

# The development of the *P–12 assessment policy* in Queensland, Australia

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## Overview

Australia is comprised of a federation of six states and two territories. While the states and territories maintain their own separate education systems, the beginning of the 21st century has seen strong support for more uniformity of education, and Australian Government oversight of curriculum and assessment from the Preparatory Year to Year 12.

Queensland is the third largest state in Australia. It has a population of a little over four million with a little under two million living in the capital city, Brisbane, in the state's south-east corner. Queensland covers an area of over 1.7 million square kilometres and the distance from the northernmost islands to the capital city is more than 2 500 kilometres.

Queensland has over 1600 schools offering education from Prep to Year 10 and about 400 schools offering education up to Year 12. There are approximately 55 000 students in each year level from Prep to Year 10, and around 45 000 students will complete Year 12 this year. The national language and language of instruction in schools is Standard Australian English.

Curriculum and assessment in Queensland are regulated by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA). The QSA is a statutory authority established by the *Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Act 2002*. The QSA administers an assessment program ranging from Prep to Year 12 (P–12). This P–12 assessment program is outlined in Appendix 1.

The QSA's *P–12 assessment policy* encompasses a variety of assessment programs in the P–12 years of schooling. While school-based assessment has operated across all phases of schooling, the focus of assessment has been on the senior phase of learning (the “high-stakes” end), from which students emerge with qualifications that enable them to enter tertiary education, training or the work force.

The policy has been influenced by a number of historical factors. It has been developed within a context of emerging negotiation among the Australian Government and state governments about the control and content of curriculum and assessment programs. These discussions are taking place within the framework of a national curriculum and a national assessment program. In formulating the policy, the QSA has stated what it values about assessment. The policy presents a clear platform from which the QSA can operate in the federal sphere.

## Historical influences on the *P–12 assessment policy*

Queensland differs from most Australian states and territories in having adopted externally-moderated school-based assessment in 1971 — not only for certification at the end of Year 12 but also for tertiary entrance purposes. In the years leading up to 1971, the formal assessment program in Queensland comprised an external examination at the end of Year 10 and an external examination at the end of Year 12. Students' results in these examinations were then reported on the Junior Certificate or Senior Certificate.

### **Radford Report**

In May 1970 the *Radford Report* (Radford 1970) recommended that the junior and senior examinations be replaced by school assessment and the Junior and Senior Certificates be awarded on the basis of school assessment. The committee which prepared the report considered that the certificates would be acceptable if the standards of assessment upon which they were

based were comparable from school to school and from student to student. The report recommended that a Board of Secondary School Studies be responsible for maintaining comparability of the gradings to appear on the certificates and this be done through a moderation system.

The *Radford Report* also gave the Board of Secondary School Studies<sup>1</sup> the responsibility to approve syllabuses that would outline courses of study with clearly stated objectives.

The recommendations of the *Radford Report* were accepted and the last external junior examination was held in 1971 and the last senior external examination was held in 1972.

### ***Review of School-based Assessment in Queensland Secondary Schools (ROSBA)***

The system of externally-moderated school-based assessment for the awarding of the Junior and Senior Certificates was reviewed in 1979. While the *ROSBA Report* supported the continuation of externally-moderated school-based assessment, it made a number of recommendations to improve the system. The following report recommendations were pertinent to this paper:

- Syllabuses should include global aims and general objectives.
- The general objectives should be set out in four dimensions for each subject (cognitive skills; factual knowledge; practical skills; and attitudes, values and feelings).
- Syllabuses should contain competency criteria to be applied to the first three areas of general objectives to determine the student's level of competence.
- The norm-based assessment procedures be replaced by competency-based procedures.
- Five levels of achievement should be reported on the Junior and Senior Certificates for each subject.

The *ROSBA Report* recommended that the Board of Secondary School Studies support the following statement regarding the purposes of assessment:

#### *The purposes of assessment are*

- *to enable the student to assess his/her learning and to provide information which can be used to correct deficiencies in his/her learning*
- *to enable teachers and students to modify teaching/learning programs to suit the needs of the students*
- *ultimately to provide the student and parents with information concerning the student's achievement and potential*
- *to assist students and parents in determining future education and employment pathways*
- *to provide, for other educational institutions and employers, an indication of the suitability and readiness of the student to undertake further education and/or employment. (Scott 1978, p. 11)*

This statement was adopted. It provided a succinct declaration that, in an environment of high-stakes certification, the prime purposes of assessment are those of improving teaching and learning.

The major thrusts of the recommendations of the *ROSBA Report* were implemented. However, the notion of competency-based assessment was replaced by one of criteria-based assessment. Revised syllabuses had criteria for the award of the five levels of achievement stated in the three dimensions in which the assessable general objectives were stated.

In 1986 the Board of Secondary School Studies created an Assessment Unit headed by Professor Royce Sadler from The University of Queensland. The Assessment Unit produced a number of

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<sup>1</sup> The Board of Secondary School Studies was amalgamated with two other statutory authorities in 2003 to form the Queensland Studies Authority.

papers which guided the revision of syllabuses under ROSBA and provided theoretical and operational frameworks for the implementation of the recommendations of the *ROSBA Report*

The first of these papers, *ROSBA's Family Connections* (Sadler 1986a) laid the ground-work for a system of externally-moderated school-based assessment based on syllabuses with explicitly stated descriptions of the standards to be achieved by students.

*Standards-based assessment is clearly a local variety of criterion-referenced assessment and has drawn on the literature and experience elsewhere for its inspiration. In particular it shares a concern for definitive grade specifications that set out what various Levels of Achievement are to consist of taking into account the various types of objectives and outcomes. But there are some points of differences. . . . standards-based assessment is less concerned than the criterion-referenced testing movement generally with measurement as such, and with determining cut-off scores for mastery. It recognizes the key role of the qualitative professional judgements of classroom teachers, both in the evaluation of individual pieces of work, and in the integrating of that information to decide on a level of achievement. . . .*

*As we are finding out, the theory of a standards-based assessment is disarmingly simple but the practice is extraordinarily difficult. But having got this coveted ball in our court, we are going to see where we can hit it to maximize the good effects (Sadler 1986a, 7)*

For the last 20 years the QSA and its predecessors have implemented and refined a system of standards-based assessment in Years 11 and 12. The assessment system is connected to syllabuses which have a substantial assessment section in them. The accountability for, and comparability of, reported standards have been achieved through a system of externally-moderated school-based assessment.

### ***Viviani Report***

For many years the major selection tool for entry to tertiary institutions from schools in the Australian states and territories has been tertiary entrance ranks. These ranks are calculated using various statistical methods to combine students' results in different subjects.

In 1989, the Queensland Government decided to abolish the Queensland version of these ranks, the Tertiary Entrance Score, as the main method of university entrance. Professor Nancy Viviani was commissioned to review the system and recommend an alternative. One of Nancy Viviani's recommendations was to replace the scaling test with a new test to be called the Core Skills Test (Viviani 1990).

What became known as the Queensland Core Skills (QCS) Test is comprised of two multiple-choice papers, a short-response paper and a writing task. It is not a subject-specific test. It tests the common curriculum elements (CCEs) that were identified in an analysis of all the syllabuses for senior subjects (Allen et al 1992).

The major purpose of the QCS Test is to scale group results between subjects, both within schools and between schools. This enables compiling of order of merit ranks. Additionally, students' individual results are reported on a five-point scale on their Statements of Results at the end of Year 12. The QCS Test is an important part of the assessment regime in Queensland's senior phase of learning.

### ***National curriculum profiles and Queensland standards***

From 1991 to 1993, Queensland participated in the collaborative development of national curriculum profiles that identified outcomes at each of eight levels spanning Years 1–12 for eight key learning areas (KLAs). The narrative of the national profiles was that the outcomes should

guide (and presumably therefore change) the curriculum and also be used as criteria for determining levels of achievement (i.e., the outcomes were “operationalised” goals and hence assessable). In Queensland, the narrative was that the existing syllabus could be used for curriculum planning while the outcomes (or “standards”) could be used for reporting. Needless to say, the implementation of standards in this form met with considerable resistance from schools.

### ***Shaping the Future***

Early in 1994, the report of the Review of the Queensland School Curriculum, known as *Shaping the Future* recommended both a move to an outcomes approach and the setting up of a statutory authority to take cross-sectoral responsibility for the development of syllabuses with explicitly defined learning outcomes for Years 1–10, and for assessment, reporting and accreditation (Wiltshire 1994). The report also recommended maintaining the existing approach to senior secondary assessment and reporting (including tertiary admission) while suggesting some enhancement of assessment pedagogy.

The first standardised literacy and numeracy test in Queensland resulted from the *Shaping the Future* report. Initially the literacy and numeracy test was administered to a sample of Year 6 students in 1995. After negotiations with all Australian education ministers in the late 1990s, the literacy and numeracy tests became full-cohort state-based tests in Years 3, 5 and 7. The full-cohort tests were implemented for the first time in 2000. They were closely aligned with the syllabuses for English and Mathematics and the literacy and numeracy contexts were aligned with the syllabuses for the other key learning areas. While national statistics were reported on the percentage of students who reached minimal-performance scores, the tests had a diagnostic focus, presenting detailed data to each school and providing individual reports to students and parents/carers.

*Shaping the Future* also recommended the introduction of a Year 2 early age “net” whereby the diagnosis of the literacy and numeracy levels of all students after 18 months in the compulsory school system would be made. The *Year 2 Diagnostic Net* is currently being revised in order to align it with new curriculum documents and provide modern materials for students to engage with.

### ***Education Queensland and the New Basics Framework***

In 1999, Education Queensland<sup>2</sup> commenced a project resulting in *The New Basics Framework*. The *New Basics Framework* provides an alternative conceptual and organisational framework for the curriculum. It reflected the demands “new times” make on students and hence on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. The New Basics were organised around four clusters – Life Pathways and Social Futures, Active Citizenship, Multiliteracies and Communications Media, and Environments and Technologies. Rather than planning, assessing and reporting against learning outcomes linked to the strands of the KLAs, learning outcomes were defined in terms of student demonstrations of their learning on Rich (transdisciplinary) Tasks.

### ***Assessment and Reporting Taskforce***

In November 2001, the Director-General of Education released a report titled *Report of the Assessment and Reporting Taskforce* (Varghese 2002). The report concluded that the more pressing need was to grow an assessment culture in Education Queensland based on the principles set out in the report. Two of the challenging tasks to be implemented by an Assessment and Reporting Unit were to develop and trial a standards framework, and to design and trial a moderation process to help teachers make consistent judgments about standards of student work.

The *Report of the Assessment and Reporting Taskforce* listed 13 principles for an Assessment and Reporting Framework for Years 1–10. These principles highlighted the following:

- interrelatedness of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

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<sup>2</sup> “Education Queensland” is the corporate name for the Department of Education.

- assessment is an ongoing and integral part of the teaching and learning process
- the importance of informed teacher judgment
- reported judgments of student achievement need to be defensible and comparable, based on sound evidence and shared understanding of standards (Varghese 2002, p. 5).

## **Current context for the development of the *P–12 assessment policy***

### ***Queensland context***

#### *Early Years*

*Early Years Curriculum Guidelines* and an Early Learning and Development Framework have been implemented in association with the introduction of the Preparatory year for all Queensland schools. Unlike the KLA syllabuses, the combined documents serve to systematically integrate planning and assessment processes. The focus is on making valid judgments about children's learning and development, and on building a record to establish readiness for schooling and reporting to Year 1 teachers.

#### *Years 1–9*

All Australian governments endorsed National Statements of Learning at the end of Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in English, Mathematics, Science, Civics and Citizenship, and ICT. School authorities agreed to align their curricula with these statements by 2008. In Queensland, the *Essential Learnings*, as part of the Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (QCAR) Framework project, incorporate the National Statements of Learning.

QCAR forms part of Phase 2 of the Queensland Government's Smart State Strategy. The development of the Framework has been undertaken by the QSA. There are five components of the Framework — *Essential Learnings*, *Standards*, *Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks* (QCATs), an online *Assessment Bank*, and *Guidelines for Reporting* (Drazek et al 2007, p. 5).

The focus of the QCAR Framework is improvement. It is about improving:

- the clarity of KLA syllabus documents
- the consistency of what is taught across Queensland
- the capacity of teachers to assess and make informed judgments about student work against commonly applied standards
- the capacity of teachers to use information about student learning to inform future teaching programs
- the feedback given to students about their learning
- the comparability of student reports to parents and carers.

#### *Years 10–12*

The QSA has cross-sectoral responsibility for moderation for Years 11 and 12 Authority subjects<sup>3</sup> and quality assurance of Authority-registered subjects. The Year 11 and 12 approach to assessment and reporting is regarded to be robust and has considerable support from teachers and the broader community.

Vocational education and training (VET) certificates and subjects are offered in accordance with the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), based on nationally accredited training packages. The assessment practices associated with the AQTF share some features in common with standards-based assessment but they also have a distinctive feature of being "competency-based".

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<sup>3</sup> Results in Authority subjects are used to compile the order of merit ranks for tertiary entrance.

The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) is Queensland's new senior school qualification to be awarded to eligible students for the first time in December 2008. The QCE encompasses a broad range of learning — learning that can be undertaken in a variety of places, in numerous ways, and over more flexible time periods. It also requires students to achieve a significant amount of learning at a set standard, and to meet requirements in literacy and numeracy.

#### *Years P–12*

A research report prepared for the QSA by Allan Luke, *Development of a Set of Principles to Guide a P–12 Framework* (Luke et al 2008), argues for a syllabus design informed by international findings, directions and benchmarks and based on a balance of informed prescription and informed professionalism. The report argues that each syllabus should have guiding statements of philosophy, aims, recognition of distinctive learner cohorts and their needs, brief statements of essential expected learnings, related standards, and some detail of approaches to assessment.

#### **National context**

The strengthening of QSA's assessment capability is being undertaken at a time when the initial phases of the development of a national curriculum are being undertaken.

*Year 12 Curriculum content and achievement standards* (Matters et al 2007), a report commissioned by the Australian Government, was published in January 2007. The conclusions can be summarised by the following statement:

*The challenge as we see it is to set clear statements of core curriculum content within which schools and teachers have flexibility in relation to teaching strategies and learning contexts. An additional challenge is to set clear achievement standards which allow different methods of assessment, but which provide comparable student results* (Matters et al 2007, ix).

In September 2007, the Council for the Australian Federation published the *Federalist paper 2: the future of schooling in Australia*. This paper proposed eight areas of work and 14 actions. The areas pertinent to this paper are:

- working towards national curricula
- testing to improve student achievement
- reporting performance.

The new Australian Government formed in November 2007 has continued the movement initiated by the previous government, on the pertinent areas stated in the paper.

In January 2008, the Australian Prime Minister and the Minister for Education, Minister for Employment & Workplace Relations, and Minister for Social Inclusion, announced the appointment of Professor Barry McGaw as the Chair of the Australian Government's new National Curriculum Board. The Board is to oversee the development of curriculum for all Australian students from kindergarten to Year 12, starting with English, Mathematics, the Sciences and History by 2010, for implementation by jurisdictions by 2011.

A Working Party under the direction of the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) has also worked on the development of a conceptual framework for the development of core content and Year 12 achievement standards. The final report of this Working Party (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2007, p. 4) concluded that the standards shown in student work can be validly compared across jurisdictions.

The previous Australian Government had (with the agreement of state and territory governments) moved from state-based full-cohort literacy and numeracy tests in Years 3, 5, and 7 to full-cohort national literacy and numeracy tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The new tests are called the National

Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The first of these national tests was conducted in May 2008.

As stated previously, the major purpose of the Queensland-developed tests was diagnostic and the tests were connected to the Queensland syllabuses. The major purpose of the NAPLAN is to provide data on how well students and schools are performing. There has been adverse reaction to the production of league tables based on results from the NAPLAN from a number of states including the State of Queensland. This matter has yet to be resolved.

While current claims for the NAPLAN is that it is connected to the National Statements of Learning and state curricula, there has not been a test framework to support these claims. The process for developing the first test entailed the collection of items with certain data characteristics rather than the development of items that validly tested student achievement of curriculum intentions.

The NAPLAN is currently being coordinated by the Curriculum Corporation located in Melbourne, the capital city of the State of Victoria. The Curriculum Corporation is a partnership of all Australian Governments. It undertakes activities that are in the national interest and that support and the work of the states and territories.

Quite recently, AESOC has considered the establishment of a National Schools Assessment and Data Centre (NSDAC). The NSDAC is to be formed in 2009 and it is to oversee the National Assessment Program and the collection of data and reporting on outcomes and measures agreed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

## **Analysis of historical and current influences**

The Queensland Studies Authority's *P–12 assessment policy* has been developed in an environment rich in a range of assessment practices and previously un-collated assessment policy settlements. The *P–12 assessment policy* has been developed at a time in which the probability of national initiatives in the area of curriculum and assessment are more likely to be enacted than any time in the past.

There are common themes evident in the reports examined in the section "Historical Influences on the *P–12 assessment policy*" earlier in this paper. These are summarised below:

- The prime purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning.
- Assessment is ongoing and an integral part of teaching and learning.
- Teachers are at the heart of a good assessment system.
- Assessment is geared towards determining how well students have achieved what syllabuses state students should achieve.
- Assessment should be standards-based.
- When the results of assessment are reportedly formally, the grades reported need to be defensible and comparable from school to school.
- The best way of attaining defensible and comparable reported grades is through a system of moderation.
- Externally-moderated school-based assessment can be complemented by standardised testing programs.

The national agenda is clearly one of centralising Australian curriculum and assessment programs. The NAPLAN, the establishment of the National Curriculum Board, planning for a National Schools Assessment and Data Centre, and the Australian Government's commitment to reporting individual school results from the NAPLAN, are the early indicators of this agenda. In the context of the Federation of Australian States, there will need to be considerable discussion and negotiation before the full governance arrangements for the implementation of this agenda can be put in place.

It is important that Queensland have a consolidated assessment platform on which the State can base its stance on what is important about assessment and reporting, what can be negotiated, and what must be preserved.

## **The QSA's P–12 assessment policy**

The QSA's *P–12 assessment policy* and full *P–12 assessment overview* accompany this paper. They will be distributed at the conference session and are available at <[www.qsa.qld.edu.au/assessment/3111.html](http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au/assessment/3111.html)>.

The *P–12 assessment policy* is formulated under eight headings:

- Overview
- QSA's responsibility for assessment
- Purposes of assessment
- Principles of assessment
- Assessment instruments
- Reporting the results of assessment
- QSA's assessment capability
- Teachers' assessment capabilities.

The policy has been informed by the various historical settlements stated previously and these are evident in the policy. Additionally, the policy states the QSA's stance on issues that will be debated in the national context.

The first words of the policy resonate with the informed practices developed over the last four decades:

*Students in Queensland benefit from a formal program of standards-based assessment. The major purposes of an assessment program are to improve teaching, help students achieve the highest standards they can within their own capabilities, and provide meaningful reports to parents/carers on students' achievements (QSA 2008, p. 1).*

In the national context, the policy states the QSA's stance on a number of issues:

- Assessment must assess in terms of syllabus specifications.
- Social moderation of teachers' judgments is the best system of ensuring comparability of standards across Queensland.
- When school-based assessment is complemented by standardised assessment programs designed to measure the health of a system, these assessment programs are best conducted as periodic sample tests.
- The QSA does not support the identification of individual school results during the public reporting of whole-cohort standardised testing results.
- The QSA has a proactive stance on the appropriate representation of different kinds of cultural knowledge and experience (especially indigenous knowledge and experience) in its syllabuses and assessment practices.

To continue Sadler's (1986, p. 7) tennis analogy: Queensland has a coveted ball in its court, but there is likely to be a very long rally involving more than the usual number of players if we are to hit the ball to the best advantage of all the players in the Federation of Australian States and Territories.

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## Appendix 1

### Queensland P–12 assessment overview

Assessment program and approximate student numbers annually	Year level	Purpose
Early Learning Record 55 000 students	Prep	Build a picture of children's learning and development during Prep and on transition to Year 1
Year 2 Diagnostic Net 55 000 students	1–3	Monitor students' progress in literacy and numeracy. Diagnose individual learning needs in literacy & numeracy
National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy 230 000 students	3, 5, 7, 9	Report comparable data across states and territories, including percentages of students meeting benchmarks in reading, writing and numeracy Improve teaching and learning
Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks (QCATs) in English, Maths and Science Extended trial 2008 165 000 students in 2009	4, 6, 9	Improve student learning and develop consistency of teachers' judgments about student work Support teachers' assessment capabilities
Externally-moderated school-based assessment for Authority subjects 40 000 students by the end of Year 12	10–12	Provide comparable levels of achievement for the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) and a basis for Subject Achievement Indicators (SAIs) for Overall Positions (OPs) and Field Positions (FPs)

Assessment program and approximate student numbers annually	Year level	Purpose
Quality-assured school-based assessment for Authority-registered subjects 23 000 students by the end of Year 12	10–12	Students to obtain credible levels of achievement for the QCE and tertiary entrance (TE) schedules
Workplace, Community and Self-directed Learning Projects (WCS)	10–12	Students to complete projects for credit towards the QCE
Vocational education and training (VET) 23 000 students by the end of Year 12	10–12	Students to complete or partially complete courses/qualifications to obtain credit for the QCE Students to complete or partially complete in order to move to employment or further training
Senior External Examination 700 candidates annually	12	Provide comparable levels of achievement for some students in some subjects for the QCE and TE requirements
Queensland Core Skills (QCS) Test 29 000 students annually	12	Provide scaling parameters for the calculation of student Overall Positions (OPs) and Field Positions (FPs) for entrance to Queensland tertiary institutions Provide scaling parameters for the calculation of Interstate Transfer Indices for students moving interstate
Individual achievements 600 students by the end of Year 12	11–12	Record student achievement on Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement