

# Why are we learning this stuff?

This is the second article in a series of four by Dr Chris Jansen from Leadership Lab and Dr Cheryl Doig from Think Beyond that profiles the shifts that are happening in many secondary schools towards more future-focused and flexible learning opportunities.

**L**earning in our schools is designed around the New Zealand Curriculum, a curriculum document that currently enables a great deal of flexibility in approach. The first half of the curriculum document focuses on a vision for developing ‘confident, connected life-long learners’ and the second half is organised into eight key learning areas, such as English, Maths, Science and so forth, that we are all familiar with. But the world is changing and these eight learning areas do not necessarily fall neatly into the diverse range of contexts and applications that are increasingly common in our workplace and society. There is also an increasing demand for skills such as collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and communication and increasingly employers are looking for people who are able to work confidently and creatively across integrated content areas.

Until recently our secondary schools have organised their learning programmes strictly into the eight learning areas each with discrete and separate knowledge sets. The result of this is strongly defined departments with very little collaboration between them. However, many schools are now exploring integrating two or more existing learning areas by designing multidisciplinary units of work based around authentic real-world contexts. These can be known as project-based learning, curriculum integration or cross-subject learning. Some of the demonstrated benefits of these more integrated approaches to curriculum design are increased engagement levels of students and development of skills such as initiative, curiosity and problem-solving.

Rangiora High School for example has developed a connected curriculum in Years 9 and 10 where students explore ‘passion projects’ that require individual students to select topics of interest and then investigate industry sources of information in specific areas; one student is currently studying Marine Biology and Underwater Photography. Benefits reported include students feeling a strong sense of ownership by designing their own learning. Scott Wright (Deputy Principal) describes the school’s focus on slowly putting control back towards students: ‘Students can do it if they are given a chance.’

In Canterbury during 2018, the NCEA kickstart project involved 10 secondary schools exploring ways that they could merge traditionally siloed subjects at senior secondary level by co-designing assessment tasks to fit more than one subject area. NZQA assisted by critiquing the tasks to ensure reliability and validity at NCEA Level 1. This resulted in a range of cross-curricular assessments that allows students to experience success from a number of achievement standards from different subject-related domains. One school has since established an innovative integrated prototype class of Year 11 students who spend the majority of their week working with several teachers in a cross-curricular collaborative environment to learn and achieve successfully at NCEA Level 1.

Finally – some schools are interested in exploring new knowledge that is being generated at an exponential rate across the globe, with strong themes of technological change, environmental sustainability and local/global connections as drivers. New school subjects and blocks of learning are the result, for example, the St Thomas of Canterbury curriculum includes subjects such as Sustainability (a combination of History, Geography and Biology) and a Forensics course (a combination of Science, Maths and Technology).

From a wider perspective, ChristchurchNZ is developing Supernodes which focus on high-tech growth industries, namely Future Transport and Aerospace, Health-tech and Resilient Communities and Future Food, Fibre and Agritech. Local secondary schools are showing an interest in using such resources to develop new models of curriculum, intentional curriculum design and future pathways for learners. Changes to curriculum have implications for the training and recruitment of teachers, qualification structures and models of ongoing professional learning so that students have access to a future-focused and flexible curriculum while at school. ●



**Dr Chris Jansen** is a director and senior consultant with Leadership Lab and works alongside organisations in the education, health, business and community sectors on a range of projects. Chris is also a senior lecturer at the University of Canterbury, where he teaches the Master of Business Administration and Postgraduate Diploma of Strategic Leadership. [leadershiplab.co.nz](http://leadershiplab.co.nz) [growwaitaha.co.nz](http://growwaitaha.co.nz)



**Dr Cheryl Doig** is a leadership futurist who follows leadership trends and research and translates these into practice, working internationally and virtually with organisations, business leaders and educators. Her passion is for challenging organisations to think differently in order to adapt to a changing future – to think beyond their current leadership realities, while still using the best of the past. [thinkbeyond.co.nz](http://thinkbeyond.co.nz)