

Senior Assessment, Teacher Workload and Student Standards

Doug Goldson.
qsa000@gmail.com

November 2010.

This report derives from an article called “Keep it a Simple Syllabus (KISS)” and was first published in the Queensland Teachers’ Journal (March 2010) and later republished in the Journal of the Queensland Association of Mathematics Teachers (QAMT) (winter issue). It is an analytic attempt to debunk the recently introduced Maths B (2008) syllabus. It resonated with some teachers sufficient for them to contact me and share their concerns about this syllabus. The result of this correspondence was the second article called “Has the QSA lost its way?”. This too was published in the QAMT Journal (September issue) and then sent to the mail list of the Science Teachers Association of Queensland (STAQ) (November). In this second article I explicitly requested teachers to contact me with their opinions about senior maths and science syllabuses. This report is the result. The questions posed to teachers were,

- (1) Are syllabuses over complicated?
- (2) Are syllabuses written in a simple and clear way?
- (3) Are syllabuses an unreasonable burden on your work?
- (4) Are syllabuses understood by students?
- (5) Do syllabuses make it easy to explain your decisions when a student queries their grade?

Let me be clear about the purpose of the present report. My goal is to present some of the responses to these questions that I have received from some teachers. This survey does not pretend to be scientific. The number of teacher respondents is very small. Against this, the responses are rich. Teachers were invited to write what they think; not to click on boxes that can be summed so as to measure (sic) their satisfaction levels.

Teacher credentials.

- (R1) Science HoD with 25 years’ experience.
- (R2) Senior science teacher with 40 years experience.
- (R3) Ex-deputy principal.
- (R4) Teacher with 14 years experience.
- (R5) HoD with 20 years experience.
- (R6) HoC
- (R7) Teacher with 35 years experience.
- (R8) Science teacher.
- (R9) Science and maths teacher.
- (R10) Teacher with 25 years’ experience.

Are syllabuses over complicated?

- (R1) The syllabi are easy enough to follow ... The assessment is the complicated part!
- (R3) I find the assessment criteria a nightmare.
- (R7) Yes, for no good reason.
- (R8) The immediate past Science syllabus had one ‘Difficult’ criterion Now in the new syllabuses – we have the ‘difficult’ criterion in every one of the nine assessment categories It is up to us teachers to provide those opportunities and then up to the students to demonstrate they are good enough in not one – but nine categories. This has to exponentially complicate each assessment piece from where we were only a few years ago.

Are syllabuses written in a simple and clear way?

- (R1) The exit statements ... are a mystery to me. E.g. In one criterion, for an A, students need to “critically analyse” and for a B “analyse”. This relies on “gut feeling” as I was told Not sure that “gut feeling” goes over well when justifying anything to students and parents. The criteria are ridiculous and I am yet to get a straight answer from anyone I ask.
- (R3) The criteria for judging standards are too complex.
- (R7) No.

Are syllabuses an unreasonable burden on your work?

- (R1) Ridiculously so, but probably even more in the assessment setting phase. We agonise over meaningless wording of criteria sheets. ... Assessment takes hours and hours and hours. This would be fine if there was an educational benefit but all I can see is lower standards and more confusion.
- (R2) As for the assessment program, the excessive workload on teachers has become enormous. ... We have to develop such detailed criteria to judge every piece of assessment and then try to apply them so subjectively.
- (R4) The formal assessment process has become so onerous that I am doing almost no informal marking of student work.
- (R4) The workload in marking has increased dramatically. Also, the effort involved in creating a balanced supervised assessment that adequately addresses the standards across all levels and across the breadth of key ideas is ridiculous.
- (R6) Marking time has at least doubled for a set of senior papers.
- (R7) Yes, and they take away time and energy from constructive work.
- (R8) Not only marking time - but in setting assessments as well. ... we were derided in R6 comments from a rude panel chair that our items were 'not acceptable as they were modified questions from the previous syllabus'; no assistance from QSA, or resources to help start the process off. ... I have been completely flattened by the stress this currently unsupported syllabus has caused.
- (R9) When marking an EEI in physics, it takes all of my free time for a week.
- (R10) I have been collating Year12 Maths B and Physics results and what should take one hour now takes two days of examining profiles, comparing criteria (that are totally flawed in the first place), filling out R7s, etc.
- (R10) My colleagues and I have the following experience in science and maths :- 25, 25, 20, 20, 25 years experience. We are appalled at the direction QSA is going with maths and science. I spend all my time writing work programs, creating task specific criteria sheets, recording student grades in 3 criteria and 9 sub-criteria for each assessment item, deciding between 'complex' and 'challenging' and 'complex' or 'challenging'.
- (R10) We spend all our time addressing all that QSA requires us to do - mainly dealing with the criteria/standards based assessment. I spend so little of my time actually developing exciting lessons. All the QSA PD is about the assessment and not about resources. The QSA SEO should be collating resources and distributing them to the teachers. There is no actual curriculum support at all.

Are syllabuses understood by students and parents?

- (R1) No, and I can't explain to students and parents how to improve.
- (R3) Do teachers understand them? I am sure the students don't.
- (R7) No. In fact the hardest question a student can ask in Year 12 Mathematics B is, "How am I going?" .
- (R8) I have had to compile a "Syllabus Words Explained" list and spend class time going through the meanings of the words in the exit standards. I have been over it many times and it is only at the end of year 12 there is some sign the students are understanding little bits of it.
- (R9) Students don't have a clue as to why a standard was awarded. They don't know what questions to ask. If they do ask, they do not understand the answer and so quickly learn not to ask.
- (R9) The students wouldn't have a clue what the criteria sheets mean. They attempt to do what I tell them to do to get an A etc. How well they do this is how well they understood me - not the criteria sheets. Once I have awarded a standard there is no comment whatsoever. In the past, I used to have my top students competing vigorously for 1/2 a mark and they were well justified in doing so.
- (R10) The whole system of criteria is ludicrous - most parents and students haven't a clue what they really mean.

Do syllabuses make it easy to explain your decisions?

- (R1) The language makes it hard. How can you honestly explain to a student that they should have “revealed meaningful interrelationships” but that they only “described interrelationships”. It makes the teachers look like idiots.

Effect on teacher morale and staff retention.

- (R1) I am so frustrated with the science syllabi that I have considered leaving teaching (but can't afford to retire yet).
- (R2) I cannot in all conscience face my senior students and impose such ... onerous workloads upon them.
- (R4) I find the process [of assessment writing] so daunting that I can barely face it. I end up becoming extremely stressed with worry that the instrument does more harm than good because, in attempting to address the standards, it becomes too difficult.
- (R5) I will not be teaching a senior science in 2011. I have had enough of struggling to write assessment items and make judgments on criteria that I do not believe are appropriate nor well written for the sciences.
- (R6) Our staff hate it [criteria based assessment] and do want to avoid senior classes. Some elderly teachers are thinking about premature retirement due to it.
- (R6) Teachers have lost confidence in their ability to assess due to its subjective nature.
- (R10) In maths and science, the experienced teachers want to leave and would, if they could find alternative employment, and the new teachers can hardly cope with the ridiculous paperwork that the assessment process requires. Anyone with a logical brain ... would be frustrated by the system and lack of support from QSA in terms of actual teaching resources.

Effect on school science as a discipline.

- (R1) My first love is biology and it makes me very sad to see what is happening to the subject.
- (R2) The awarding of grades has become so arbitrary and difficult to justify and the course does not give students a solid grounding in the subject.
- (R8) This is reflected in a worrying trend – science numbers are decreasing as the word is definitely out there that science subjects are too hard and require too much time on these big assessments.
- (R10) Physics is going to end up being totally assessed by "Write an essay on Einstein." type of assessment items.
- (R10) We have our best maths students writing inane paragraphs at the end of maths problems making sure they address CJ, strengths and limitations, assumptions, reasonableness, etc .

Effect on student performance.

- (R1) I can't explain to students and parents how to improve. It is incredibly difficult to get a VHA in biology and, for talented students, it shouldn't be.
- (R2) I feel now that we are perpetrating a fraud on the students. They are learning so little and are becoming so stressed in the process.
- (R5) I am not happy leaving chemistry teaching. However until the syllabus assessment and criteria take up some simple principles it pains me too much to see students making efforts which are not rewarded.
- (R8) For students to demonstrate all the different things they are expected to show, they must be very, very good, and must spend excessive amounts of time on their assessments. I wonder how many university courses have first year students conducting an independent experimental investigation?

Effect on quality control.

- (R1) I feel as though I am “flying blind” as a panelist and everyone at the meetings disagrees with the interpretations, which ... seem to change from year to year.
- (R4) I am coming to a fairly good understanding of what I think the syllabus exit standards statements are asking. After verification reviews, it is clear that many of the teachers are not in the same boat - they may be in another ocean.
- (R4) I made the complaint to the panel chair and QSA that the process is a farce. The complex nature of the modern assessment process makes it impossible to adequately review a package in the QSA-allotted 2hrs. The same goes for monitoring and verification.
- (R5) All the science panels are seeking panelists. It seems that no one wants the job of administering these unworkable syllabi.
- (R5) There is too much variance across the state as to standards of EEIs.
- (R5) I do not have faith in the moderation process and I guess neither do panel chairs or panelists.
- (R6) Teachers are worried about the assessment and not the quality of their teaching.
- (R8) Why is it that we cannot use numbers to make decisions but QSA must use numbers in determining OP level? ... QSA will say ‘we never told you not to use numbers’ but I heard that clearly from several QSA officers at syllabus workshops – they then say ‘schools must show how the numbers match the standards’, but numbers cannot be used to do that, certainly not these verbose versions we must work with - and they know it.
- (R9) Because this method of assessment is so complicated the individual can successfully argue almost any outcome and get away with it as no one else understands [the syllabus] either. In the past, panelists were reasonably consistent as they only needed to look to the quality of the assessment and marking and make sure the numbers added up. Now it is like going before a judge - you had better hope that the one you get is sympathetic to your cause.
- (R10) .The district moderation panels are a joke in that they do not objectively compare the standards across the district. ... I would think that students at some schools exit Yr 12 with very poor knowledge and skills in maths and physics.

Final thoughts.

Dangerous thinking gets the last word,

- (R6) It is time teachers ... were given a say in the process of change and if not consulted properly then it shouldn't be done. Who is in charge here? Who is writing the assessment criteria?
- (R7) The QSA system survives because of the compliance of teachers. If we cease to be compliant it will change.

Doug Goldson, November 2010.