



## **Queensland Review of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance**

**External assessment, external exams:  
What's the difference?**

Australian Council *for* Educational Research



## External assessment, external exams: What's the difference?

The review's proposal to re-model the secondary-tertiary interface includes the introduction of "external assessment" into a system of school-based assessment.

A student's Subject Result would be derived from three (possibly four) School Assessments (SAs) and one External Assessment (EA). The SAs would be set and marked by teachers in their own schools. The EA would be set annually by the QSA and marked externally by that authority. The weighting of the EA could be as high as 50% depending on the nature of the subject.

We are often asked the question: What is the difference between external assessments and external exams? This short paper aims to answer that question from several perspectives.

Table 1 takes four well-known assessment regimes and gives an example of each of them in operation.

*Table 1: Operational examples of four assessment schemes*

Assessment scheme	Example
External exam	HSC, set and marked by the NSW Board of Studies, based on a subject syllabus
School assessment	All of the assessment methods used in QLD's school-based assessment system, set and marked by teachers, based on a subject syllabus
Internal exam	One of many assessment methods used in QLD's school-based assessment system, set and marked by teachers, based on a subject syllabus
External assessment	Being considered in this review, set and marked by QSA, based on a subject syllabus, has some unique features but is not radically different from an external exam or some types of school assessment – just the best of both worlds

In the table above the HSC is taken as the example of an external exam only because it is so often referred to in conversations.

All assessments can be classified in terms of who sets and marks them.

Table 2 classifies assessments in terms of their locus of control – external or internal – for setting and marking.

*In the review's proposal, results from school assessments and an external assessment are combined to give a subject result*

*External assessment has a place in a classification system for various assessment regimes*

*External exams and external assessments are set and marked by an agency external to the school*

Table 2: Locus of control various assessments

		setting	
		EXTERNAL Centrally devised	INTERNAL Teacher devised
marking	EXTERNAL Centrally organised	External examination QCS Test External assessment	University thesis
	INTERNAL School responsibility	QCATs Rich Tasks (New Basics)	School Assessment End-of-semester test (internal examination) Project, report, investigation, oral, artefact, practical work, performance, presentation, essay, collection of short-response items, mid-semester test etc.

Seven hours for the QCS Test

Two hours for the External Assessment

School assessments in Queensland include projects, reports, investigations, orals, practical work, performances, presentations, essays, mid-semester tests, and production of artefacts

The introduction of an external assessment would enhance validity

The proposed external assessment is not exactly the same as an external exam

It is possible to have an examination that is not external. The end-of-semester test or exam for Year 12s is not unusual in Queensland schools under a system of school-based assessment. It has all the properties of an external exam except that it is set and marked by teachers in the school.

School assessment in the form of an end-of-semester test could actually be called an **internal exam** because they have so much in common. Both are designed to function according to the definition of an examination: to assess “the attainment and skill of students in a particular subject, whether by objective-type or conventional written, oral or practical questions” and “all of the papers refer to a syllabus”.

Typically, an **external exam** has a “paper” (or two) for a particular subject and the questions on the paper are unknown to students in advance of the exam. All students do the exam on the same day at the same time, with the same restrictions on equipment (e.g. pencil or pen and paper, calculator or not), and are given the same time to complete the exam (3 hours is the norm). The exam is closely supervised. The end-of-semester test that is part of the assessment program for some subjects in Queensland, and which has been labelled an “internal exam” above, has similar features although the exam might be of two hours’ duration rather than three. The key difference is the locus of control.

The point being made here is that the exam experience is not foreign to Queensland students. Nor is it associated with the senior public exams of the period from about 1890 to 1972. The same is the case for Queensland teachers unless they are older than 60 or were educated outside Queensland.

It is worth mentioning here that the QCS Test is not an external exam even though it does have an external locus of control (set by QSA) and is administered under standardised conditions. But it is not subject-specific and based on a subject syllabus; it assesses cross-curriculum skills. It belongs to a family of tests that are developed according to some technical specifications not elaborated on here. An

aspect of QCS Test pertinent to this discussion is that it is of seven hours' duration (over two days) compared with the two hours proposed for the new external assessment.

In Queensland's current system of school-based assessment, teachers devise and mark the assessments – projects, reports, investigations, orals, artefacts, practical work, performances, presentations, essays, rich tasks, constructed responses, mid-semester tests and so on. The locus of control is internal (moderation brings an external quality assurance element – not relevant in this discussion) and the variation in assessment modes is vast. We use the term **school assessment** rather than school-based assessment to describe teachers-devised assessments and reserve the term school-based assessment for describing the system. School assessments have the capacity to provide evidence of student achievement that is not possible to obtain from an external exam.

The point being made here is that a combination of School Assessment and External Assessment is more valid than one of those assessments alone.

### What is the external assessment in the review's proposed model?

Is it the same as an external exam? Table 3 compares and contrasts the proposed external assessment and an HSC-like exam.

*Table 3: Traditional external exam and proposed external assessment*

Feature of the assessment	External exam	External assessment
Assesses achievement in a subject based on a syllabus	Y	Y
Set and marked by an agency external to the school	Y	Y
Same assessment for all students in that subject across the state	Y	Y
Common conditions (time limit, equipment allowed and so on)	Y	Y
Supervised	Y	Y
Terminal (i.e. at end of Year 12)	Y	N
Special consideration	Y	Y
Looks the same whatever the subject	Y Exam "paper" contains questions to be answered in writing Typically 3 hours' duration	N Different from subject to subject: Varies in nature and length/time according to subject but most likely to be an end-of-semester test (multiple-choice is possible), essay, or collection of short responses Typically 2 hours' duration
One-off point-in-time	Y	Initially Y – summative only, but when calibrated item banks are introduced can be formative (a student can do the EA on more than one occasion) allowing selective updating of student profiles

*An end-of-semester test in a school-based assessment system is an internal exam*

*There is a definition of "examination" in the educational measurement literature*

*Properties of an external exam include standardised conditions*

*Properties of one of the many modes of school assessment include standardised conditions*

*The exam experience is not foreign to senior school students in Queensland*

## Key attributes of the proposed external assessment

The proposed External Assessment is:

1. Standardised – administered under the same conditions for all students in a particular subject across Queensland and marked according to a common marking scheme.
2. Subject-specific – there is a different assessment for each subject (i.e. the assessment is not a common test like the QCS Test).
3. Subject-dependent – the nature of the assessment depends on the nature of the subject being assessed. In setting the external assessments QSA would be able to choose the style of assessment from an array of assessment types, adapted to the nature of the individual subjects. Not all assessment styles suit all subjects.
4. Able to have a formative function – in the future when calibrated item banks are developed, students will be able to take the assessments on-line at any time, and their results can be selectively updated by the school (assuming they improve).

Standardisation relates external assessment to external exams. Designing the external assessment using a style selected from an array of styles relates external assessment to school assessment. This is what was meant earlier by the best of both worlds ... but it is two of these attributes (points 3 and 4 above) that set the proposed external assessment apart from an external exams.

*The proposed External Assessment has two identifying features:*

*One, the style of assessment depends on nature of the subject*

*Two, the potential to provide feedback to students if assessment items are drawn from an item bank, and administered and marked on line*

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