



LEARNING A TOUGH LESSON

THE Queensland parliamentary committee report recommending overhauling senior school assessment in mathematics, chemistry and physics tabled yesterday is a stunning indictment on those responsible for the state's education system.

For years bodies responsible for a substandard and unreliable curriculum and assessment system, such as the Queensland Studies Authority, have argued all is well – clearly, they are wrong.

Recommendations include 50 per cent of a student's achievement mark being based on formal, externally set and marked examinations and ensuring that school-based grades are reliable and consistent by moderating such results against results received in the external examination.

The committee also argues there should be an increased focus on "content knowledge" that all students are entitled to learn, that school-based projects be completed in the classroom under teacher supervision and that numerical marking be adopted.

And there is nothing new or radical in such recommendations, as I stated in my submission to the committee.

Victoria, during the mid to late '90s and after experimenting with a similar school-based approach adopted in Queensland, jettisoned it in favour of a greater reliance on traditional examinations and more rigorous and reliable methods of assessment.

Changes to school course work and testing are long overdue, writes
Kevin Donnelly



If endorsed by the Newman Government these recommendations represent a sea change in how senior school subjects are taught and assessed, and an endorsement of critics who long argued something had to be done.

While the QSA claims the school-based model, one where a student's work is completed over time, often outside the classroom and assessed by the school's teachers, is reliable, valid and fair, critics have suggested

is "seriously invalid and unreliable".

The reality is, currently, those privileged students whose parents can afford to pay for tutors to help their children receive an unfair advantage. It's also true, notwithstanding the amount of time and resources committed to moderating assessment, that it is impossible to guarantee consistency of grades across the state.

It stands to reason students assessed in a two to three-hour examination facing the same questions under the same conditions must do their own work. Ensuring the questions are hard to predict also means there is little, if any, value in rote learning pre-prepared answers.

The fact papers are marked by a selected group of external examiners trained to follow the same grading process ensures results are comparable.

Compared to school-based assessment and moderation, such a practice is also more efficient and less costly.

Removing a student's classroom teacher and school from the assessment process also removes the potential for conflict of interest and means teachers' resources and time can be focused on teaching instead of the days and weeks

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otherwise. A number of submissions to the parliamentary inquiry argued the Queensland system is open to abuse as it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify that students are doing their own work and to ensure that the grade given in one school is compatible to the grade given in another.

Professor Peter Ridd, the Head of Physics at James Cook University, in his submission, for example, said the existing assessment system



spent on moderation sessions.

As noted by the European researcher Ludger Woessmann, one of the defining characteristics of those education systems that outperform Australian students are competitive, high-risk, externally set and marked examinations.

Compared to Queensland, top-performing education systems in places such as Finland, Singapore, Shanghai and Japan – systems that achieve the best results in the international Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study and Program for International Student Assessment – are

more traditional in terms of pedagogy and assessment.

Students are often streamed in terms of ability, schools compete to achieve the best academic results and meritocracy is rewarded.

The US-based academic John H. Bishop also says that what he terms external exit exam systems, such as the New York Regents Exams, are far more effective at ensuring rigorous standards and a strong academic focus.

Increasingly, tertiary academics here are arguing the academic ability of first-year undergraduates is patchy and superficial.

One way to improve the situation will be to overhaul Queensland's senior school assessment system by accepting the committee's recommendations.

Given its inability to admit errors and the fact, after years of mounting criticism, the QSA has been complicit in enforcing school-based assessment on schools, the authority also needs a radical overhaul.

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HELD BACK: A parliamentary committee has recommended sweeping curriculum and assessment changes in Queensland high schools