

# P–12 syllabus design principles

Queensland’s education system, like other education systems nationally and internationally, is challenged with creating the conditions to achieve high-quality and high-equity educational outcomes for all students.

The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) has been working in partnership with school sectors towards achieving broad goals for educational excellence and equity based upon:

- high expectations and standards for all students
- improved educational outcomes for all students
- improved public trust in schools and the education system.

These goals are becoming a reality through the introduction of the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines*, the Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (QCAR) Framework and the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). In this context, a key question for the QSA is:

## *How do the QSA syllabus documents help schools and school systems meet these goals?*

Current curriculum debates have focused on questions of curriculum content — variously interpreted as disciplinary knowledge, cultural values, ideologies, specific skill sets and competencies. However, the technical form of the syllabus — its shape and features — has been neglected in these debates. Yet, research shows the technical form, when properly supported, can set up the school and classroom conditions to improve outcomes for all students.

The syllabus principles and design elements described here are based on research commissioned by the QSA and undertaken by Professor Allan Luke. This research, including an international literature review and seven expert papers by leading curriculum scholars, found that high-quality and high-equity educational outcomes for students are achieved when the syllabus design is based on a balance of “informed prescription” and “informed professionalism”. That is:

- a central, concise and consistent syllabus design applied to all syllabuses from the Preparatory Year to Year 12
- increased professionalism of teachers
- accountability of the system.

## What is a syllabus?

A syllabus is an official “map” of a school subject. It provides teachers with:

- a rationale and outline of the school subject
- an overview and specification of what should be taught and learned
- guidance on applying centralised standards to assess students to ensure that classroom and school-level assessment aligns with systemic practices.

The syllabus is not the curriculum. The curriculum is the sum total of the teaching and learning resources used in classrooms and other learning environments. The syllabus sets the parameters for the curriculum, aiming to shape and influence the curriculum in use.

## What is a school subject?

A school subject is a distinctive, purpose-built and targeted unit of study. It is constructed by selecting from particular disciplines and applied fields of knowledge and by responding to different social, cultural and political demands and challenges. The relationship between the school subject and disciplinary or applied fields of knowledge varies, depending on the phase of learning.

## What syllabus design principles support high quality and high equity?

The principle underpinning syllabus design for a high-quality and high-equity system is a low-definition syllabus that balances informed prescription and informed professionalism.

A low-definition syllabus outlines “expected” coverage and standards without attempting to “script” or “control” pedagogy or instructional approach.

Following the principle of “low-definition” syllabuses, each syllabus will:

- be succinct — the length will be determined by the task of “mapping” the school subject
- be written in teacher-accessible professional language
- refer teachers to authorised resources on materials selection, unit and lesson planning, assessment, pedagogical strategies and the specific needs for identifiable student groups, including Indigenous students, students with special needs, migrant, rural and socioeconomically marginalised students.

From the school’s perspective, this type of streamlined syllabus should do two things:

- It should stand as an “informed prescription”. That is, the syllabus should set out what is essential, in clear and plain language. Informed prescription emphasises centralised standards and syllabus mandates.
- It should establish the conditions for “informed professionalism”. That is, teachers exercise their professional judgment to shape and modify the syllabus, pedagogy and teacher-based assessment.

## Design elements for QSA syllabuses

The following design elements for low-definition syllabuses set the enabling conditions for achieving high-quality and high-equity educational outcomes. This is achieved by a balance between informed prescription and informed professionalism.

### 1. Syllabus coverage — Phases of learning

Across Prep to Year 12 there will be three phases of learning: Early, Middle and Senior. Each phase will have a specific and distinctive developmental focus that aligns with the overall system's goals of high quality and high equity. There will be a syllabus for each school subject for each phase of learning.

#### Early phase: Equity of access

Early phase syllabuses will focus on proficiency in early literacy and numeracy.

The developmental focus on *access* accommodates current early childhood philosophies that recognise the diverse cultural, experiential, cognitive and social resources that children bring to formal education.

#### Middle phase: Equity of engagement

Middle phase syllabuses will continue the focus on literacy and numeracy through a broad and general education including social, cultural, scientific, technological and aesthetic learning.

The developmental focus on *engagement* accommodates issues of participation, motivation, identity, youth and community cultures that research shows commonly arise in the middle years.

#### Senior phase: Equity of pathways

Senior phase syllabuses will focus on the multiple pathways through schooling to further education, work and gainful and active participation in democratic society.

The developmental focus on *pathways* accommodates the different aspirations, orientations and capacities of students.

### 2. Syllabus rationale

Each syllabus will have a rationale which includes brief statements about:

- **the school subject:** a statement of the philosophy and logic of the school subject, noting key developments and benchmarks in research on the subject
- **the educational goals:** the overall purposes of the school subject, noting benefits and value, associated learning during the particular phase and links to earlier and later learning
- **the learners:** a description of the phase, age and developmental issues of the diverse communities of learners to whom the school subject will be taught (e.g. by gender, language, cultural background, age, location, special needs).

### 3. Syllabus content

Each syllabus will identify the key components of the school subject (e.g. English might include writing, reading) and for each key component, the required learning (e.g. writing might include identifying topic, purpose and audience). The key components and their required learning will be expected for all students.

The required learning will be expressed as clear, simple and concise statements that are useful for teachers. A “teacher prompt” to illustrate the required learning will accompany each statement.

Depending on the school subject and phase of learning, the required learning may be expressed as content knowledge statements, skills and behaviours, tasks and performances, processes, competencies, capacities and experiences.

### 4. Syllabus standards

Each syllabus will include the standards of learning and standards of assessment to guide teacher judgment. They will be framed as “aspirational” targets for students and teachers to work towards, and will also be used for reporting achievement.

The standards statements will be based on an agreed model of cross-curricular capabilities and be consistent across school subject and phase of learning. This will develop a common vocabulary for teachers, students and parents for describing student performance in and across school subjects.

### 5. Assessment

Each syllabus will include specific guidance on school-based assessment practices and strategies appropriate to the school subject and phase of learning.

Each syllabus will indicate where systemic standardised testing programs and mandated moderated assessment are linked to required learning. This will guide the development of systemic, school and classroom assessment and moderation (where appropriate).

## Alignment with systemic policies

The syllabus principles and design elements proposed here set enabling conditions for informed professionalism in pedagogy and assessment, aimed at high-quality and high-equity student achievement. It is a design that aligns with education and training reforms already underway.

However, it only sets the enabling conditions. The success of this syllabus design is contingent on the effective alignment of other systemic policies and resources, including:

- the development of accessible teacher professional resources
- a commitment to cross-sectoral and interagency collaboration
- ongoing comprehensive professional development
- clearly aligned pre-service teacher education.

## Conclusion

The principles and the syllabus design elements provide a practical approach for syllabus writing and support the policy directions of the Queensland Studies Authority and employing authorities.

This approach to the technical design of syllabuses — low-definition, balancing informed prescription with informed professionalism — will contribute to delivering excellence and equity for all Queensland students, from Prep to Year 12.