TRACKING QUEENSLAND EDUCATION UNDER *THE BLOB* FOR THE PAST 40 YEARS

What is *The Blob*?

1. SCHOOL-BASED ASSESSMENT (SBA) *THE QUEENSLAND BLOB* GETS A FOOTHOLD AND GROWS.

School-Based Assessment was introduced into Queensland in 1973 to replace the senior external examinations which had been used for ninety years. Thus, high school matriculation scores (and competitive university entry) began to be determined by each school's own examinations, which were checked by 'district moderation panels', under the supervision of a central government regulator.

In 1976, the Review of School-Based Assessment report (ROSBA) emphasised a new direction which led to an increased focus on the quality of assessment applied within high schools, now that they were partly autonomous and responsible for setting their own senior assessment programs. Following international trends, the assessment authority (Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, BOSSSS) **instructed schools to clearly articulate the objectives of every subject course**. This had never before been done even in the syllabi of the subjects.

Over time, schools were helped considerably by pamphlets (**Discussion Papers** for In-service) on different types of assssment instruments. However, the BOSSSS was beginning to become excited about a new direction for assessment, even to the extent that they were hell bent on a 'theory-building exercise in itself'. The quantum shift imposed was essentially away from an emphasis on quantitative use of numerical marks, towards a theoretical value-laden qualitative style.

The traditonal style of assessment focussing on Subject Knowledge and Skills (the Psychometric Paradigm) was replaced with a new focus on values and attitudes of students, the collection of a portfolio of student work and providing an opportunity for application of greater teacher judgement of the standard achieved (the Hermeneutic Paradigm). It was a recognisably sad indictment of the innovation that one of the main advantages stated of the new assessment system was that it provided a good theoretical framework with which to attack the psychometric paradigm.

By the late 1980's, schools were also required to articulate the specific criteria for awarding grades for all assessment. This was traditionally done at the time by using 'cut-off scores' applied to numerical totals. However, this system was sitting in the cross-hairs of abandonment, as the BOSSS bureaucrats were moving toward exclusive use of qualitative criteria for award of achievement levels for subjects.

This was the thin end of the wedge. From that time, teacher judgements and workloads started to increase dramatically, as teachers were required to broaden their repertoires of assessment and also achievement descriptors. All of the "innovations" in assessment immediately meant more and more work for teachers, who were the ones to actually implement the ever increasingly detailed and creative procedures for assessing kids' achievements. Meanwhile there was less and less time left for real teaching and for students committing knowledge to memory. It was likened to spending so much time and effort on the wrapping of a present, that you forget to put the present in the box. Unfortunately, this trend has continued to accelerate right up to the present time, so that school-based assessment is now so much out-of-control as to be damaging. Sadly, the students were pushed onto an experimental assessment treadmill from which they have still not escaped in 2015.

There was discernable excitement and pride that they (*The Blob*) started to feel during the 1980's, so much so that they even started promoting themselves, advertising the Queensland system at international education conferences. It wasn't noticed at all as to what was happening to the students and staff. Who would imagine that the new and wonderful scheme resulted in kids learning less traditional subject knowledge? Who cared about whether a cheating culture would emerge on take-home assessment? As far as *The Blob* were concerned, they had cracked the knotty problem of adding true value to internal assessment. And when they started to focus more specifically on "Higher Order Thinking Skills", this was an ill-conceived idea from the point of view of Cognitive Science studies, (See Section 3, Paras. 5-6 below). It is tempting to consider whether or not *The Blob* had begun to believe that the assessment system reflected the perfection and brilliance which the bureaucrats ascribed to themselves.

A Parliamentary Inquiry (2013) was commissioned to respond to the public outcry, an ACER Review followed (2014) and a QCAA Review (2014-15) has also been needed to address the multiplicity of problems caused by *The Queensland Blob*.

So, What are the key problems that have arisen and become entrenched by school-based assessment? The Parliamentary Inquiry exposed that

- most students are graduating without appropriate subject knowledge or skills
- students and teachers are overworked by centrally-imposed assignments and other assessment requirements - under the present system, students are over-assessed and the workload for students is well beyond what is reasonable, leading to many overwork and illness issues and stresses for all stakeholders.
- matriculation grades are highly unreliable and subject to systemic cheating
- students' take-home assignments are very frequently written by adults, e.g. tutors and internet services
- schools 'game' the assessment procedures in order to gain advantages for school publicity
- the Moderation processes via the Subject Panels can be subverted by teachers and schools and are unreliable.
- comparability of grades awarded from school to school is questionable.

2. OUTCOMES-BASED EDUCATION (OBE) ANOTHER INNOVATION-FAD FAILURE

During the early to mid-1990s, all Australian states and territories, to a greater or lesser degree, have adopted an outcomes-based education approach to school curriculum. Drawing on the writings of the US academic, William Spady, and in opposition to the more traditional, academic and competitive model of curriculum, OBE promotes a new-age, child-centred and progressive approach to teaching and learning. OBE is based on a developmental and constructivist philosophy of education and, as a result, more formal methods of teaching, competitive assessment and placing the disciplines at centre-stage give way to a situation where teachers 'facilitate' learning, students are described as 'knowledge navigators' and dispositions and attitudes take priority over received knowledge. Knowledge is viewed as a social construct, and the view of knowledge as objective truth is disregarded.

OBE was conceptually flawed, difficult to implement and substandard when compared to either a syllabus or a standards model of curriculum. It was introduced across Australia and in Queensland in the early 1990s. It featured a focus on 10 *Key Learning Areas* (KLAs). After only a few years, it became apparent that the task of defining what constituted the most important outcomes for all of the subject areas was too difficult, overly laborious and too contentious for the teaching profession, and the approach was partially abandoned.

3. HIGHER-ORDER THINKING SKILLS – QCST - THE HUBRIS OF *THE BLOB* BECOMES PALPABLE

Following the release of the Viviani Report of 1991, concerns over the use of TE scores and lack of comparability of school results led to a change of direction in assessment. This flowed through after *Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* had attained its most modern incarnation, and the work of Edward de Bono on *Thinking Skills* and Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences* (Sensory Modalities) had become popular. The required transformation of assessment, from *The Blob* point of view, was that Higher Order Cognitive Skills/Processes were to be privileged and embedded into all subject courses (as *Common Curriculum Elements*, CCEs).

But, there was a secondary agenda behind this innovation. Although schools and staff were well aware of it, the general public stakeholders did not really understand that there was a side-benefit for *The Blob*. Its real purpose was to provide statistical parameters to enable scaling of student subject results so that all subjects could be treated as having equal difficulty. This was designed as a mechanism for generating an OP (*Overall Position*). However, this questionable idea of treating all subjects as having equal difficulty was palpably suspect and probably part of a social agenda designed to remove privilege from highly academic subjects while raising the status of less academic subjects. The OP was designed to act as a tertiary entrance indicator and replace the TE Score.

Special External Exams were reintroduced in the form of the *Queensland Core Skills Test* (QCST), consisting of four tests held over two days. These tests were scholastic aptitude tests, designed to be relatively content-independent. However, their immediate impact was to creat a tension for teachers of subjects, because teachers now had to place strong emphasis on the CCEs and still fit in the traditional subject content. In every practical sense, the subject knowledge was devalued. One particularly ironic element of the QCST scheme was that, although writing tasks were an integral part of the Core Skills Tests, the results of these were never allowed to contribute towards the student's assessment grade for English.

A secondary problem has steadily been allowed to develop through various editions of the subject syllabi because of the fact that school-based assessment was both continuous and exhaustive, and students and teachers were now trapped in a non-stop cycle of over-assessment. Worse still for the students, as they lurched from assignment to assignment, there was little time left for preparation for term tests. The whole sorry saga of the past twenty-four years has been that **students have been placed into an assessment nightmare**, where a survival mentality develops in order to cope with too many "teach-yourself" assignments. The students' response nowadays is to **"Research it, Write it up, Hand it in, and Forget it!"** The result? Many students graduate with a *Senior Education Certificate*, but possess little real key knowledge in their permanent memories, and consequently are ill-equipped to commence tertiary studies. For Maths and Science career aspirants, this system lacks fairness, efficiency, and productivity.

Why has this debacle occurred, whilst *The Queensland Blob* has been actively promoting Queensland's system as "World's Best Practice" for more than two decades? The important disjunct which was missed was the assumption that students could be equipped for an unknown future by giving them Higher-Order Thinking Skills without sound Knowledge background in subjects. Back as early as the 1920's, Bertrand Russell recognised the folly of this assumption. In more recent decades, Cognitive Science studies have exposed the fallacy inherent in the present assessment system. Broad comprehension – being able to think critically about a wide range of subjects – requires a broad base of knowledge. **Long-term memory is now viewed as the central dominant structure of human cognition.** Everything we see, hear and think about is critically dependent on and influenced by our long-term memory base.

Where cognitive science is useful is in explaining how this process works. The reason it's so important to have lots of facts stored in our long-term memory – the reason it's essential if we're to develop the ability to think – is because of the limited space in our working memory. That would make any form of thinking – even the most rudimentary bit of mental arithmetic – virtually impossible were it not for our ability to retrieve facts from our long-term memory. (p.14)

4. THE NEW BASICS PROJECT (NBP) FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLING - *THE BLOB* ON STEROIDS

Arguably the worst example of a well-intentioned but misguided educational experiment was the introduction of the *New Basics Project* at the turn of the millennium in selected Trial Schools. This was designed to utilise Social Constructivism, emphasising child-centred, co-operative learning as the best way to motivate self-learning habits of students. The program was founded on the questionable notion that educators could predict 'the skills and knowledges required to survive and flourish in the changing economic, social and technological conditions' of the future. However, it burdened schools with the responsibility of negotiating with their local communities as to what topics would be vital to the program. It ambitiously aimed at 'raising the intellectual quality of learning across the State' via its use of *Deep Engagement* in *Rich Tasks* informed by the *New Basics Framework* of the *Productive Pedagogies*. These parameters required teachers to develop a whole range of new pedagogies and acquaint themselves with a new culture of teaching and learning. Rather ironically, the *New Basics* Project aimed at 'renewing our work as educators, returning to the basics of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, with a clear focus on improving student outcomes through increasing the intellectual rigour of their work'. Naturally, the program required increased sophistication of the assessment criteria and accompanying matrices of performance descriptors, to a stage where assessment became more subjective, less clear and totally qualitative – an ominous sign of things to come.

In fact**, there was nothing traditionally basic about the new curriculum**, pedagogy and assessment at all. This was a calculated use of words attempting to position educators and other stakeholders favourably. The 'new' basics focused mostly on use of the new digital technologies but largely ignored traditional basics. It produced students lacking traditional levels of foundation knowledge in Maths and Sciences, to the extent that increasing the rigour of their assessment tasks was itself impeded and even problematic. It was noble in intent, but was ill-founded on many fronts. Only the bravest and most committed teachers accepted this challenge, but were stretched to their very limits by the endeavour. The project was terminated without any fanfare in 2006.

5. SENIOR ASSESSMENT IN MATHS AND SCIENCES – INTRODUCTION OF THE 2007 SYLLABI - *THE BLOB* REFUSES TO RELINQUISH ITS DREAM OF ASSESSMENT

While the New Basics was applied to Middle Schools, and in spite of its failure, the new Senior Syllabus roll-out in 2007 continued the evolution of the assessment model in the same direction. Numerical marks were proscribed, all assessment was judged qualitatively on a 15-point scale (A+ ⟷ E-). Summative grades were achieved using notional approximations, on balance of judgement, about combining multiple letter grades.

The assessment model had reached a breaking point in which stakeholders' interests were non-existent and the burden of overload weighed heavily on students, teachers and families alike. Stress levels of students in final semester are well-documented and the number of students requiring special consideration for overdue assessment peaks in third term. Concerned groups of teachers began to organise meetings to discuss problems and public outcry demanded a response from the Newman Government. Consequent to such complaints, the 2013 Parliamentary Inquiry into Assessment in Senior Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics was commissioned.

Alarmingly, in spite of sensible recommendations being made by the Inquiry Report, two years have since elapsed without any clear response from the Qld Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) and only on the 25th August has Education Queensland announced its intentions. The fundamental proposals of the ACER Review (2014) have been announced as ushering in an Education Revolution, which won't really take effect until 2018. **Senior assessment will be comprised of One External Assessment and three Internal Assessments.** No further detail is available at present.

So where do teachers and students find themselves now? **No relief from the burdens and tensions intrinsic to the assessment overload and misuse appear to be in sight** in the near future, **and no clear details have been announced as to how invalidity and unreliability of internal assessments are to be addressed**.

6. SUMMARY

The past 40 years have produced in Secondary education

- Over-complexity in assessment
- An overburden of assessment workload for students and teachers
- Poorly designed and articulated assessment criteria, because of the focus on "Higher Order Thinking" rather than subject knowledge and skills
- Secondary graduates who, in the main, do not carry forward required permanent knowledge to facilitate further studies
- A devastating loss of corporate capital caused by the resignations of many teachers who have left the profession because of the stringent adherence to the dogma of *The Blob* and its imperviousness to criticism from the profession.

And, in Primary Education

- Whole language reading method of teaching instead of teaching of phonics
- Inclusion of phonemic awareness (the vocal sounds associated with letters or letter groups from the alphabet), even at early ages, in teaching reading
- Unintelligible assessment matrices - Alarming over-complexity in requirements of assessing and reporting, particularly in the Early Childhood Sector. Complex academic language has been introduced into the assessments and reporting for the earliest levels of schooling, leaving parents and students bewildered.
- Complex social values have been loaded into assessment, requiring primary students to be critically aware of invited readings of texts and motivation behind texts, long before the children are really capable of straightforward comprehension of texts.
- Without realising the significance of arithmetic as a foundation for further mathematics, primary education has fostered a total reliance on calculators and computers and has produced an entire generation of students possessing very low knowledge of number facts and low mental calculation competency.

7. *THE BLOB* SHOULD BE REMOVED – NORMAL NEGOTIATIONS DON'T WORK

In a rational and democratic world, *The Blob* Bureaucracy would have responded to the problems in the education system long ago. Particularly, they would have responded to the Parliamentary Inquiry recommendations for the sensible reform of Senior Assessment in the Maths and Science subjects. Their stone-walling response shows how *The Blob* operate. Again and again they trot out the same sort of (perhaps well-meaning) rubbish, but the situation stays the same, some would say worsens.

The Blob have not recognized or acknowledged the complaints and have not learned from all the failures reported by the Parliamentary Inquiry. The series of failures described in this article illustrates that ***The Blob* will not self-reform**. **They must be removed and replaced by a smaller, more competent administration to implement a fair and transparent system, as used in all other Australian states. Such a new administration must then rely on the only valid quantitative data collected by the inquiry and reviews – an analysis of the submissions collected by the 2013 Parliamentary Inquiry.**

The body of submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry was highly polarised, as is shown in the Analysis Table and Graphs below (**See Figs. 1 and 2**).

The *non-Blob* submissions to the Parliamentary Inquiry (those submitted by parents, teachers both full-time and part-time, and professionals, as shown in the first four columns of the data) were resounding as to the solution to the problems. **These groups were strongly in favour of key reforms to Senior assessment and return to external exams, most importantly in the maths and science subjects.**

The data and graphs in **Section 8.** below, obtained by a rigorous analysis of the 288 submissions to the Inquiry, clearly indicate the strength of support *Plato-Qld* enjoys for many positive and pro-active changes.

By contrast, ***The Blob* responses came from Education Academics and Education Agencies including the QCAA**.

- The Fig. 1 graphs show how significantly their responses were in the minority.
- The Fig. 2 Table shows the Classification and Tally data, as well as the Analysis of the submissions to the Inquiry – this data gives rise to the graphs in Fig. 1.

8. ANALYSIS OF 2013 PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO ASSESSMENT IN SENIOR MATHS, CHEMISTRY AND PHYSICS

Figure 1.

Classification of Queensland submissions to The Parliamentary Inquiry into Senior Mathematics and Sciences Assessment based on stated profession.

Blue: Support change to use of marks and state-wide exams,

Red: Prefer social moderation, criteria marking and long written assignments.

Green: Undecided.

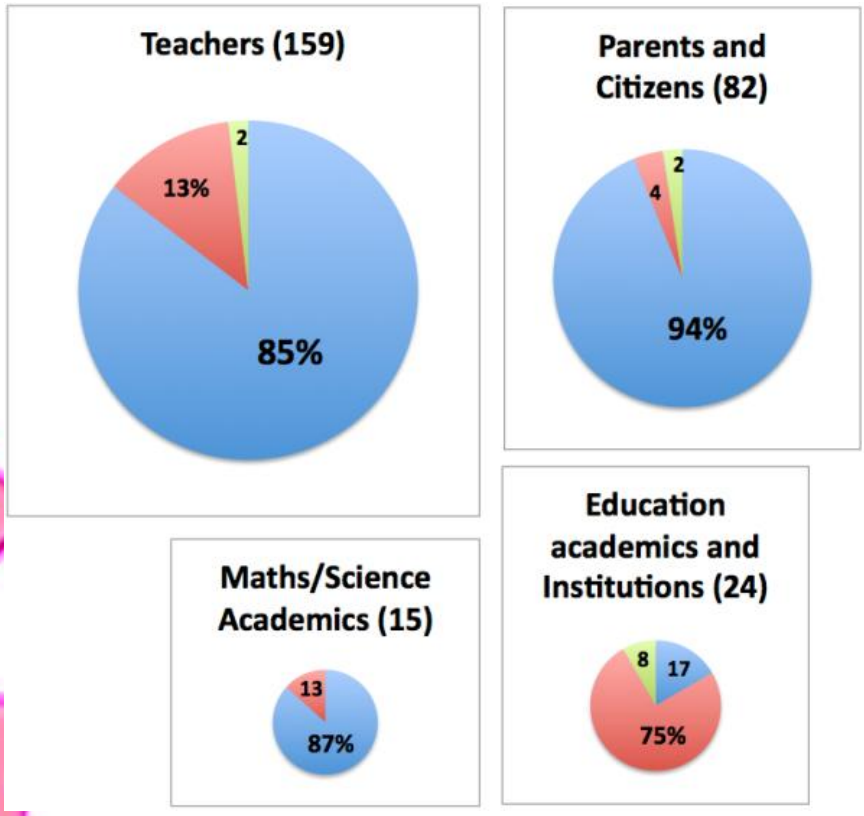

Figure 2.

Analysis of Submissions to the Qld Parliamentary Inquiry into Assessment in Senior Maths, Chemistry and Physics

	Parents, students, other professionals & 'not stated'		Teachers on a full teaching load		Teachers on a partial teaching load (HODS)		Maths or Science Discipline academics		Education academics		Education agencies (including QCAA itself)		Sub-totals for each group	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
FOR CHANGE *	77	94	115	96	21	54	13	87	2	13	2	13	230	**82**
AGAINST CHANGE *	3	4	3	2	17	44	2	13	6	75	12	75	43	**16**
NEUTRAL	2	2	2	2	1	2	0	0	0	13	2	13	7	**2**
TOTAL	82	100	120	100	39	100	15	100	8	100	16	100	280	**100 %**

* Those in favour of change/overhaul in Qld. i.e. want return to marks, tests and external state exams.

* Those who support the old ways currently under inquiry, i.e. criteria, assignments and social moderation.

Total submissions = 288 - 5 repeats + 3 confidential = 280 readable personal submissions.

See

http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/work-of-committees/committees/EIC/inquiries/current-inquiries/QldAssessment