



Making fair grades

Call to demystify assessment of students

By JCU's PETER RIDD*

IN the last Queensland election campaign it was notable that education issues barely rated a mention despite the State's appalling showing in the latest national tests.

We came second last, scraping home just ahead of the Northern Territory. Worse, in international comparisons Queensland is way behind the top rank players such as Taiwan.

In maths, Taiwan has 45 per cent of it students in the "advanced" bracket whereas Queensland managed just 3 per cent.

So what needs to be done? Fortunately we can make huge improvements without spending an extra cent. The main problem is that the Queensland education system has been hijacked by ideologues that have developed some of the craziest syllabi in the world.

It is the syllabi that are broken and which must be fixed, and it is the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), supported by the education faculties of universities, that must be blamed for them.

One of many aspects of our syllabi that must be fixed is the system of assessment. It is fundamentally unfair to the students and excessively time consuming

for teachers.

Presently in Queensland marks are banned in secondary schools. No longer do you for example get a mark out of 20 for your assignment, out of 30 for practical write-ups and out of 50 for the exam. No longer are teachers allowed, or even able to add up the marks to get an overall mark from which grades are determined.

Instead, an extended criteria sheet has to be written by the teachers for every item of an exam and for every assignment. A letter grade from A to E is given for each of these items, but here is where the problem lies. How do you combine all these letters to get a final grade? A complicated and tortuous scheme has to be used by teachers that relies on what is termed in the syllabus as a "holistic judgment".

That boils down to a guess based on gut feeling. Pages and pages of the syllabi are devoted to how this guess is done and is the subject of endless debate among teachers, moderation panels and even within the QSA.

The irony is that despite the banning of numerical marks to get the final grade for each subject; a purely mathematical system is

used to obtain the eventual OP score. This system is based on the ranking of each student in each subject of his or her school group.

The teachers must provide the QSA with a number that has been magically derived from whole bunch of letters that have been combined in an undefined and unknowable fashion.

This final number goes into the QSA computer and is combined with some solid statistical procedures involving means and standard deviations to provide, guess what? A number – because in the end, that is what the universities and employers want.

The farcical assessment system has problems with fairness and transparency and may be open to legal challenge by some disgruntled lawyer parent of a student who has not done as well as expected.

Another concern is the sheer amount of effort that teachers have to expend on implementing the system. Criteria sheets are often pages in length. Determining final grades can take days. Lack of an objective system means



they are always open to questioning by unhappy students, and worse still, irate parents.

We are having trouble enough keeping good teachers, especially in hard mathematics and the numerical sciences, and the last thing needed is to waste vast amounts of their valuable time implementing a complex but silly assessment system.

A second problem with our assessment system is the gross overuse of long writing assignments even in maths, physics and chemistry.

Any parent of a high school child dreads those periods when a batch of assignments are due. The child may literally burn the midnight oil for a few weeks, aimlessly looking at websites and going over multiple drafts.

As a parent you are faced with the dilemma. Remembering that teenagers know everything about everything and hate taking advice from their parents, do you attempt to help your child and totally destroy household harmony? Or do you do nothing and pretty well guarantee an inferior result?

The real problem with assignments is that teachers can never be sure who has done, or helped with the assignment and by how much. Was it the parent, the tutor, or the student?

I know of quite a few of my undergraduate university students who were on a nice little earner helping with, or actually doing, assignments for children of well-to-do parents.

The overuse of assignments discriminates against children who do not have good support at home.

How can the child of a family whose parents have poor education themselves or who take little interest in education, hope to compete?

Another problem with excessive use of assignments is that it is a major disincentive for many students, particularly those with a maths bent who often dislike excessive writing. Labouring for

hours each night writing reports can destroy the joy of understanding and being successful at solving problems in physics, chemistry and mathematics.

Additionally, if students do not get help at home or from a private tutor, it is unlikely that the teacher will have enough time to help improve with writing skills, the development of which is the main object of assignments. The net result is that there is little improvement in writing skills.

“The farcical assessment system has problems with fairness and transparency and may be open to legal challenge by some disgruntled lawyer parent of a student who has not done as well as expected”

Finally, many of the open-ended assignments that teachers set require skill levels that are way beyond their students. Students are expected to write assignments on esoteric topics they know almost nothing about.

Some require levels of expertise that I would not expect from third year university students. They should instead be getting a thorough understanding of the basic concepts and techniques of the subject.

I was recently asked by a colleague at James Cook University a

question about an electronic circuit diagram and after a few hours cogitating about the question I enquired why he was entering this line of research. He replied that it was actually his daughter's Year 12 physics assignment.

The QSA has shown over the years that it treats academics like me with disdain even though we are a major end-user of what the education system produces.

It is therefore up to others to do something about our broken education system.

I have mentioned problems with assessment but this is only a fraction of the problem, albeit indicative of the lunacy of which the QSA is capable.

It is now time for teachers to stand up and be counted by protesting against the time-consuming and unfair assessment systems.

Their interstate counterparts, and teachers in better performing systems overseas, do not have to tolerate such a pointless imposition on their time.

They need to lobby the unions, moderation panels, school principals, Queensland Education, and the independent school organisations.

But most importantly, the Minister of Education needs to remind the QSA that it exists to serve the students and their parents.

Parliament represents the parents and Parliament created the QSA. The QSA has failed the Parliament leaving our children exposed in a global economy with weak, low educational outcomes.

I urge the new Parliament to launch an inquiry into the condition of education in our schools.

The QSA should not be at liberty to experiment on our children with the latest trendy educational theory.

***Professor Peter V. Ridd is
Head of Discipline,
Physics Department,
School of Engineering and
Physical Sciences,
James Cook University**



HARD LESSON . . . Queensland students are lagging way behind other states, tests show