) and levels 1 and 2 (graded pass, merit or distinction) and are broadly equivalent to SCQF levels 1–5.

Qualification levels and grading



Diagram from [Qualifications Wales \(2025\) National Qualifications 14–16: Centre Guide](#)

New Zealand, 15–18

Context

[The New Zealand Curriculum is being updated](#), with full implementation by 2027. It [has been organised](#) into five phases of learning:

- Primary school: Phase One (Years 0–3), Phase Two (Years 4–6), Phase Three (Years 7 and 8)
- Secondary school: Phase Four (Years 9 and 10), Phase Five (Years 11–13)

In New Zealand, secondary school begins when learners are 12 or 13 years old (Phase Four) and lasts for five years, from Year 9 to Year 13, though learners can leave once they are 16 years old. There is no external assessment before Phase Five.

Phase five: the 15–18 offer



(Diagram from NZQA (2025) [Guide to NCEA](#)).

New Zealand has a three-year upper secondary school phase, with three levels of qualification available within the [National Certificate of Educational Achievement](#) (NCEA) issued by the [New Zealand Qualifications Authority](#) (NZQA). NCEA is transitioning to a revised qualification, with implementation from 2024 to 2029 (revised from 2024 to 2027).

- NCEA Level 3 [has been equated to](#) SCQF level 7 (Advanced Higher)
- NCEA Level 2 has been equated to SCQF level 5 (National 5)
- NCEA Level 1 is considered a ‘below upper secondary’ qualification by the OECD

Learners usually begin studying for their NCEA Level 1 in Year 11 (aged 15–16) and continue NCEA levels through Year 12 (16–17) and Year 13 (17–18). They do not have to complete NCEA qualifications at a given level within a single academic year and can accumulate credits towards an NCEA qualification over a number of years, including after they have left school.

All three NCEA levels in the revised qualifications require 60 credits each, with one credit equivalent to 10 notional learning hours. These credits are made up of subject-based courses. A 20-credit mandatory ‘co-requisite’ in literacy and numeracy must also be taken as a one-off to achieve any level of NCEA. NZQA provides detailed support and exemplification for all [subjects](#) and individual standards. In addition, a range of curricular [assessment resources](#) are provided by the Ministry of Education.

Around 40% of NCEA achievement standards are externally assessed by end-of-year national examinations, with the remaining achievement standards internally assessed during the school year and moderated by the NZQA. Marks for achievement standards are usually graded on a four-point scale: 'Not Achieved', 'Achieved', 'Merit' and 'Excellence'.

Learners also receive a Record of Achievement (ROA). This official transcript can be updated as learners gain new standards and qualifications throughout their life.

New South Wales (Australia), 14–16

Context

The [NSW Education Standards Authority](#) (NESA) oversees education from kindergarten until high school graduation. The New South Wales (NSW) school system has six two-year phases after kindergarten. Stages 5 and 6 (covering Years 9–12) are of most significance to the current discussion. The curriculum is aligned with Australia's [National Curriculum](#), which has undergone significant reform following a [2020–21 review](#).

Stage 5 (14–16): Record of School Achievement (RoSA)

Learners in NSW can leave at the end of Year 10 (Stage 5), though those leaving before the Higher School Certificate (HSC, see next subsection) must enrol for vocational training or work full-time until they are 17. Learners leaving at this point are eligible for a Record of School Achievement ([RoSA](#)) if they meet the [requirements](#). Those not meeting RoSA requirements receive a transcript of study.

At Stage 5, the new curriculum is divided into eight key learning areas. Each course is internally assessed and graded A–E. Grades and work samples are monitored by NESA for consistency of standards. The grades for each course are recorded on the learner's HSC or RoSA. Subject-specific Course Performance Descriptors have been developed for teachers to use in assigning grades in Stage 5.

Stage 5 Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses are also available and delivered through school or approved training providers. VET courses are

competence-based and ‘dual-accredited’ (certificated both through the HSC or RoSA and a Certificate or Statement of Attainment).

The RoSA is also available to learners who, from 2020, have not demonstrated the [HSC minimum standard](#) to receive their HSC. This means that it is employed as a form of fallback certification at Stage 6 as well as an exit certification for Stage 5 leavers.

Stage 6: Higher School Certificate (HSC)

The [HSC](#) is taken at Stage 6 (Years 11 and 12). It is broadly equivalent to SCQF levels 6 and 7, is modular, and includes both internal assessment for units and external exams. Though it is focused beyond 14–16, approaches to assessment, moderation, minimum standards and tiering may have resonance in a Scottish context.

HSC courses have a final external examination set by NESA and an internal assessment programme devised by the school following NESA requirements. The total number of internal assessments is capped, with only one [formal written examination permitted](#). Assessments should take place at different points in the year.

The [moderation](#) process adjusts school assessment marks using both internal and external components. To show they meet the [HSC minimum standard](#), learners need to achieve [Level 3 or 4](#) in short [online reading, writing and numeracy tests](#) of skills for everyday life. These are two to three levels below the demand level of HSC subjects (level 6). Courses are also tiered, with revised syllabuses such as that for [standard mathematics](#) offering modules linked to key knowledge areas showing different levels of demand within the overall course offer.

Estonia, 15–18

Context

In Estonia, [general school education](#) is divided into three phases: pre-school (up to age 7); basic education (Years 1–9); and upper secondary education (Years 10–12). They all follow a common curriculum.

[Vocational secondary education](#) traditionally follows a separate pathway after basic education, and around 25% of upper secondary learners are [enrolled in vocational programmes](#). From 2024–25, the school-leaving age has been [extended to 18](#).

Basic school education (to 15)

[To graduate from basic school education](#), learners are required to have studied the curriculum to a satisfactory level. They must also complete a creative assignment and pass three state exams, taken during the spring examination period. These exams are: Estonian (or Estonian as a second language), mathematics and one elective subject from foreign languages, sciences, or social sciences. Learners who do not pass have [a less formal fallback option available](#), where they can advance to the next level of education through a teacher's recommendation or by passing school-based exams.

In Russian language schools ([15% of basic schools](#)) the state exams are in Russian, mathematics and Estonian as a second language. In 2024 Estonia began the process of [switching the language of instruction](#) in all schools to Estonian.

Upper secondary education (15–18)

Estonia offers five pathways for post-basic school education. Education is now compulsory until age 18 in Estonia. The following discussion focuses on general upper secondary pathways, as these are most analogous to our National Courses in upper secondary education.

Compulsory subjects and optional courses are set out in a highly detailed national curriculum. A minimum of 96 courses (modules) are taken over three years of upper secondary. Sixty-three of these are compulsory, [spanning seven subject areas](#): language and literature, foreign languages, mathematics, natural science, social studies, art and music, and physical education. Each course consists of 35 hours or lessons, and almost all assessment is internal.

Schools have significant flexibility in how they teach and internally grade courses, provided they stay within the boundaries of the official [General Provisions](#). For example, the Language and Literature guidelines state that teachers should choose

assessment methods that match their students' age, individual abilities, and readiness for specific activities.

[A five-point grading scale](#) is used for internal and external assessment at both general secondary and vocational schools. On the scale, a score of 3 points (50–74%) or above is considered a pass. However, schools [do have the freedom to use other grading scales](#) and convert them to the five-point scale for reporting purposes.

Three subjects are assessed in external state examinations at the end of Year 12: Estonian, mathematics (at one of two levels) and a foreign language, and these are [compulsory](#). These subjects are part of the leaving certificate, and to graduate learners must also [pass a school exam and research project](#) based on the national curriculum.

British Columbia (Canada), 14–16

Context

The [OECD's 2021 report](#) on Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence highlighted the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC) as an effective example of a [recent curricular redesign that balances](#) knowledge, skills and understanding.

The education system in BC operates on a Kindergarten to Year 12 (5–18) curricular model and uses a 'Big Ideas' curricular framework. Schools are divided into grade schools (Kindergarten to Grade 8, age 5–13) and secondary schools (Grade 9 to 12, age 14–18). Learners are not separated into general and vocational pathways.

14–16 education

School is only [compulsory up to age 16](#), which is around Grade 10. However, there is no designated certification pathway for leavers at age 16. Learners are able to [access transcripts](#) of all courses successfully completed, credits earned and achievement levels attained at Grade 10 or above, which may act as a kind of fallback in lieu of formal qualifications.

Curricular reforms in BC have led to changes in assessment approaches in the early stages of secondary education which may help to provide evidence of attainment for

early leavers. Marking and reporting approaches move to a graded approach at Grade 10: Learners in Kindergarten to Grade 9 are ranked on a [proficiency scale](#) while those in Grades 10–12 receive letter grades. The inclusion of pre-diploma Grade 10 courses in this suggests that Grade 10 grading outcomes may act as a form of fallback for those leaving before completing the full graduation diploma.

Assessment is largely internal, and the BC curriculum provides detailed support for all areas, subjects, and courses, structured around the model: Content (know), Curricular Competencies (do), Big Ideas (understand). The only external assessments are [literacy tests](#) at Grade 10 (and now Grade 12) and a [numeracy test](#) at Grade 10 that form part of mandatory high school graduation requirements in BC. These are digital assessments, taken online, and can be retaken. They may serve to provide a degree of certification for early school leavers, although it is important to note that the tests are mandatory for the graduation diploma (usually completed at age 18 or 19), and it is possible for leavers at age 16 not to have completed them.

British Columbia Certificate of Graduation (15–18)

BC's qualifications system is focused on a Year 12 certificate of graduation, often referred to as the [Dogwood Diploma](#). As well as the mandatory external literacy and numeracy assessments mentioned above, learners are required to attain 80 internally assessed credits across a wide range of subjects over the three years to graduate. Four credits represent around 100–120 hours of directed learning. These credits must also come from courses at different levels: a tiered approach results in some Grade 10 courses being eligible for the diploma, with others appearing to serve as a foundation requirement for study at Grades 11 and 12.

Conclusion

The jurisdictions examined in this report demonstrate a range of approaches to the design and reform of qualifications for learners broadly equivalent to those at SCQF levels 4 and 5.

While each system reflects its own national context, several common themes emerge, including increased modularisation, greater use of internal and digital

assessment, flexible approaches to progression and certification, and an enhanced focus on skills, competences and learner choice.

The case studies also highlight differing approaches to certification at lower secondary level, with some systems offering formal qualifications, others providing records of achievement or fallback certification, and several embedding literacy and numeracy requirements across pathways.

Taken together, these examples illustrate the variety of ways in which qualifications systems seek to balance consistency, flexibility, breadth and progression. The findings in this report are intended to support ongoing discussion and reflection about the future design and reform of qualifications at SCQF levels 4 and 5 in Scotland.

Appendix 1: System overviews

New South Wales (Australia)

Area	Remarks
Title / awarding body	The <u>NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA)</u> oversees education until graduation. In the senior phase, NSW employs a modularised system in the Higher School Certificate (<u>HSC</u>).
Implementation and change	The HSC has been available since 1967 but has <u>evolved and changed</u> significantly. The current form of the HSC was introduced in 2001, with the first digital examinations in 2019. Ongoing <u>reforms at national level</u> resulted in Curriculum 9.0, which began implementation in 2021.
Number of levels / SCQF equivalence	One level, broadly equivalent to A level or SCQF levels 6 and 7, but with UK university entrance requirements sometimes <u>specifying Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores over 90%</u> .
Duration of course	The HSC is usually awarded in Year 12 (10 courses), but the requirement for preliminary courses (12 courses in Year 11) means that it is in effect a two-year course.
Mandatory components and levels	To show they meet the <u>HSC minimum standard</u> , learners need to achieve <u>Level 3 or 4</u> in short <u>online reading, writing and numeracy tests</u> of skills for everyday life. These are two or three levels below the demand level of HSC subjects (level 6). Two credits of HSC level English must also be taken, and the examination sat.
Differentiation approaches	<u>Exemptions</u> to minimum standards apply for some ASN candidates.
Wider achievement	A wider achievement programme called <u>Up2Now</u> , managed online, recognises a range of wider achievements inside and outside of school and supports CV development and onward progression.

Area	Remarks
Number of credits or modules required	12 units of preliminary and 10 units of HSC courses: Most courses have a 2-unit value. Where NESA courses do not cover a curriculum area, it is possible for schools to develop <u>Board Endorsed Courses</u> . However, the criteria for these have been tightened up as part of NSW reforms.
Notional learning hours	A unit of study comprises <u>60 hours of indicative time</u> in both Preliminary and HSC courses.
Standards and frameworks	Detailed requirements are published by NESA. These cover assessment, grading, moderation and outcome reporting.
Assessment approaches	Internal assessment has a high degree of freedom in approach, controlled by the online submission of evidence for moderation. External exams are largely written, and increasingly online, but some also have practical or performance exams. Each HSC exam assesses how candidates achieve the learning outcomes from the course syllabus.
External assessment	A compulsory exam applies to all HSC Board Developed Courses, except VET courses, where the exam is optional. NESA sets, conducts and marks the exams. Each HSC exam contributes 50% of the final HSC mark for that course.
Internal assessment	Schools run an assessment programme for each HSC course, following NESA's requirements. Internal assessment <u>deadlines</u> are scheduled state-wide. Practitioners are required to upload specific evidence online for QA purposes. However, a formative approach means that informal assessment may also be used, including a range of strategies such as questioning, class discussion, observations, and student self-evaluation.
Digital assessment	Yes
Moderation of assessment	The <u>moderation</u> process adjusts school assessment marks using both internal and external components so they can be compared across schools. It is carried out by the NSW Education Standards Authority. There is a <u>QA process</u> in place for all 'universal resources' provided to schools.

Area	Remarks
Transferability	Credit transfer and recognition of prior learning can take place in agreed situations. Prior learning can be credited for the HSC, and in turn HSC credit can sometimes be transferred to vocational courses at levels 5 and 6. HSC results are also central to determining Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking (ATAR), although the credits cannot be transferred into tertiary study directly.
Resits	Students who do not demonstrate the minimum standard before they complete Year 12 can apply to sit for one or more minimum standard online tests after they leave school if they have fulfilled all other HSC requirements. They have five years from the start of their HSC courses to do this.
PISA scores (mathematics)	<u>Recent data</u> based on PISA tests show that Australia as a whole is 15 points above the OECD average in mathematics. Within this, NSW has shown signs of improving performance, against an overall national pattern of decline. Although a 35-point drop in performance in NSW is apparent between 2003–22, performance in NSW has begun to climb slowly again since 2018. There is a rural-urban attainment gap, with rural learners outperformed by those in cities. The largest range of student performance in Australia was seen in New South Wales, with 269 points between the 10th and 90th percentiles. 52% of NSW students met <u>national standards</u> . 2022 PISA Mathematics outcomes in NSW (491 points) were also better than <u>Scotland</u> (471 points).

British Columbia (Canada)

Area	Remarks
Title / awarding body	The <u>British Columbia Certificate of Graduation</u> or 'Dogwood Diploma' is awarded by the <u>Government of British Columbia</u> .
Implementation and change	Ongoing, with <u>the most recent changes</u> implemented between 2011 and 2020.
Number of levels / SCQF equivalence	Study in years 10, 11, and 12 leads to diploma. No direct SCQF parallel, but UK universities often require a 65% score in 5 subjects.

Area	Remarks
Duration of course	Three years.
Mandatory components and levels	Three <u>graduation</u> assessments: Literacy and numeracy (Grade 10) and literacy (Grade 12) are taken online. 4 credits with an <u>Indigenous focus</u> are mandatory from 2023, which in many cases cross over with other permitted certification components, such as Language, Arts or Social Sciences. Otherwise: 16 credits must be at Grade 12 level, including mandatory Language Arts 12 and Career Life Connections. 28 credits must be elective course credits. The remaining 52 credits comprise: • Career-Life Education (4 credits), and Career-Life Connections (4 credits) • Physical and Health Education 10 (4 credits) • Science 10 (4 credits), and a Science 11 or 12 (4 credits) • Social Studies 10 (4 credits), and a Social Studies 11 or 12 (4 credits) • Maths 10 (4 credits), and a Maths 11 or 12 (4 credits) • Language Arts 10, 11 and a required 12 (12 credits total) • Arts Education 10, 11, or 12 and/or an Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies 10, 11, or 12 (4 credits total)
Differentiation approaches	By pathway: Mathematics courses include workplace or apprenticeship-focused courses as well as computer science, calculus and other core maths activities. By level (partial): Credits can be at Grade 11 rather than Grade 10 in most subjects, though 16 Grade 12 credits in total are required for the diploma. By language: <u>Alternative arrangements</u> apply for first language French learners allowing them to take the diploma in French or obtain a dual diploma.
Number of credits or modules required	80
Notional learning hours	4 credits = 100–120 hours of instructional time.

Area	Remarks
Standards and frameworks	<u>Framework for Enhancing Student Learning</u> (from 2020) <u>BC Curriculum</u> . Year 10 and 12 provincial literacy and numeracy assessments are part of the diploma, and a wider provincial sampling and assessment programme, providing a degree of accountability. BC participates in PIRLS and PISA.
Assessment approaches	Formative approaches are strongly encouraged, with teachers using best outcome evidence to make assessment judgements. This is supported by <u>performance standard</u> exemplification and <u>principles of quality assessment</u> . Grades and percentages are used to <u>report student achievement</u> .
External assessment	Three <u>graduation</u> assessments: Literacy and numeracy (Grade 10) and literacy (Grade 12) are taken online. <u>Online support materials</u> are available.
Internal assessment	The provincial government provides resources for <u>four methods</u> : performance and portfolio assessment, student-centred conferences and student self-assessment. For provincial assessments, one exam in each subject can be sat per <u>session</u> .
Digital assessment	Yes, developed in partnership with <u>Vretta</u> .
Moderation of assessment	<u>Framework for Enhancing Student Learning</u> (from 2020).
Transferability	A system of <u>dual credit</u> makes it possible for grades 11 and 12 students to take post-secondary courses and receive credit towards both high school graduation and post-secondary credentials.
Academic and vocational routes	Largely shared pathway. Dual credit and courses aligned to vocational destinations (for example workplace mathematics at levels 10 and 11, Apprenticeship mathematics at level 12) support vocational progression.
Cross-curricular themes	Core competences and three curricular elements — Content, Curricular Competencies and Big Ideas — are embedded across the system, balancing skills, application and knowledge, and are simplified as ‘know, do, understand’. (BC Curriculum overview)
Resits	Assessments can be taken <u>three times</u> , the original attempt and two resits.

Area	Remarks
PISA scores (mathematics)	BC outperformed Scotland (471) in Mathematics (496) in 2022 and has done so consistently over the last decade, but has experienced a significant decline from a high of 522 in 2012 and 2015. The fall in attainment coincides with both the introduction of computer-based tests for PISA in 2018, and the implementation of the new curriculum from 2011 to 2020.

Estonia

Area	Remarks
Title / awarding body	<u>School Leaving Certificate and State Examination Certificate; Estonian Ministry of Education and Research</u>
Implementation and change	Significant change early on. Estonia became independent from the USSR in 1991. The early years of Estonian independence were focused on building an effective curriculum which evolved away from the post-Soviet legacy. Many features of the organisation of Estonian education, such as access to academic and vocational schools in upper secondary, and extensive use of internal assessment may reflect the approach of Estonia's Nordic neighbours, notably Finland. Subsequent developments from 2000 onwards focused on providing appropriate technology to schools, and Estonia now has a highly digitised system. Reforms and developments continue to roll out, but Estonia remains a high performer in international measures such as PISA.
Number of levels / SCQF equivalence	<u>Estonian Qualifications Framework (EstQF) - Kutsekoda</u>
Duration of course	3 years
Mandatory components and levels	Estonian, second language, mathematics
Number of credits or modules required	96
Notional learning hours	1 module = 35 hours

Area	Remarks
Standards and frameworks	<u>National curricula Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium (hm.ee)</u>
Assessment approaches	Assessment is primarily internal, though this is aligned to detailed curricular specifications. However, external exams are set by the Estonian Government for Estonian as a first or additional language, mathematics, and an additional language.
External assessment	Language 1, Language 2 and mathematics are compulsory. Some other subjects have optional examinations below upper secondary level.
Internal assessment	All other subjects.
Moderation of assessment	Limited. This aspect of the system is sometimes criticised.
Transferability	Between academic and vocational pathways.
Academic and vocational routes	Separate, but with increasing transferability, and high parity of esteem.
Resits	Students' length of study can be altered based on individual need.
PISA scores (mathematics)	High-attaining (510 in 2022 compared with 471 in Scotland).

New Zealand

Area	Remarks
Title / awarding body	<u>NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement);</u> <u>New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)</u>
Implementation and change	<u>Introduced</u> between 2002 and 2004. Currently undergoing a <u>change programme</u> .
Number of levels / SCQF equivalence	<u>Three levels: 1, 2 and 3.</u> <u>Comparison:</u> Level 2 = National 5 / SCQF level 5 / GCSE. Level 3 = Advanced Higher / SCQF level 7 / A level.
Duration of course	Usually 3 years, but can continue post-school.

Area	Remarks
Mandatory components and levels	10 mandatory credits in each of <u>literacy and mathematics</u> , taken in either English or te reo Māori. The co-requisite only needs to be achieved once and is transferable across NCEA levels. Assessment for these is internal but must be done within a two-week window and in compliance with NZQA <u>regulations</u> .
Differentiation approaches	Environment: learning environments including schools, tertiary providers, and school-workplace partnerships. Level: 3 distinct levels of qualification are available, including a foundational Level 1.
Number of credits or modules required	60 for each level.
Notional learning hours	1 credit = 10 hours.
Standards and frameworks	The <u>New Zealand Curriculum</u> provides the basis for the ongoing development of achievement standards and unit standards registered on the <u>National Qualifications and Credentials Framework</u> .
Assessment approaches	NCEA is based on three types of <u>standards</u> , currently under review as part of the <u>reform process</u> . Each standard is worth a specific number of credits and assessment of these is both internal and external.
External assessment	Achievement standards can be internally or <u>externally assessed</u> . External assessment is by examination or <u>portfolio</u> . <u>Formal reports have recently been removed</u> from external assessment due particularly to concerns around AI use.
Internal assessment	Internal assessment can take a variety of forms, is designed to suit circumstances and is used for <u>unit standards</u> .
Digital assessment	Yes. Digital provision is increasing with many <u>external assessments</u> provided (or moving towards) digital formats. Preparation materials are <u>provided</u> .
Moderation of assessment	<u>Internal</u> and <u>external</u> moderation is used.

Area	Remarks
Transferability	Some credits can count to <u>more than one qualification</u> , and qualifications may include study at <u>more than one level</u> . An <u>exclusions list</u> prevents excessive overlap between similar courses. When two standards are mutually exclusive, the credits cannot be used for both to achieve a qualification or course endorsement.
Resits	While there are different rules for schools and tertiary education providers, students can usually resit an assessment later (NZQA, 2023).
PISA scores (mathematics)	In the 2022 PISA cycle, NZ performance in mathematics averaged 479 points, compared with 471 in Scotland. A steady fall in scores has been apparent over the last decade or more.

Wales

Area	Remarks
Title / awarding body	Qualifications Wales is developing new GCSE and VCSE qualifications for Years 10 and 11. AS and A levels are taken in Years 12 and 13. The Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC) is responsible for setting and marking exams in Wales. (WJEC website)
Implementation and change	<u>Phased rollout underway from 2025 onwards.</u>
Number of levels / SCQF equivalence	GCSE has a foundational level 1, but primarily level 2 (SCQF 5 equivalent). A-levels are equivalent to SCQF levels 6 and 7.
Duration of course	2 years (GCSE/VCSE).
Mandatory components and levels	GCSE Maths, English, Science.
Number of credits or modules required	Courses are modularised. However the number of modules is determined at subject level.
Notional learning hours	GCSE and VCSE: 120–140 guided learning hours.

Area	Remarks
Standards and frameworks	GCSEs will be attainment referenced, <u>aiming for consistency with old GCSEs</u> .
Assessment approaches	<u>Modular or linear</u> , depending on subject. Untiered except GCSEs in Mathematics and Numeracy and The Sciences which will offer tiered (foundation or higher) papers.
External assessment	Subject-dependent. Modular courses require at least 40% of assessment at the end of the course.
Internal assessment	Subject-dependent. Generally, increased internal components and non-exam assessment .
Digital assessment	Yes: <u>10 new GCSEs include digital-only assessments</u> , phased over several years, with others planned.
Academic and vocational pathways	Separate.
PISA scores (mathematics)	Wales' PISA scores in mathematics were below those of Scotland in the 2022 cycle. Welsh students averaged 466 points, compared with 471 for Scottish students.

Appendix 2: Information tables

Table 1: Structures and content

	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
Overall qualification title/awarding body	The Higher School Certificate (HSC) . is overseen by the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA)	British Columbia Certificate of Graduation awarded by the Government of British Columbia	School Leaving Cert. + State Examination Cert. Managed by Estonian Ministry of Education and Research	NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) . Awarded by New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA)	Qualifications Wales is developing new GCSE/VCSE courses. These are studied in Years 10–11, with AS and A levels sat in years 12–13. The Welsh Joint Education Committee or WJEC sets and marks exams in Wales.
Duration of senior phase study	2 years	3 years	3 years	3 years	2 years (GCSE) + 2 years (A level)
No. of levels within qualification	N/A	N/A — accumulation of credits over three years.	N/A though some courses offer a variety of pathways.	3	2
Compulsory components	The HSC minimum standard requires Level 3 or 4 in short online reading, writing and numeracy tests . Two credits of HSC level 6	3 online graduation tests. 16 credits at Grade 12, inc. Lang. Arts 12 and Career Life Connections.	Organised by curricular area - See General Provisions .	10 mandatory credits in each of literacy and mathematics , taken in either English or Māori.	Mathematics, Science and English are usually mandatory at GCSE.

	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
	<u>English are also required.</u> 12 preliminary and 10 HSC courses (2 credits each).	28 elective and 52 credits specified by curricular area. There is also a requirement for 4 credits to have an <u>indigenous focus</u> .			
Total credits/modules	44 over 2 years	80 credits total	96 modules in total	60 per level	Varies across subjects, centres and learners.
Credit for outside learning	<u>Limited</u>	Yes. <u>Many achievements</u> can be recognised if key criteria are met.	Yes – within internal assessment processes.	Yes, eg <u>Class 1 NZ learner driver licence</u> gives 2 Level 2 credits.	N/A

Table 2: Notional learning hours

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
Number of units/modules	6 (or 7) N5 and 5 Higher courses 24 SCQF credits each ²	44 over 2 years. ³	80 credits divided into courses of 4 credits	96 (72 in part-time schools)	60 per level (up to 180 across 3 years)	Varies by subject.
Notional learning hours (unit/credit)	N/A	60	25–30	35 hours	10	Varies, but usually a subdivision of overall course.
Notional learning hours (course)	240	120	100–120	N/A	10 credit courses = 100 hours	120–140 for single courses. Double award courses are credited with 240–280 guided learning hours.
Notional learning hours (across years of senior phase)	Varies depending on course choices.	$44 \times 60 = 2,640$	2,000–2,400	$35 \times 96 = 3,360$	600 per year / 1,800 over 3 years	1 GCSE or VCSE = 120–140 guided learning hours
Duration of senior phase course (years)	3 × 1	2 years 1x preliminary 1xHSC	3 years	3	3	2 years (GCSE) + 2 years (A level).

² 6 N5 courses is presently common, with some schools moving back towards 7 in response to concerns about curricular narrowing.

³ 12 courses (2 units each) in year 1, 10 courses (2 units each) in year 2 = 44

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
Notional learning hours per year	Variable – dependent on number of courses taken per year.	1,320	667–800	1,120	600	Varies according to individual course uptake.

Table 3: Assessment approaches

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
Subject specifications (synonymous with curricula for BC/Estonia)	<u>SQA Qualifications</u>	<u>2 forms of specification are used. 1. NESA Board Developed, and 2. NESA Board Endorsed</u>	<u>BC Curricula (all years — see 10–12)</u>	<u>National Curricula Upper Secondary</u>	<u>NCEA Subjects</u>	<u>New Qualifications</u>
Internal assessment	Not used in National Courses after National 4	Schools run an assessment programme for each HSC course, following NESA's requirements but with <u>significant autonomy</u> . Assessment is standards-	The provincial government provides resources for <u>4 methods</u> , performance and portfolio assessment, student-centred conferences and student self-	<u>Formative and summative</u> , objectives set out in <u>General Provisions</u> . Internal assessment is used even for areas with an additional	For unit standards and some achievement standards. Assessments can take a <u>variety of forms</u> .	Under development. Expected to be no more than 60% of course.

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
		referenced. It uses syllabus outcomes as key reference points for decisions about students' progress and achievement.	assessment. For provincial assessments, 1 exam in each subject can be sat per <u>session</u> .	external examination.		
External assessment	Assessment methods are external for NQs beyond National 4.	External final exam for all HSC Board Developed Courses. NESA sets, conducts, and marks. VET frameworks courses have an optional HSC exam. Most courses have written exams, but some also have practical or performance exams.	Three <u>graduation</u> assessments: Literacy and numeracy (Grade 10) and literacy (Grade 12) are taken online. <u>Online support materials</u> are available.	Written examination in three <u>State examinations</u> Estonian, Language 2 and mathematics are <u>compulsory</u> Some other subjects have <u>optional examinations</u> .	<u>External assessment</u> is by examination or <u>portfolio</u> .	Under development. Final exam to contribute no less than 40% of mark.
Balance of Internal vs. External	Internal National 1 to National 4. External National 5 to Advanced Higher	Approximately 50/50, with subject variation.	Primarily internal	High trust in teacher judgement with majority of assessment done internally.	Varies by subject but <u>no more than three standards</u> can be externally assessed per course.	Under development

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
	All work-based courses available for delivery in schools are internally assessed.					
Permitted methods	The Qualifications Scotland <u>Guide to Assessment lists 14 permitted methods</u> . 12 of which are currently in use in National Course assessments. However, written (non-digital) examinations make up a considerable proportion of assessment. In previously unitised qualifications, overuse of written unit tests was also an issue.	Internal assessment tasks include tests, written assignments, practical activities, fieldwork, and projects. External assessments constitute the other 50% and are set and marked by the Board of Studies NSW. Methods include written papers (increasingly online), speaking and listening examinations, practical examinations or coursework	The provincial government provides resources for <u>4 methods</u> .	External equates to written examination. Internal is teacher-determined, but is expected to be appropriate, relevant, with formative as well as summative approaches encouraged.	Internal – wide ranging External: examinations, portfolios, formal reports.	Permitted methods vary by subject. Reforms have encompassed changes to assessment. This includes increased use of non-exam assessment (NEA) and increased use of digitisation. Some qualifications are modular, whilst some are linear, depending on the subject studied.

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
		submitted for external marking.				
Support for assessment	<u>Guide to Assessment, Understanding Standards and Prior Verification.</u>	External moderation also makes use of online systems.	<u>BC Curriculum</u> provides detailed support. Supported by <u>performance standard</u> exemplifications and documentation on <u>principles of quality assessment.</u>	Exceptionally <u>detailed curricula</u> and <u>General Provisions</u> documentation <u>eKool</u> facilitates tracking and feedback.	NZQA: detailed supports and exemplification for all <u>subjects</u> and individual standards. Curricular: <u>Assessment Online Resource</u>	Dedicated <u>Supports for Assessment</u> page provides advice for centres, practitioners, learners and parents.
Curricular documentation	There is no senior phase curriculum. Qualifications Scotland course specifications outline the assessment requirements for each course.	<u>Curricular guides</u>	<u>BC Curriculum</u> and <u>Government guidance Graduation Policy Guide.</u>	<u>National curricula basic and upper secondary.</u>	Extensive, including through NZ Curriculum Online	Provided through <u>Hwb</u>
Standards documentation /support	<u>Guide to Assessment, Understanding Standards and Prior Verification.</u>	<u>Resources for teachers</u>	<u>Framework for Enhancing Student Learning</u> (from 2020)	See above	<u>About assessment standards</u>	Led by <u>Qualifications Wales</u>

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
			<u>Policy for Student Success.</u>			

Table 4: Digital technologies in education

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
Online teaching / learning materials	For example: <u>National e-learning offer</u> and <u>e-Sgoil</u> – not universally available.	Extensive, including curricular guidance and documentation, Up2Now programme and <u>online schools</u> .	Extensive. Digital assessment developed in partnership with <u>Vretta Graduation</u> assessments taken online. <u>Online Course Registry</u> <u>State-provided online schools</u> are available, allowing delivery of entire curriculum online.	<u>World-leading</u> digital strategy for education. <u>eKool</u> near-universally used.	Extensive. <u>External assessment</u> is increasingly online, as are moderation processes.	Stakeholders have agreed a <u>joint position</u> . Not all subjects employ digital assessment. <u>Rollout</u> will take place from 2026 onwards for those subjects which are using digital assessment.
Online assessment materials	Limited	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	<u>Planned for some subjects</u> .
Online moderation processes?	No	Yes	Yes	some <u>automatic grading of online examinations</u> has	Yes	<u>IAMIS</u> is used for digital upload of some internal components for

	Scotland	Australia (NSW)	Canada (BC)	Estonia	New Zealand	Wales
				recently been introduced.		moderation. The moderation sample is determined by IAMIS.
Online support for assessment development	Yes	Yes – simulated marking	Yes	Estonia has a highly-digitised education system including a national platform - eKool , which facilitates tracking and feedback.	Yes	Both Hwb and IAMIS can contribute to assessment support.