

Redesigning the secondary–tertiary interface

Queensland Review of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance

Extract: Recommendations

Report submitted to the Queensland Minister
for Education, Training and Employment

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Recommendations

A general conclusion of this Review is that senior secondary assessment and tertiary entrance in Queensland are in need of attention. It is more than twenty years since the current OP system was designed, and the broad features of the senior assessment system have been in place even longer. Over the past two decades, assessment and tertiary entrance processes have been the subject of ongoing modifications. Although the current processes have served Queensland well, we believe that they will be less adequate in meeting future needs and that the time has come for a redesign. Any redesign must recognise and preserve strengths of the current arrangements. The challenge is to design senior assessment and tertiary selection processes appropriate to Queensland in the twenty-first century, rather than attempt to reconstruct arrangements from the past or to adopt solutions from elsewhere. We include among the strengths of existing Queensland arrangements the use of classroom teachers' judgments of students' performances and work, and believe that this aspect of the current system must be preserved as a significant element of future assessment arrangements.

The following recommendations list major features of our proposed redesign. It has not been possible in a Review of this kind to develop detailed implementation plans to accompany these recommendations. We recognise that this more detailed work is essential and will need to be undertaken prior to implementation. We also recognise that our recommendations have resourcing implications. A higher level of investment will be required to build the twenty-first century assessment system we envisage. And beyond this, there are likely to be implications for capacity building within the responsible agencies: QCAA and QTAC.

The current OP system

It is clear to us that the current OP system no longer functions as originally envisaged and is reaching the end of its usefulness. Shortcomings identified by the Review include:

- the inadequacy of OPs and FPs as a basis for differentiating among applicants to high-demand tertiary courses, and the construction and use of ATARs instead;
- the bypassing of the OP system through the use of the QTAC Selection Rank and associated concerns that schools may be directing students to this alternative route as a way of maximising their "equivalent" OP;
- the inability of FPs to provide the envisaged additional discrimination among applicants to high-demand tertiary courses;
- the increased and unhelpful status of the QCS Test as the major external examination and key assessment event during the senior secondary years;
- concerns about the amount of coaching that schools are accessing and providing for the QCS Test;
- the complexity of the current system with its subject Levels of Achievement, QCS Test grades, SAls, QCS distribution parameters, OAls, OPs, FPs, ATAR, QCS Test percentiles and QTAC Selection Rank, some of which have been introduced on an ad hoc basis; and
- a lack of transparency in current selection processes, with applicants sometimes unaware of the basis on which they are considered for admission to tertiary courses.

We found little support for the current OP system either among schools or universities, with these two groups usually expressing different concerns.

Recommendation 1

The OP system should be discontinued and the interface between secondary completion and university selection should be redesigned. The implications are that SAs would no longer be generated, OAs, OPs and FPs would no longer be calculated, and the QCS Test would be discontinued. Under the new model, Subject Results would be reported on a finer scale for use by universities in their selection decisions.

Recommendation 2

Responsibility for certifying student attainment in senior subjects should be separated from responsibility for selecting applicants for admission to university courses. The former should be the responsibility of QCAA, working directly with schools. The latter should be the responsibility of the universities and their agent QTAC.

Recommendation 3

Student attainment in each Authority Subject should be reported by QCAA in the form of a "Subject Results" indicating the level of knowledge, understanding and skill that the student has attained. These should be directly comparable across teachers and schools and function as standalone measures of senior secondary attainment, independently of how they might subsequently be used.

Recommendation 4

The certification of student attainment in each senior subject should be based on a set of four specified types of assessment activities. QCAA should specify the nature of each activity, the conditions under which it is to be completed and the marking scheme for assessing students' performances. One of the four assessment activities should be externally set and marked by QCAA.

Recommendation 5

Students' Subject Results should be reported as integers on a scale of 1 to 60, with the suppression of a total mark of 0. Each Subject Result should be calculated as the sum of a student's mark on the external assessment (in the range 0 to 30) and marks on the three assessment activities set and marked by teachers (each in the range 0 to 10). Teachers' assessments should not be statistically scaled against the external assessment.

Recommendation 6

An External Assessment in each subject should be set and marked by QCAA and completed at the same time under the same supervised conditions in all schools. If resourcing is an issue, priority should be given to developing External Assessments for subjects with high enrolments, subjects which are foundational for university courses, and subjects for which external assessment is most practicable. For the vast majority of senior subjects, the External Assessment should contribute 50 per cent of the Subject Result.

Recommendation 7

Three School Assessments should be specified for each subject. The nature, intentions and parameters for these three assessment activities should be specified by QCAA, with teachers in schools annually designing local versions of each. The three School Assessments and the External Assessment should be designed jointly to provide appropriate coverage and balance of the subject syllabus and in general should address different kinds of learning and achievement within the subject.

Recommendation 8

QCAA should assure the validity and reliability of School Assessments in each subject through a revised approach to moderation that includes three elements:

- “Endorsement” of proposed assessment activities – For each of the three School Assessments, QCAA checks locally-devised assessment activities/instruments and marking schemes for their consistency with QCAA specifications and endorses their use with students.
- “Confirmation” of accurate application of marking schemes – For each of the three School Assessments, QCAA checks that schools’ applications of marking schemes are accurate and consistent across teachers and schools. This is done through “moderation” meetings in which teachers undertake blind re-assessments of student work against the relevant 10-point scale. QCAA also conducts annual spot sampling and blind re-assessments to check the consistency of marking across schools. Where a problem is identified, all student work in that subject in that school is re-marked.
- “Ratification” of Subject Results – At the end of Year 12, QCAA checks each school’s results on the four assessments for anomalies. If anomalies are identified, then these are investigated and resolved before verifying students’ marks on the four assessments. Once anomalies are resolved, the ratification of students’ Subject Results for certification follows.

An appeals process will be available to students after they receive their Senior Statements from QCAA (or in some other way as determined by QCAA). QTAC should be included in discussions about the appeals process.

Recommendation 9

QCAA should establish a guild of Assessment Supervisors to provide guidance in relation to the proposed moderation processes (the endorsement of assessment activities; the confirmation of marking standards; and the ratification of Subject Results) and to assist in teacher capacity building.

Recommendation 10

The Senior External Examinations currently developed by QCAA should be discontinued. Instead, all students who are undertaking a senior subject should be required to complete the four assessment activities specified by QCAA for that subject (the three School Assessments and one External Assessment).

Recommendation 11

Tertiary institutions should make as transparent as possible the basis on which applicants are selected for admission to tertiary courses. This should include clarity about the nature of the evidence to be considered (for example, subject results, aptitude test scores, interviews), course prerequisites, any preferential weighting to be applied to subject results, and any processes for aggregating student results to rank applicants.

Recommendation 12

The current responsibilities of QTAC for processing applications to undergraduate courses and implementing institutions' admission rules and procedures should be extended to include any scaling and aggregation of senior Subject Results to produce rankings of course applicants.

Recommendation 13

If tertiary institutions choose to construct an ATAR, then this should be computed using an inter-subject scaling of Subject Results reported by QCAA (each on a 60-point scale). In setting new eligibility rules tertiary institutions should consider reducing the number of subjects and restricting combinations of subjects.

Recommendation 14

Tertiary institutions, in collaboration with QCAA, should conduct ongoing monitoring of the impact of tertiary selection processes on the senior secondary school (particularly possible impacts on students' choices of senior subjects). Institutions should also continue to explore improvements to their selection processes and alternatives to rankings such as ATAR.

Recommendation 15

The Queensland Government should make the legislative changes required to divest the QCAA of its current responsibilities relating to tertiary selection (including scaling and aggregating results to produce rank orders of tertiary applicants).

Recommendation 16

The Queensland Government should invest additional funding in the creation of high-quality assessment and certification processes to underpin a reformed senior secondary credential. A priority order of subjects should be established in the event that it is not possible to fund the development of externally set and marked assessments in all senior subjects.

Recommendation 17

The QCAA should continue to build its staff capacity in educational assessment, educational measurement and information and communication technologies.

Recommendation 18

The QCAA should build into its assessment processes a greater focus on skills and attributes now being identified in senior secondary curricula as essential to life and work in the 21st Century (for example, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, verbal communication).

Recommendation 19

The Queensland Government should devise a multi-platform information strategy to precede and accompany any significant changes or reforms to senior assessment and tertiary entrance.

Recommendation 20

Queensland tertiary institutions should undertake a review of their admissions processes, including options for comparing and selecting applicants to competitive tertiary courses. This review should consider the appropriateness of constructing a single rank order of school leavers regardless of the course or institution to which they are applying, and options for ranking course applicants (ATAR; a "points system").

Recommendation 21

Queensland tertiary institutions should consider enhancing technical capacity within QTAC to undertake any new scaling procedures to produce rank orders of course applicants. Consideration also should be given to establishing a high-level Technical Committee to oversee the technical quality of these procedures.

Recommendation 22

The proposed QTAC Technical Committee should, as part of its responsibilities, monitor on an ongoing basis any impact (positive or negative) that tertiary selection processes have on the senior secondary school, including any impact on students' choices of subjects, and recommend changes to selection processes where appropriate.

Recommendation 23

As part of the Queensland Government's commitment to further development of the Queensland Certificate of Education, consideration should be given to enhancing the capacity of QCAA to develop and deliver a world-class senior secondary qualification. This may include establishing a group of specialist staff within QCAA capable of further conceptualising, leading and implementing the recommendations of this Review. It may also include the creation of two separate authorities, one with responsibility for curriculum and assessment in Years K–9, the other with responsibility for Years 10–12.