

To: The Education and Innovation Committee eic@parliament.qld.gov.au

SMC&PA Submission 93
Received: 9 May 2013

Dear Committee Members,

I have been teaching mathematics and science for many years. I am extremely concerned about the QSA and their approach to assessment. The workload is excessive which is affecting all aspects of my professional and personal life. My preparation and student contact time is limited, as is the time I can spend with my young family. I find myself becoming more stressed than I should be when marking assignments and exams, and I submit this does not benefit the students making the exercise pointless. Frustration and anger about our system of assessment is a common theme running through the staff rooms at my school.

Perhaps more important is the damaging effect this assessment is having on the students. They have too many long written assignments, are staying up till very late and have insufficient time for regular revision of mathematics and science. In addition, we find that we have to spend increasing amounts of class time on doing these assignments as the student time which would be far more effectively spent teaching and practicing new material.

The criteria paragraphs which QSA call standards are very tedious and ineffective. They are subjective, ambiguous and unhelpful. It would be much more efficient to add up marks and award percentages, as has always been done, for the following reasons.

It seems universally accepted that feedback is a very important part of any assessment process. The value of this has to a large part been negated by the criteria approach to assessment. Almost without exception I have my students asking "What does this mean?" when trying to interpret their result. At parent-teacher interviews the parents are equally puzzled. The meaning of the result SHOULD be self evident but instead it has to be interpreted against vague and ambiguous criteria.

Then there is the small matter of consistency. I have seen three very experienced teachers (two with PhDs) marking the same piece of assessment in science using the same criteria, with the achievement moving from a D with the first, to a C, then to a B. How can any assessment system claim to be an accurate reflection of students' ability with this kind of variability?

Another important aspect with assessing mathematics primarily through long written assignments is the issue of who actually does the assignments. Is it the student, the parent, a tutor, or even an internet based assignment writing service? In contrast, tests and exams leave no doubt who is being assessed.

I am in favour of state-wide externally-set exams set by teams of experienced and currently practicing teachers and discipline experts, in preference to the current system of social moderation. For more on this topic please read "External Beats Internal" by Dr Kevin Donnelly attached.

Thank you for your patience and consideration.

Sincerely,



David Best
(Mathematics and Biology/science Teacher, *currently* Runcorn State High School)

External beats internal

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=14921>

The Queensland government is currently holding an inquiry into assessment methods related to senior mathematics, chemistry and physics. It's about time – primarily, because the assessment model used in Queensland is substandard, flawed and lacking in credibility.

In its promotional video detailing school-based assessment and moderation the Queensland Studies Authority boasts that its system is "unique". When it comes to Year 12 that is certainly true as every other system across Australia, except for the ACT, relies primarily on externally set and examined examinations in the final year of schooling.

The reasons why the other states, and the most successful overseas education systems as measured by international tests, prefer externally set examinations under supervised conditions is a simple one – the alternative involving school based moderation doesn't work.

The first problem in allowing senior school students to complete assessment tasks over time and outside the classroom, often with the help of parents or paid tutors, is that it leads to cheating.

While teachers might spend hours and hours trying to verify students' work to ensure it's genuine, the reality is that it is often impossible to tell who's responsible. That's aside from the fact that how do you draw the line between constructive outside help and somebody taking over and completing the student's work for them.

Associated with cheating is the time consuming nature of school-based assessment as instead of a 2 or 3 hour examination to prepare for students spend weeks and weeks drafting and completing projects and work requirements that leave little time for additional learning.

The second problem with moderation, a situation where groups of teachers across the state meet to try and ensure consistency of marking, is that it is impossible to guarantee that the grade or mark given to the work of one student is comparable to another.

Notwithstanding the claims by the Queensland Study Authority it is impossible to guarantee that a grade or mark given to a student's work in Cairns, Mt Isa or Brisbane is equivalent to a student living elsewhere in the state.

Compare that situation to externally set examinations where a group of markers meet together in one place over a set time with an agreed criteria for marking and regular feedback, involving statistical checks, to ensure consistency of marking.

Unlike the situation in Queensland, an added benefit of externally set and marked examinations is that all students are on a level playing field as they sit the same test under the same conditions and it is impossible to cheat as the test is supervised.

Compare that to the situation with school-based assessment and moderation where a wealthy, privileged student from a comfortable home has far more help and resources to draw on than a disadvantaged student from a poor background.

The fact that school-based moderation is costly, ineffective and educationally unsound explains why Victoria, after experimenting with such an approach during the early 90s, abandoned it in favour of the more traditional end of year, externally set and marked formal examinations.

It's also the case that research by the European academic Ludger Woessman and the US based John Bishop demonstrates that what they term externally set, exit examinations are one of the characteristics of stronger performing, more successful education systems.

In addition to being credible, reliable and more equitable than school-based assessment and moderation, external set and marked examinations provide a powerful incentive for schools and students to try and outdo one another.

The competitive nature of such exams, and the fact that they are often seen as prestigious and reputable, mean that they are taken seriously as a school's reputation can rise or fall on the results achieved.

No wonder Margaret Thatcher when Prime Minister referred to the English A-Levels as the 'gold standard' in assessment. Such examinations, in addition to being externally set and marked, have the additional benefit of being academically rigorous and a sound preparation for university education.

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About the Author

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