

QCEC Response to Draft 2 Consultation on Stage 1 Senior Syllabuses

16 September 2016

Introduction

Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the second drafts of Stage 1 redeveloped senior syllabuses. QCEC is the peak strategic body for the 300 Catholic schools in Queensland which are operated by 22 different Catholic school authorities and include 107 secondary schools impacted by changes to senior secondary assessment and tertiary entrance processes. The syllabuses are recognised as a fundamental element in the structure and implementation of the senior curriculum.

QCEC has actively encouraged school and teacher input into the individual online syllabus surveys linked to this consultation. Additionally, Catholic school authorities have facilitated consultation across staff in their schools and have provided high level feedback to QCEC to inform this response. Catholic school authorities may choose to provide their own individual response to QCAA as well.

QCEC represents a diversity of schools, including highly academic, tertiary oriented schools, schools which cater for significant diversity within their student population and flexible learning centres which cater for disadvantaged and marginalised students. QCEC noted in its initial response to the ACER Review that the Terms of Reference of that review included *the inclusiveness of the system for all students completing Year 12*. While the orientation of the syllabuses under consultation is now firmly towards tertiary requirements, the inclusion of those students who will not enter tertiary education must be accommodated in schools.

This QCEC response to draft 2 of the 35 Stage 1 syllabuses focuses on high level issues across syllabuses and for the most part does not address individual syllabus responses except where a particular concern has been consistently raised in feedback to QCEC. The opportunity to raise and address issues as part of an iterative process of syllabus development is most welcome.

High level issues across the curriculum

Points for consideration and improvement in draft 2 syllabuses

QCEC acknowledges and appreciates changes made to syllabuses in response to feedback from draft 1 consultation. There are however significant issues raised in the QCEC response to that consultation that

remain unaddressed by the global and individual syllabus design and redevelopment and further issues identified now as detail of assessment are included in the syllabus document.

The following recommendations are, for the most part, not subject specific but present high level issues for consideration. They are presented with the aim of assisting the process of syllabus redevelopment.

1. Flexibility

QCEC again highlights issues emanating from the highly structured design of redeveloped senior syllabuses and the lack of flexibility presented for schools. This issue goes beyond the capacity to adapt and contextualise learning according to the needs and interests of the community and students, now to impacting on the capacity to provide some subject offerings at all in some school circumstances. Very large numbers of schools across Queensland utilise composite or combined classes to expand subject offerings to senior secondary students. In some cases in small schools, this is of necessity; in other cases it simply extends the study opportunities open to students. It is a feature of Queensland senior school curriculum that QCEC strongly recommends must be enabled into the future. The unitised design of the syllabuses with summative assessment confined to units 3 and 4 significantly limits the strategies that can be utilised to provide combined class offerings.

QCEC recognises that QCAA has convened a working group to consider issues of combined classes but the root cause of the issue is one of syllabus design; the working group's operational advice on potential work arounds to deliver a school curriculum will at best patch, not solve, the problems created. The solution must be addressed in the syllabus design.

Even if compressed classes were to be offered by schools in the first year of new assessment processes (the most critical transition year, impacted by the "half cohort" of students in Year 11) there is currently no provision of external assessment for that timeframe. Running combined classes across different year levels from different syllabus structures is unlikely to do justice to either students or teachers put in that situation. Out of hours solutions obviously carry workforce and school life implications that need careful consideration.

It is noted here that the unit structure of the syllabuses is often sheeted back to the Australian Curriculum as an agreed source document. QCEC acknowledges and supports the Standing Council's endorsement of the senior secondary Australian Curriculum for English, Mathematics, Science and History as the common base for development of state and territory senior secondary courses (December 2012). However the flexibility in the draft Queensland senior syllabuses is much more limited than suggested by [ACARA](#) for the Australian Curriculum:

- *The curriculum for each senior secondary subject is organised into four units with the last two units cognitively more challenging than the first two.*
- *Each unit is designed to be taught in about half a 'school year' of senior secondary studies.*
- *Content has been specified for each unit, and achievement standards are described for each pair of units, that is, Units 1 and 2, and Units 3 and 4.*
- *States and territories determine flexibility arrangements to meet student needs and interests by, for example, allowing students to complete one unit in a subject and then transfer to another subject, or to offer year-long or two-year courses.*

There is very little evident flexibility in the potential implementation of the draft 2 syllabuses.

QCEC recommends that flexibility offered in the syllabus design continues to be considered as a priority to accommodate the needs of senior secondary students and schools.

2. External assessment

Two issues are raised in relation to external assessment: the scheduling of assessment and the resultant loss of teaching time; and the method of assessment employed almost unilaterally.

The consistent pattern of external assessment placed in Term 4¹ is quite evident in the draft 2 syllabuses under consultation as is use of a written assessment, examination style². Recent modelling would indicate that a period of up to 3 to 4 weeks could be required to accommodate external assessment simultaneously for individual subjects across all schools.

A recognised key element of curriculum design is that of providing a curriculum that is able to be implemented in the available time. Concern is expressed about the available time to provide for a Unit 4 requirement of 55 hours in a timeframe compressed by the removal of 3 to 4 weeks at the end of Term 4 for assessment purposes. The potential leach of the senior curriculum back into Year 10 has been mooted as a possible solution to this loss of time. QCEC is of the firm opinion that students and schools must be given the opportunity to fulfil the requirements of the Australian curriculum P to 10 without incursion of the senior school requirements into Year 10. Thus QCEC is against creation of a syllabus models that are dependent on the use of time from Semester 4, Year 10 for completion. It is acknowledged that individual schools may make their own decisions about opportunities provided in Year 10 but these decisions should not be forced by senior schooling syllabus design.

It is recommended that the learning requirements of syllabuses be reconsidered and re-balanced to ensure that Unit 4 requirements for each subject can be delivered in a shortened timeframe occasioned by external assessment requirements. Consideration might also be given to the placement of external assessment in school year for Year 12 students. Under current QCAA arrangements, the finishing date for Year 12 students is three weeks short of the Queensland State School finishing date. It is common practice in all schools currently to begin Year 12 exam blocks some weeks ahead of the Year 12 finishing date to enable marking and certification processes. The removal of much of the onus for marking and the reduction in current school-based assessment activities e.g. assigning of SAIs and data checking (e.g. SDCS Disks 5 and 6) from teachers in schools will help facilitate later external assessment. While other states might typically start their external examinations in mid-October, it is suggested that Queensland should determine external assessment timing as late as possible and according to its own established needs, not just follow suit.

Although the length of Semester 4 and the finishing arrangements for Year 12 is not a syllabus design issue per se, lengthening the available time for learning by scheduling external assessment dates as far out in the school term as possible would be an alternative solution to ensuring the learning requirements of Unit 4 in syllabuses were given appropriate time.

3. School based assessment

While it is understand that the nominal hours in any subject does rightfully encompass both teaching and assessment time, a balance is required so that the learning can be delivered and the assessment

¹ It is noted that, despite the recommendation contained within the ACER Review Report, all external assessment included within the first 35 draft syllabus documents are external exams. All but one of these relate to Unit 4 (although some include Units 3 and 4).

² The trend towards the increasing use of term “examination” is also noted despite the disclaimers in the ACER Review that this was not the intention.

undertaken in the time available. QCEC notes that in some cases, the nominal hours for a syllabus unit do not appear to take into account the class time that would also be required to meet the conditions of assessment as indicated in the syllabus i.e. that students must complete the majority of this assessment in class time. It is important that the syllabus be workable and sustainable for students and teachers. Therefore, the expectations of the syllabus must realistically be able to be implemented within the available nominal hours. There is concern that this is not currently the case and is likely to have unintended consequences for learning and teaching if not addressed during syllabus redevelopment.

There is also some concern about the adoption of a potentially limited range of assessment styles. Suggestions that assessments in Units 1 and 2 might mirror assessment demanded for units 3 and 4, while logical from a practical point of view in providing students with practice for summative assessment items, will further limit the scope and variety of assessment. The mirroring of assessment in Units 1 and 2 clearly places an assessment focus in the syllabus construct when that focus should rightfully be on learning.

As an aside, it is noted that this evolving assessment driven focus will not be limited to senior secondary schooling. While QCEC supported in principle the introduction of external assessment, it was acknowledged from the start of the ACER Review process that this would have potential backwash effects onto junior secondary school that should be monitored. Increasing discussions about needing to prepare students for exams and focus on content rather than conceptual knowledge and skills are now, understandably, creeping into thinking about junior secondary curriculum. QCEC suggests that such pedagogical shifts need to be carefully monitored and balanced to prevent negative effects on the way teaching and learning happens across school years.

Although this QCEC response is not aimed at specific subject syllabus feedback some particular points are noted for further consideration in regard to subject specific assessment:

- Repetitive use of an assessment technique in Study of Religion where the three pieces of internal assessment are all analytical essays
- The highly theoretical nature of Physical Education with very little practical component now evident in assessment or learning
- The introduction of new school based assessment modes, for example in music and modern history, will require additional support and professional development for teachers to be able to administer assessment properly and equitably
- Some lack of confidence expressed about capacity of all accreditors to fairly assess the responding element in assessment tasks if the accreditor is unfamiliar with the work that the students are responding to, whether that be a piece of music in Music or a novel in English.

In looking at assessment as a whole it is recommended that now more detail has been elaborated in syllabuses around assessment requirements across the 35 Stage 1 syllabuses, a mapping of assessment requirements across subjects and terms be undertaken to look at overall impacts on students and school communities.

4. Assessment workload for students

The Parliamentary Education and Innovation Committee Inquiry into assessment in maths, physics and chemistry identified issues with the increasing length of written student assessment items. It was appreciated that QCAA did some significant work over past years to ensure the demands within written research assignments as set by schools did not escalate unduly. It is notable in a scan of the assessment

requirements across redeveloped subject syllabuses that many subjects now have a research assignment indicated in the first half of Unit 4: lengths of 1500-2000 words could be encountered in up to six subjects during this term. This places unnecessary pressure on both students and teachers. There is support for the notion that overarching word limits across syllabuses will be consistent and enforced but the overall workload on students across subjects must be considered. Currently, schools can manage the demands across subjects, to some degree, through the developing and adjusting of work programs. It is noted that this school based management response will not be possible within this more prescriptive system.

With respect to workload particularly for redeveloped syllabuses in Mathematics and Science Areas, the weighting of assessment e.g. Unit 3 = 30%, Unit 4 = 20% + 50% external, puts much pressure on the final six months of schooling and has raised further possible issues around student welfare and unintended consequences for the number of students who will be encouraged to choose a majority maths/science pathway. Some respondents have expressed a preference that if the external assessment is to be worth 50% of marks, the focus of Unit 4 would be solely on external assessment, with assignments being completed in the earlier unit

5. Specific detail of assessment conditions

There are issues related to specific detail of assessment conditions that, it is appreciated, will need to be worked through by the Expert Writing Teams in collaboration with various advisory groups. These issues are raised for due attention of those groups as syllabus redevelopment progresses further:

- insufficient guidelines in Instrument Specific Marking Guides (ISMGs) with regard to the length of student responses
- the need for consistency between word length of assessment items and the time allowed to complete them
- responses required to some unseen stimuli are considerably longer than the current requirements for the QCS Test Writing Task: time allowed in the conditions for assessment items must be realistic, especially when students are required to read and analyse unseen stimulus and then draft and edit a response. (It was noted that, in some cases, students were required to develop a response to an unseen stimulus longer than currently expected within the Writing Task component of QCS but expected within a shorter timeframe)
- the need for congruity between top responses as indicated in the ISMG and the time and word length available for students to develop those highest level responses (in some instances it was not seen as possible to develop the top response indicated within the time or word length indicated, even for very short responses)
- the need for greater clarity around perusal time: whether this includes reading time for stimulus or whether students could make notes on the test (but not response) paper
- scaffolding and drafting conditions for student assessment
- questions in relation to assessment in the Mathematics subjects as to how a pre-endorser or confirmer would be able to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar contexts and ensure that the “unfamiliar” doesn’t become “familiar” to students through drilled classroom practice.

6. Instrument Specific Marking Guides (ISMGs)

It was felt that in their current form, the ISMGs would not support consistent teacher judgements and application of marks. Different interpretations are felt likely to lead to different application of marks during confirmation processes. Questions were raised about any appeals process associated with confirmation. Further, the use of qualifiers within the ISMG e.g. appropriately, generally makes the application of these descriptors subjective. Defining these within the glossary is intended to assist,

however in their current form they do not support consistency of understanding³. Further clarity is needed to understand whether a student must demonstrate ALL bullet points listed against the descriptor or just most. What discriminates between a “9” or “10” mark when both are presented next to the same list of descriptors?

The inclusion of an ISMG for the external assessment task so that students (and teachers) are clear the criteria that will be used within the assessment would be valued. It would provide an opportunity to clearly identify the role of higher order thinking in this item.

7. Content heavy syllabus design

Across a number of draft 2 documents, respondents noted an improvement in the quality of the syllabus and appreciated evident response to feedback provided during the Draft 1 consultation process.

QCEC remains concerned however that the content heavy syllabus design still evident in many redeveloped subject syllabuses will put at risk an appropriate emphasis on complex thinking and problem solving skills. There is an evident trend across syllabus documents that are now very content driven and appear to prioritise breadth over depth, particularly in Units 3 and 4. This will have implications for the ability of teachers to engage students in deeper learning and for students to demonstrate higher order thinking. Whilst Marzano’s Taxonomy of Learning is cited and the full range of thinking skills is identified in the rationale of syllabuses, such thinking skills are not always adequately represented in the units developed thereafter.

The burden imposed on students to learn an excessive amount of content and the impact this will have on pedagogical practices as well as the depth of understanding students are able to develop is raised as a concern. It is neither necessary nor wise, to include content that would be considered to be from a second year university course in some cases. Syllabus content must be appropriate to the cognitive ability of 15 to 18 year olds as well as cognisant of all students’ welfare.

QCEC recommends that the balance between required content in syllabuses and the deep thinking and understanding facilitated be reconsidered.

8. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Perspectives

Respondents noted the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Perspectives within the Course Overview section. Whilst this was still under development in some syllabus documents, there were concerns expressed that the inclusion appeared tokenistic in many cases which devalued the inclusion. A suggestion was that this perspective be highlighted at a unit level where appropriate.

9. Pitch of subjects

There is always a tension between developing syllabuses to address tertiary entrance preparation and demands and ensuring the end curriculum that a school provides is able to address the capacities of a range of students. This draws into focus particular issues around the pitch of some subjects that have

³ It is noted that the ACER Review Report criticised the inclusion of value qualifiers (or “squishy standards”/descriptors) that exist within our current syllabus documents. It is therefore disappointing to see that these same qualifiers are heavily relied upon within the ISMGs.

traditionally addressed the needs of less academically able students and those students most likely to disengage if the school offerings are unsuitable.

The redesigned syllabuses for Essential English and Mathematics Essential, both introductions based on the Australian Curriculum, represent an increase in rigour and academic challenge when compared to the current subjects of English Communication and Pre Vocational Mathematics. Feedback from practicing teachers has indicated that these new syllabuses will not meet the needs of all learners who currently study those subjects. This is particularly the case in schools where students re-enter secondary education without a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy. The replacement of English Communication and Pre Vocational Mathematics will result in the loss of courses that have previously provided students with the opportunities to explore vocational pathways, work readiness and employability and life skills in the context of their studies in English and mathematics. A further concern is that the structure of external assessment in both of these subjects will significantly reduce learner success in their schools.

Discussion has taken place about the development of another lower level English offering which could address the needs of these students. Great caution is urged in progressing yet another English offering. The reality is that most schools, apart from very large and well-resourced schools, will be limited in the number of English offerings they can provide. Much of the debate around these subject offerings seems to have been around their classification as General or Applied subjects and therefore whether they might or might not count in the four subjects other than an SAS or VET certificate 3 for ATAR calculation purposes.

It is suggested that in this case the division between General and Applied subjects is somewhat artificial and used only to refer to the pitch of the subject towards a less academically demanding level than other General subjects. That being the case, it is suggested that proposed inter-subject scaling would make it highly unlikely that the lower level English or mathematics would make a significant contribution to an ATAR for tertiary entrance purposes. It has already been established by the Ministerial Working Group that appropriate achievement in “an” English subject is required but no limits are put on which English for this purpose. It is suggested that there is little to be lost in providing a lower pitched English offering, whether it is named Essential English or English Communication; little to be gained by providing a higher pitched additional Essential English; and possible disadvantage to schools in breaking the English cohort further.

10. Glossary

The introduction of a glossary to aid consistent language use is highly supported although it is noted that this is an area of syllabus redevelopment that has progressed to varying degrees across the suite of Stage1 Syllabus documents. A lack of subject specific terms in individual syllabus glossaries is noted at this point. Questions were also raised about how understandings of subjective assessment result qualifiers such as *adequate*, *appropriate* and *apt* might be differentiated and understood by users.

Conclusion

QCEC values the opportunity to consult and respond to the process of syllabus redevelopment. The syllabuses will be fundamental to the structure and implementation of new senior assessment and tertiary entrance processes and to the capacity of schools to cater for the needs of all their senior students.

This response has identified potential impacts on students through increased work load at specific times of assessment and examination schedules. The introduction of high stakes external assessments,

particularly in mathematics and science where the contribution to the final subject result is higher than other subjects, has the potential to impact adversely on the wellbeing and mental health of students. QCEC advocates strongly that the overall wellbeing of students needs to be a prominent consideration when decisions related to assessment, examination scheduling and special consideration are deliberated.

For any clarifications and further information: please contact Mandy Anderson or Bob Knight at QCEC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lee-Anne Perry', with a large, stylized initial 'L' and 'P'.

Dr Lee-Anne Perry AM

Executive Director

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