



# Flawed syllabi a pressing problem

By PETER RIDD

THE latest national test results of our Year 3, 5, 7, and 9 children have confirmed Queensland to be at the bottom of the state league table although there has been a marginal improvement in some areas.

What make this result worse is that this is not a comparison with the best education systems in the world. For example, in maths, Singapore completely outclasses the best Australian state, and Taiwan has 45 per cent of its students in the 'advanced' bracket whereas Queensland managed just 3 per cent.

To her credit, Premier Anna Bligh commissioned Geoff Masters of the Australian Council for Education Research to investigate the reason for Queensland's poor showing in the national test last year.

Unfortunately for the Premier, an important finding of the report is that the usual excuse of the State Government, that Queensland students are a little younger than their interstate counterparts, is not entirely valid. According to Masters, in the 1960s and 70s Queensland was on top of the league table in mathematics, and our students were just as young in those days.

Although the Masters' report concentrated mostly on basic numeracy and literacy in the lower school years, the problems in the high schools are probably just as bad. Masters hinted at this

with the comment relating to junior high school maths "the decline in the government system between 1964 and 1995 was larger than in any other State and has been estimated as the equivalent of 'more than two years of learning'."

The problems with our education system are so deep that it will take a least a decade to correct. A good place to start is with the little known organisation called the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA). This organisation creates our school syllabi and determines what is taught, how it is taught and how it is assessed.

The QSA has introduced some badly flawed syllabi that have completely changed the way that subjects are taught and assessed. Dominated by education ideologues that mostly live in the Brisbane suburb of Fairyland, the QSA thinks we have an ultra modern system that leads the world despite data from international and national tests that indicate that Queensland is lagging badly. Until the QSA admits we have a problem, there is little that can be done.

A few weeks ago, I ran a forum for maths and sciences teachers under the banner of the Australian Institute of Physics, the Institute of Engineers, and the Royal Australasian Chemical Institute, where we discussed many of the challenges facing teachers

of the hard sciences and mathematics.

The overwhelming consensus of the forum was that the new QSA syllabi have significant problems, and that the new assessment schemes have dubious accuracy and are very time consuming to implement.

Despite criticisms from universities, teachers, principals and parents, the QSA buries its head in the sand and pretends that all is fine. It is particularly notable that despite the universities being the major end user of students who have trained in Maths B, Maths C, Physics, and Chemistry, the QSA could not care what the universities think about their cherished syllabi. This has been a constant problem with the QSA: they are totally unresponsive to the needs of their clients.

The problem at the moment is that there are a large number of teachers, parents and university staff who are very unhappy with our new syllabi, but without effective organisation, it is difficult to mount an effective opposition.

The unions are useless; the teachers and principals are scared to comment in public for fear of retribution from the QSA; and, the education system, and the parents are alone and helpless.

And universities have not helped. The education faculties are complicit in the introduction



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of our abominable new syllabi. The science and engineering disciplines could do something if they acted together but so far they have not united to form an effective lobby group. Most academics I speak to think that it is impossible to influence the QSA. Perhaps they are right.

The one person who could do something is our Minister of Education Geoff Wilson. He is a sensible sort of fellow who probably

has no idea about the depth of feeling against the new syllabi.

He should remember that in Western Australia, similar crazy syllabi were recently scrapped after a well organised people-power campaign was mounted through a web-based organisation called PLATO WA ([www.platowa.com](http://www.platowa.com)) with lots of help from *The West Australian* newspaper.

One WA Minister of Education

was forced to resign during the debacle. Something similar could be done in Queensland – but it will require organisation, the contribution of parents, teachers and principals, and the support from the highest levels of universities.

Fixing our syllabi will not cure all the problems we have in education, but it would be a good start.

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