

TEACHERS TOLD TO STICK TO LETTERS

School ban for numerical marking

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NUMERICAL marks are effectively banned in Queensland, with the state's curriculum authority saying they "disguise the strengths and weaknesses" of a student's work and foster a false sense of objectivity and precision.

Instead, teachers must assign a letter grade from A to E based on "a global retrospective review" of a student's performance.

The grade is judged against standards set out in the syllabus and the "pattern of evidence" of a student's achievement, rather than a tally of grades or marks.

The Queensland Studies Authority says marks encourage "a quantitative notion of grading"

that may not reflect quality or have any reference to the syllabus standards, and that it encourages comparisons between students.

"Numerical marking systems enjoy a status that is higher than they strictly deserve," it says in a discussion paper.

While the QSA says the syllabus is "silent" on the use of marks and teachers may use them if they wish, a group of maths and science teachers argue numerical marks are effectively banned.

Co-ordinated by James Cook University physics professor Peter Ridd, the group of about 130 teachers is establishing a website in the new year as part of a campaign against the assessment procedures.

Unlike the other states, Queensland has no external

exams and instead uses a system of school-based assessment, in which teachers award letter grades from A to E representing the standard achieved. At the end of Year 12, these grades inform a teacher's decision in assigning students to one of five levels of achievement from very high to very low.

In determining a student's grade, teachers are encouraged to avoid using numerical marks or cut-offs but rather an "instrument-specific criteria sheet", which is the new term for a marking guide developed for each assessment task.

In advice prepared for chemistry and physics teachers last year, the QSA says "a student's folio of work... is a collection of individual instruments and is to be judged

as a whole, rather than as the sum of its parts."

"It is not an appropriate practice to 'add-up' or aggregate grades to arrive at an overall judgment about a student's level of achievement within each criterion," it says.

"The aggregation of marks and application of pre-specified, arbitrary numerical cut-offs for level of achievement decisions tends to disguise the strengths and weakness of a student's work."

Speaking on behalf of the group of maths and science teachers, Professor Ridd said the guidelines were interpreted as banning teachers from tallying or aggregating the letter grades a student received. "You're absolutely not allowed to add the letters up but have to make a holistic judgment

on where the student sits based on the dominant letter."

Professor Ridd said the grades were then used in a process akin to statistical alchemy, turning letter grades into numbers at the end of Year 12 to calculate the student's overall position, or OP. The OP, a statewide ranking of students used for tertiary entrance, is based on school assessment and a state-wide core skills test.

"A teacher might have 50 students in a B category and has to somehow rank them in order. It's very difficult to differentiate," Professor Ridd said.

In NSW, which also assesses students against standards, marks are used to differentiate the students, particularly those who sit on the boundaries of different grades.

A spokesman for the QSA said the assessment system was not new and the foundations of it had been in place since the mid-1980s, but it had recently re-emphasised the need for teachers not to base their grades on numerical marks.

"The use of 'marks' is more likely to hinder than to facilitate the practice of judging students' achievements against fixed criteria and standards," he said.

"A mark of 75 per cent on its own is just a random number. Its meaning will vary with things such as how hard the test is, or how many marks are given for each question."

He said the QSA was aware that a small minority of teachers had concerns about the assessment requirements, but the vast majority were satisfied.

Teachers give A-E grading system an F

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The Queensland Studies

"a quantitative notion of grading" that may not reflect quality or have any reference to syllabus standards, and that encourage comparisons between students.

Maths and science teachers campaigning against the assessment procedures compare them to statistical alchemy — turning letter grades into numbers at the end of Year 12 to calculate a student's overall position.