

Submission on proposal to replace NCEA

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Submitter details

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Submission

Introduction

1. Recreation Aotearoa is a professional association and industry organisation responsible for providing leadership, advocacy and professional development opportunities for those involved in the broader recreation sector. We work at an agency, industry and professional level to build capability, develop partnerships, and equip individuals and organisations with the skills they need to deliver high quality recreation experiences that engage participants.
2. Recreation Aotearoa's membership includes recreation policy makers, territorial local authorities, voluntary organisations, regional sports trusts, outdoor recreation businesses, and others involved in the delivery of recreation throughout New Zealand. Many of our members are Outdoor Education providers.
3. It is from this perspective that we submit our strong concerns regarding the proposed reclassification of Outdoor Education (OE). The Ministry's current proposals suggest removing OE from the list of general academic subjects and reclassifying it as a vocational option overseen by an Industry Skills Body.
4. Recreation Aotearoa submits that this change would have significant and detrimental implications for the wellbeing of young people, for the future of the outdoor workforce, and for safety in the outdoors.

Outdoor Education in New Zealand

5. Outdoor Education is an academically rigorous, knowledge-rich discipline that combines theoretical learning with applied practice. It draws on diverse fields including risk management, environmental science, group dynamics, leadership theory, emergency response, and cultural knowledge such as mātauranga Māori.

6. Students in OE are not simply going tramping or kayaking. They are learning to assess and manage risk, to solve problems collaboratively, and to make complex decisions in real time, often under pressure. These are sophisticated academic and practical competencies. The depth of OE has already been recognised through the development of dedicated OE achievement standards in 2022. These standards were designed to finally place OE on equal footing with other academic subjects, ensuring it could contribute both to vocational pathways and to University Entrance.
7. Reclassifying OE as vocational-only would undo this important progress and diminish its status in the eyes of students, parents, and schools.

The Role of Outdoor Education in Engagement and Wellbeing

8. OE is one of the few subject areas with a proven record of engaging students who might otherwise disengage from school. It provides alternative pathways to success for learners who do not thrive in traditional classroom settings, offering them meaningful, experiential learning that connects classroom theory to real-world contexts.
9. Research clearly demonstrates the benefits of movement-based and experiential learning on focus, memory, and engagement. OE provides precisely this kind of learning, strengthening both cognitive development and physical wellbeing. Importantly, time in nature is directly linked to improved mental health, reduced anxiety, and greater resilience.
10. The timing of these reforms is especially concerning, as New Zealand faces unprecedented levels of student disengagement and absenteeism. OE is one of the few subjects shown to re-engage absent students. If reclassified as vocational-only, many schools may reduce or cease their OE offerings, removing a key pathway for disengaged learners.
11. This has particular relevance for Māori and Pacific students. Outdoor Education provides culturally meaningful opportunities grounded in mātauranga Māori, kaitiakitanga, and collective learning. These approaches affirm identity, strengthen cultural connection, and provide a

pathway to success for students who may otherwise be marginalised by mainstream education systems.

The role of Outdoor Education in Workforce Development and the Economy

12. Outdoor Education is important to the development of skills and capabilities that underpin multiple growth sectors in New Zealand, including adventure tourism, conservation, environmental management, outdoor recreation, education, and defence. Tourism alone contributes 7.5% to GDP and supports one in nine jobs nationwide. The outdoor sector as a whole provides employment across regions, often in communities where few alternative opportunities exist. OE creates the skilled local talent pipeline required to sustain these industries, developing both technical competencies and transferable skills such as leadership, adaptability, and resilience.
13. Equally important, OE provides well-established pathways into tertiary study. Most New Zealand universities endorse OE for entry into relevant degrees and diplomas. If OE is shifted to a vocational-only category, these pathways will close. Students will be deterred from pursuing OE in the first place if it does not contribute to University Entrance. This is not only a loss for those individual learners but also a direct threat to the future workforce of key industries already facing skill shortages.

Safety in the Outdoors and Public Good Outcomes

14. One of the most overlooked aspects of OE is its contribution to public safety. Outdoor Education teaches risk management, dynamic decision-making, and emergency response in authentic environments. These are fundamental competencies that protect not only individual students but also the wider public when those students later participate in outdoor recreation, lead groups, or work in outdoor-related industries. The current system enables a blend of academic achievement standards and practical

unit standards, allowing OE to provide a comprehensive education in outdoor safety.

15. Under the proposed reforms, vocational subjects will be designed by (yet to be established) Industry Skills Bodies with limited resources and narrower mandates. There is real concern that this will dilute the scope and depth of OE, leading to reduced safety competency among young New Zealanders. We note that the specific Industry Skills Body for OE has not yet been established, and when it is, it will be less resourced than its predecessor, the Workforce Development Council. Expecting such an entity to design a comprehensive, nationally consistent curriculum for OE is unrealistic and risks compromising safety outcomes.

National Identity and Cultural Value

16. Outdoor Education reflects our national identity. It embodies our relationship with the land, our unique environment, and our collective culture of outdoor recreation. It is one of the few subjects that explicitly integrates environmental guardianship, equity, and cultural responsiveness into its core curriculum.
17. Recreation Aotearoa submits that marginalising OE by confining it to a vocational stream would erode these values. It would reduce opportunities for young people to connect with te taiao, to develop kaitiakitanga, and to build the skills and attitudes that underpin both environmental sustainability and civic responsibility. At a time when climate change, biodiversity loss, and public health challenges demand deeper connections with our natural world, downgrading OE sends the wrong signal.

Summary and recommendations

18. Recreation Aotearoa strongly urges the Ministry of Education to reconsider the exclusion of Outdoor Education on the general subject list. We make this call on behalf of our diverse membership and in recognition of the broad evidence base supporting OE's academic, social, cultural, and economic value.

19. Reclassifying Outdoor Education as vocational-only will:

- Undermine its academic credibility and sever established tertiary pathways.
- Reduce accessibility for students and limit its proven role in supporting engagement and wellbeing.
- Exacerbate workforce shortages in critical growth sectors such as adventure tourism and conservation.
- Dilute essential outdoor safety education, with direct implications for public safety.
- Erode a subject that reflects New Zealand's unique cultural and environmental identity.

20. Outdoor Education a critical, evidence-based discipline that delivers measurable outcomes across education, wellbeing, workforce development, and national identity. Retaining OE as a general subject is a low-cost, high-impact decision that will support attendance, capability, and the economy without creating additional bureaucracy.

21. Recreation Aotearoa respectfully asks the Ministry to retain Outdoor Education on the general senior subject list, ensuring it continues to serve as both an academic and vocational pathway. To proceed with the current reclassification would be a profound misstep for education, for equity, and for the future of Aotearoa New Zealand.

22. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further and to provide practical advice, drawing on the experience of our membership across councils, outdoor education providers, and the outdoor recreation industry.