

# QCEC Response to the redevelopment of 35 senior secondary syllabuses

Date: 27 May 2016

## Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) appreciates the opportunity to provide this response to the *Redevelopment of 35 senior secondary syllabuses*. This response follows consultation within very constrained timeframes with Catholic School Authorities in Queensland.

Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schools in Queensland. These schools are administered by five diocesan schooling authorities (Brisbane, Cairns, Rockhampton, Toowoomba and Townsville) and 17 Religious Institutes that operate 300 schools altogether. QCEC has delegated roles in relation to liaising with State and Federal Governments, negotiating and distributing government funds to Catholic schools and facilitating collaboration between Catholic School Authorities (CSAs) to determine planning.

Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) provides this response on behalf of 22 Catholic schooling authorities which operate Catholic schools in Queensland, educating 145,000 students; and specifically on behalf of the 100 Catholic secondary schools, their students, staff, communities and families on whom issues of senior syllabus redevelopment particularly impact.

In its submission to the ACER Review of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance Processes consultation, QCEC identified three principles underpinning responses to questions of senior assessment and tertiary entrance processes:

- Learning should foster the holistic formation and well-being of the individual student and not be unnecessarily circumscribed by assessment requirements.
- Teaching, assessment and tertiary entrance processes should recognise the different needs of students and be equitable in providing access and pathways appropriate to needs of different students.
- Equity, fairness and appropriate discernment in providing access to post school pathways serves not just the individual's needs but the common good in supporting productivity, social justice, and just and sustainable use of higher education resources.

QCEC continues to align these principles in providing feedback on the redevelopment of 35 senior secondary syllabuses. In doing so, QCEC has recognised that the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) has developed an online survey and principals, curriculum leaders and teachers have had the opportunity to provide QCAA with responses to issues that are specific to a particular subject. This QCEC submission therefore is focussed on the following:

- (i) Study of Religion syllabus

- (ii) Higher level issues that have emerged across the curriculum

The specific focus on the Study of Religion syllabus is a result of the unique role the subject has in the senior secondary curriculum offerings of many Catholic schools in Queensland.

## Study of Religion

QCEC wishes to provide advice on three main areas: content, sequential unit structure and pedagogy.

### Content

The draft senior syllabus Study of Religion (SOR) has a considerable focus on content which results in concerns being raised that this would not allow time to “depth” topics. The 55 hours per unit is realistic, however, this could be assisted with specific guidelines about how much of each topic needs to be covered and how much is optional.

Comments on each unit were:

<p>Unit 1</p> <p><i>Sacred texts and religious writings</i></p>	<p>This unit covers more religions than presently required.</p> <p>It was felt that topic 2, “People of the Book”, is not an accurate description of the topic and it was suggested that “Religions within the Abrahamic Tradition” might be a better title.</p>
<p>Unit 2</p> <p><i>Religion and ritual</i></p>	<p>Topics 1 &amp; 2 could be restructured similar to Unit 1 – general and then more specific.</p>
<p>Unit 3</p> <p><i>Religious ethics</i></p>	<p>The <i>Rationale</i> states that students will study the five major World Religions as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Spiritualities, however, Unit 3 has omitted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Spiritualities from the unit description. It is recognised that inclusion is difficult because of the amalgam of spiritualities (and particularly ethics) involved and will require the identification of specific resources to clarify the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait spiritualities and ethical concerns.</p>
<p>Unit 4</p> <p><i>Religion, society and the state</i></p>	<p>Topic 2 <i>Religion and the State</i> has a number of bullet points that require an historical study rather than providing opportunity for critical thinking. The unit does not specifically reference Islam and tends to avoid Australian contexts in this regard. The unit should focus on the positive theme of how religion influences the State rather than a focus on ‘conflict’. Further examples of this approach would enhance the syllabus.</p>

Although the amount of content was an issue, respondents also noted the lack of inclusion of *Ultimate Questions*. This unit has proven to be engaging and relevant as it provides an understanding of the functions and purpose of religions in sociocultural contexts and philosophy. Consideration should be given to embedding the relevant ‘ultimate questions’ within the other units, however, the preference is that *Religion and ritual* be embedded in the other units to allow room for a new introductory unit of *Ultimate Questions*. It was noted that *Religion and ritual* is also reinforced through the spiritual life of a Catholic school.

## Sequential unit structure

There is no reference in the syllabus that the four units would be taught in sequence, however, QCEC understands that it is a design feature of all syllabuses that the four units will run in sequence. Although the teaching of the four units in sequence provides consistency for the *moderation of assessment*, and allows for external assessment, it poses challenges for composite classes and combined classes. More flexibility would be highly desirable to allow schools to adjust their curriculum for their particular context. However, if this is not possible and sequential units are mandatory, Catholic School Authorities request that careful consideration is given to appropriate ways in which the syllabus can be delivered to combined classes.

Concern was also raised about the flow of units and a suggestion that a revised 3,1,2,4 order of units taught might take better account of skill and prerequisites required. Particular mention was made with regards to starting with *Sacred Texts*. This would require the teaching of exegesis and hermeneutics at a very early stage in the course whereas teaching *Ritual* first (should it not be subsumed into other units as suggested above) would be a more productive and effective way to develop key religious concepts (if *Ritual* is retained as a separate unit rather than our preferred position of embedding it in other units..

Given the length of Unit 4, and the unconfirmed likelihood that the external assessment might be in term 4, units 3 and 4 might work more effectively if swapped.

## Pedagogy

The *inquiry-based learning* approach is supported, however, the concern raised in 'content' above highlights a movement away from 'depth' to cover more 'breadth' in the content at the expense of high level cognitive processes.

More guidance for the *valued pedagogies* of identifying research questions, formation of hypotheses and framing questions is required. This guidance could include specific reference to research and research practices, and a discerning selection of sources and annotated bibliographies.

The syllabus objectives could be more specific in reinforcing the *valued pedagogies* to move students from *learning about* to *learning from*. Emphasis needs to be on quality pedagogy that resists telling and invites dialogue, uses story-telling and begins and ends with real life (praxis), informed by genuine and deep reflection on what the faith traditions have to offer by way of truth and enlightenment.

## High level issues across the curriculum

### 1. Curriculum

#### Combined classes

Data collected from Queensland Catholic schools has indicated that combined classes are currently utilised widely for curriculum delivery in senior years and a significant number of schools are heavily reliant on this model. In a sample of 50 diocesan Catholic schools across urban, regional and rural settings:

- All but one had some subject delivery involving combined classes.
- Across the 50 schools there were 432 combined classes.
- 320 were Authority subjects and 112 were VET or Subject Area Syllabus (SAS).
- Across the 49 schools (with combined classes) the average number of Authority subjects delivered in this mode was 6.5 per school.

There were a number of different models of combined classes. The predominant model included combined classes across year 11 and 12 where the same content is delivered to both year levels.

- Of the 323 combined classes involving Authority subjects 276 were delivered using this model.
- There were 47 combined classes that used a model where two programs were taught to the two year levels concurrently.
- There was a smaller number of additional models that involved multiple modes of delivery both across and within year levels and often involved a combination of Authority, SAS and/or VET courses.

Many schools have invested heavily in the combined classes strategy and have a significant proportion of their senior curriculum delivered in this mode. Larger schools have used this strategy to maintain a diverse curriculum and smaller schools have relied on the strategy to maintain sufficient student choice. Whilst the use of combined classes is often seen as a strategy to manage small student enrolments in a subject the data collected indicates that of the 320 combined classes with Authority subjects, 141 had enrolments in their combined classes for year 11 and 12 students greater than 15.

Schools have indicated that with the smaller cohort of students entering year 11 in 2018 it is likely that there will be a greater reliance on the combined class strategy to maintain similar curriculum offerings.

There is concern that the current structure of the syllabuses and external assessment will significantly limit the options for combined class delivery. There is an urgent need to gain a detailed understanding of the way the senior curriculum is delivered across schools in all sectors and the extent to which that delivery is dependent on combined classes. This analysis can then inform the syllabus development and the consideration of strategies to mitigate the risk associated with a more rigid and constrained syllabus design.

There is considerable urgency to address this issue of combined classes as schools go into their subject selection and timetabling procedures for Year 11 2017 (the first year of combined classes for 2018) and are seeking information about possible flow on effects of removal of some subjects and impacts on combined classes in 2018

### **Flexibility**

High definition, tightly structured syllabus design is likely to impact on flexibility in schools. Catholic School Authorities have indicated that they value the opportunity to tailor courses to local contexts. Similarly they aim to be able to find expression in the curriculum for the school's values or charism and where appropriate to pursue learning content that is local and relevant such as topical issues in the local media for case studies in Legal Studies.

QCEC seeks to ensure that where appropriate courses can be tailored to local contexts and the infusing of values and perspectives across the curriculum are recognised and accommodated

### **Variable Progression**

Students have accessed variable progression for a range of needs and purposes. These have included:

- To support elite sporting and athletics programs
- To support students with complex medical conditions
- To support students with emotional issues, learning difficulties and ESL.

The provision of variable progression is an important equity issue and QCEC suggests that early consideration of how it might operate in the new system of senior assessment is essential and is addressed in subsequent versions of the syllabus documents.

## **2. Teaching and Learning**

### **External Assessment**

QCEC appreciates that the timing and placement of the external assessment within the school year will have a range of impacts on schools, teachers and students. Whilst acknowledging the complexity of the issue, concerns have been raised about the potential impact of a designated 'examination block' in term 4 that would effectively reduce year 12 to 3 terms of teaching and learning. This in turn will potentially impact on both year 11 and year 10. Catholic School Authorities also indicated that the nature of specific subjects should influence the timing of external assessment.

This issue has significant implications for students, teachers and schools. The decision on placement of external assessment in the school year needs to consider the alignment with the teaching – learning process, the nature of the course of study and needs of the school and community. Whilst it is acknowledged that school calendars cater for a range of activities, both internal and external to the school, to provide a rich array of educational opportunities for students, the calendar should not be the dominant drive of decisions regarding the placement of external assessment – teaching and student learning outcomes should be the primary focus. Most, if not all, secondary schools currently have exam blocks in terms two and three. All have provision for QCS testing. These support the notion that there are other common "windows" of time in which external assessments could be placed without disruption to other important calendar elements.

### **Movement between subjects**

Currently students move between subjects for a range of reasons including:

- Finding a subject too difficult
- A developing interest in a particular career path
- A transfer into a school whose timetable cannot accommodate their current course.

Whilst QCEC acknowledges that continuity of learning is an important success factor in senior studies there is concern that the syllabus structure may penalise students who for legitimate reasons need to change subjects. In the case of early exit from a subject what opportunities will there be for students to gain credit for their learning and contribute toward their ATAR?

### **Number of assessment instruments**

QCEC has welcomed the clear directions from the Senior Secondary Assessment Ministerial Taskforce to endorse four assessment pieces (three school based and one external). It would be a significant concern if the inclusion of multiple assessment techniques (for example an assignment and a written test) within one assessment piece was used as strategy to increase the number of school based assessment tasks. The decision of the Taskforce to endorse four pieces of assessment reflected the considerable current concern about the amount of assessment students are required to undertake in year 12. The important principle reflected in the decision of the Taskforce should not be undermined by requiring multiple tasks within one assessment.

### **Type of Assessment**

In designing an assessment program, it is important that the assessment tasks and conditions are compatible with the general objectives and the learning experiences. Assessment is an integral aspect of a course of study. There has been an acceptance that a range of assessment techniques have been used to assess student learning. It would be a concern if the assessment regime (school and external) became too heavily reliant on a specific assessment technique such as a written examination.

## **Higher order thinking**

Marzano's Taxonomy of Learning has been identified as the underpinning taxonomy for the syllabus design. In many cases, whilst the full range of thinking skills are identified in the rationale, this does not transfer to the units of work where higher order thinking is underrepresented e.g. Physics, all Maths. Teachers did note that the emphasis on lower order thinking skills did match a syllabus that is heavily content laden (which has been identified as the case in many of the new draft syllabuses). However, this is not seen to be desirable or reflective of engaging students in 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.

QCEC is concerned that the current syllabus design will put at risk the current emphasis on complex thinking and problem solving skills.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills**

The QCAA has identified 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills as valued aspects of learning that should be evident in each Authority Syllabus. Whilst these broadly align with the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum, the omission of Ethical Understanding is a concern.

QCEC is concerned that the naming of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills is unnecessary and reduces continuity of learning from P-10 where General Capabilities are used into years 11 and 12.. QCEC is also concerned that the very important aspect of Ethical Considerations has been omitted from the list. It is suggested that the General Capabilities of the Australian Curriculum are adopted and ensure consistency across P-12..

## **Increase in content across subjects**

Catholic School Authorities have indicated that some syllabuses contain an increased amount of content (Ancient History, Modern History and Mathematical Methods). The emphasis in the syllabus documents on content and prescription appears to have led to an emphasis on breadth rather depth.

There is a concern that the redeveloped syllabuses and possibly the changed assessment regime has encouraged the inclusion of additional content. The preferred approach is to encourage less content with a greater depth of understanding.

## **Professional learning implications**

QCEC notes that across the 35 syllabuses there is a variable amount of change from the current syllabus documents. In a number of syllabuses the amount of change is significant. This has important implications for professional development and the resourcing to support it.

QCEC seeks information and advice on the arrangements QCAA intends to implement for professional development.

## **Resourcing issues**

Significant resourcing implications have been identified. For example, the nature and content of the various syllabus documents means that current texts in many cases will no longer be suitable. Many schools have textbook hire schemes and would only normally need to "turn over" texts every 5 or so years (along with syllabus redevelopment cycle). Some schools are likely to have a significant resource allocation in this area. Similar concerns have been raised around the specificity of calculators in the Mathematics and Sciences.

A detailed analysis and ongoing consideration of the resourcing implications for schools is essential.

### **3. Consultation**

#### **Learning Area Reference Groups**

QCEC is concerned that processes employed within the Learning Area Reference Groups (LARGs) have not always supported effective consultation. Issues have related to:

- Insufficient time to achieve consideration of complex information in syllabus documents
- Insufficient information on which to provide considered advice
- Insufficient time to properly interrogate proposals and critique alternate perspectives

QCEC suggests a review of the LARG consultation process so that this element of the overall strategy enhances the integrity of the syllabus redevelopment process.

#### **Timelines and process**

QCEC appreciates the challenge and complexity of redeveloping around 60 senior syllabuses and the rationale for the current process of syllabus writing in stages. However Catholic School Authorities have indicated that it is difficult to provide meaningful feedback on a partially developed syllabus without the important elements of assessment. Catholic School Authorities indicated that the English syllabus document did not have sufficient detail to support a meaningful review.

QCEC requests that consideration is given to ensuring that there is sufficient opportunity to consider the syllabus documents holistically and there is an opportunity to reconsider the rationale, objectives, units of work with objectives, and subject matter when the assessment and other elements of the syllabus are written. It is important that the new processes of syllabus development and feedback do not result in a diminished quality outcome.

#### **New or modified syllabuses**

It is understood that there are potentially new and combined syllabuses. This has important implications for schools that are currently looking at the curriculum planning for 2017 which will be the first year of combined classes with the new syllabuses in 2018. This is a significant planning issue as schools seek to manage curriculum offerings to, in some cases, a significantly smaller cohort of students in 2018.

#### **Conclusion**

QCEC appreciates the opportunity to identify significant issues as we move to implement the new senior assessment and tertiary entrance processes and would welcome opportunities to work with QCAA and the other Queensland education sectors to further explore these issues and seek solutions.



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