

Independent Schools Queensland
Response to:

Draft 2, Stage 1 redeveloped QCAA
Senior Syllabuses

Introduction

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to QCAA on the second **draft** of the Stage 1 new redeveloped **senior syllabuses**.

Independent Schools Queensland is the peak body representing and advocating on behalf of 200 independent schools across Queensland. Each independent school has its own governing body and is responsible for meeting government accountabilities and delivering educational programs to students.

Independent schools in Queensland are characterised by diversity. The sector includes large metropolitan single sex colleges as well as small rural co-educational schools. Some schools are based on particular religious, philosophical and / or pedagogical approaches while others cater for specific groups of students. Some independent schools in Queensland are primarily for Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander children while others have Indigenous students from remote communities as boarders.

- This response was developed in the following way:
 - ISQ facilitated 11 face-to-face meetings with over 150 senior curriculum leaders in Brisbane and across regional centres. Leaders provided their comments and feedback
- ISQ Education Sub-Committee and several ISQ leadership groups also provided feedback
- ISQ invited written comments from over 800 Curriculum Leaders across the sector
- comments were collated into broad themes and subjects

Background

Independent schools in Queensland are characterised by diversity, however one feature in common is the genuine commitment of each school to developing curriculum offerings that are appropriate, challenging, high quality and which reflect the values-base of the school.

Independent schools are committed to the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) senior syllabuses and have provided the resources to implement previous versions as effectively as possible. Independent schools believe they are in an informed position to contribute to consultation on the changes to draft senior syllabuses.

ISQ is aware that this response will contribute to a wider set of feedback from Queensland including responses from other sectors.

Organisation of the Response

ISQ received feedback from our member schools that can broadly be described as being about:

1. The nature of the new approach to senior syllabuses and senior assessment
2. Redeveloped syllabus documents

1. Comments about the nature of the new approach to senior syllabuses and senior assessment

A number of themes have emerged about the nature of the new approach to senior syllabuses and senior assessment as outlined below:

- a) Composite classes
- b) Endorsement and confirmation
- c) Timing of Unit 4
- d) Lack of flexibility in syllabuses
- e) Exams / assessment
- f) Variable progression rates
- g) Status of the Subject Area Syllabuses
- h) Scaling and ATAR

a) Composite classes

ISQ is aware that QCAA has a working group examining options and that this is not an issue just for the independent sector, or even for small schools alone. Many independent school currently offers some composite / combined classes for small cohort enrolments.

ISQ strongly encourages QCAA to consider how composite classes may be accommodated in the new regime. ISQ encourages the QCAA to consider a broad range of options such as possibly developing Units 1 and 2 independently (not sequentially) of Units 3 and 4 so that two external assessment tasks could be developed each year in each subject: one for students doing Units 1 and 2 in Year 12, and one for students doing Units 3 and 4 in Year 12.

b) Endorsement and confirmation

ISQ is supportive of the QCAA's efforts to strengthen school-based internal assessments. ISQ is on record as being supportive of both the endorsement and confirmation processes. However various independent schools have expressed concerns about both of these 'checking' processes in terms of the timelines that could be involved, how many senior teachers will need to be involved, and therefore at what cost to member schools.

On QCAA's website – see <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/senior/new-snr-assessment-te/strengthening-school-based-assessment> it states that 1,400 assessors will confirm the grades of approximately 200,000 assessment pieces. That is approximately 143 separate student pieces per assessor. ISQ understands that not all those pieces will come in at once – typically they will be spread across

Year 12 from April to September, however this is also when senior teachers are themselves at their very busiest. Clearly there will be a significant time turn-around from when the sampling of this internal assessment evidence (for confirmation) occurs in April to when schools are notified of the outcomes. Member schools have also expressed concern about the time that it will take those accredited school-based senior assessors to do this work – time that they will not be in front of their own classes.

c) Timing of unit 4

Many independent schools are concerned about the timing and length of Unit 4. In all draft senior syllabuses, Unit 4 is considered to be large, and with complex content that will require a full semester of teaching. However, if the external assessments are to cover either Units 3 and 4 (sciences and mathematics) or just Unit 4 (the remainder), then logically they will need to be in the later part of October to allow time for the content to be taught. This means that essentially schools will have one term to complete their Unit 4 and to provide time for students to revise and prepare for those external assessments. Many independent schools are working through the logistics of commencing their senior courses of study in term 4 of Year 10 as a way to allow adequate time for the full two years of the senior courses. This practice would then impact on the learning of Year 10, unless the whole high school moved over to a new academic year at the beginning of term 4. It is feasible that some schools will commence moving their 2017 cohort of Year 10 students into the new Year 11 program from term 4 of next year. Schools are concerned that QCAA's current timelines do not allow for this scenario.

d) Lack of flexibility in syllabuses

ISQ understands QCAA's rationale for more prescription in syllabuses. The current attention to detailed prescription will be useful for early career teachers or teachers teaching out-of-field. The current approach to prescription will also mean unambiguous preparation for assessment tasks. High levels of prescription should lead to clarity of expectations of what is taught and the outcomes that are expected. Experienced teachers who have over many years developed contextual units deeply aligned to particular groups of students, will find this level of prescription inhibiting. Schools are concerned their students will not have the same opportunities for engagement in prescribed units that they currently experience in the school-based units.

e) Exams and assessments

Some member schools have expressed surprise with the suggestion that Queensland Year 12 students will have to sit two papers for science and

mathematics that cover the whole year of work in Units 3 and 4 (one argument being that even at university they no longer expect that). Additionally, in those subjects (except for Essential Mathematics) the exam counts for 50% of their entire assessment. This is a significant cultural change from the semester internal examinations that previous cohorts of Queensland students experienced. This is a significant shift in thinking and has potential repercussions on student and teacher wellbeing.

There are also concerns with the assessment demand across the draft syllabuses. There is a clear “ramping up” in expectations of students across this suite of subjects in terms of word lengths, time allocations and the overall range and balance. In Economics for example, three assessment tasks, totalling 75% of the course, are exams.

The logic associated with the development of the Instrument Specific Marking Guides (ISMG) is sound, however the descriptions linked to the numeric grades are only described in quantitative terms – descriptions of learning quality (standards) are usually a combination of amount, context and complexity / sophistication.

f) Variable progression rates

On QCAA’s website:

https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/senior/snr_assessment_intro_faqs.pdf it states that QCAA is still “considering options” for students who complete their senior studies over three years. Member schools have raised this as an important issue because there are a number of students who do take the option of completing their senior courses in three years. These students could have to work to support families; they could be sporting or cultural representatives; they could be sick or need to travel with their families. Social-emotional reasons are also a common factor. At a more specific level, a number of independent schools have asked about students who begin Year 11 English Communications next year and then have a break before wanting to complete the subject in Year 12 in 2019. ISQ encourages QCAA to consider the situation of all these students and to provide comprehensive solutions that accommodate their needs as soon as possible.

g) Status of subject area syllabuses

ISQ has received significant feedback that both English Communication and Pre-Vocational Mathematics are NOT equivalent to Essential English and Essential Mathematics. The Learning Area Structure on page 2 of each of the suite of English syllabuses for example, makes it clear that Essential English is not an

“applied” course in the same way that other Subject Area Syllabuses such as Aquatic Practices in Science is. Not only is there a significantly increased expectation about the amount and level of content to be covered in both Essential English and Essential Mathematics from that studied previously in the respective SASs, but also the assessment in both these subjects makes them that much harder and unattainable for many students.

Teachers in independent schools, but particularly those teachers who work in Special Assistance Schools, those teachers who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from remote communities or those teachers who teach students with learning difficulties and / or have low levels of literacy and numeracy have consistently provided feedback to ISQ that these new syllabuses based on Australian Curriculum are pitched at too high a level for these groups of students.

The decision to make an English subject compulsory and for a satisfactory level of achievement to be part of the ATAR calculation will have a significant impact on large numbers of international students who can currently matriculate with their science and mathematics results.

2. Redeveloped syllabus documents

Some comments gathered from independent member schools relate to the suite of redeveloped Stage 1 syllabuses. Examples have been drawn from the redeveloped syllabuses for Biology, Drama, Essential English, Economics and Physical Education to outline the points below:

- a) Consistency across the syllabuses
- b) Embedding of Australian Curriculum
- c) Content
- d) Emphasis on knowledge
- e) Assessment
- f) 21st Century skills
- g) Subject development

a) Lack of consistency across syllabuses

Independent school personnel have expressed concerns about the lack of consistency within and across subject syllabuses. Although a common template has been used, it would appear that this template has been interpreted differently by different syllabus writing teams. Some examples are provided below:

- All syllabus documents need to follow a consistent construction so that those teachers who teach across different subjects know what to expect in each

section. Simple things such as consistent numbering will assist teachers. Section 3.4 is called *Teaching and Learning* in Drama but in Economics, Biology, Physical Education and Essential English, *Teaching and Learning* is numbered as 3.3.1. Within this section on *Teaching and Learning* it is very unclear what should be included here and why, with no consistency across Essential English, Economics, Biology, Drama and Physical Education?

- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective is developed in Drama and Physical Education, but not in some of the others.
- In the Drama syllabus there is a complex table illustrating all the possible pathways from drama into various careers. Is this information necessary and if so, then why is it not included in the other syllabus documents? What could be included in a similar table for Physical Education? The inherent problem is that once a 'definitive' list is provided in a syllabus it is almost certain that some careers will be omitted. ISQ believes that although the table in Drama is useful, it should be in a resources section of the QCAA website, rather than in the syllabus document itself.
- There is a lack of consistency about the section called Course Structure such as in Drama 3.3? This section is well done in the Physical Education syllabus.
- The Drama syllabus includes a very long description of pedagogical practices in sections 3.4.1 to 3.4.11 (pp. 11 to 16 of the draft syllabus). This work is useful as advice or as a resource but it is not appropriate for it to be found in a syllabus document. Incidentally this section discusses the "making and responding" objectives in 3.4.2 before the reader has actually read what the syllabus objectives are.
- In Essential English, Economics, Biology, Drama and Physical Education section 3.6.1 contains an identical paragraph about core learning. *Core learning is the required information, mental procedures and psychomotor procedures particular to the unit.* But in Drama there is a section on subject matter first which is quite useful and should be considered for inclusion in the other syllabuses.
- The Economics draft syllabus has no information about the core learning but goes into a section on assessment in 3.4.3 which is not evident in the Biology, Physical Education or Drama. There is some useful information in this assessment section and some of this should be generic across all syllabuses, such as the explanation about authentication of student work. However, some of this assessment information is more applicable to a resource or support document rather than being in the syllabus itself.

b) Lack of consistent embedding of Australian Curriculum

There is a lack of consistency in how the original senior Australian Curriculum has been embedded into the various syllabuses. In some syllabuses based on the Australian Curriculum, the subjects have reordered the content and introduced additional content – see for example the Essential English syllabus.

However, in some syllabuses such as Biology some of the content appears to have been taken verbatim with this syllabus actually naming the knowledge and understanding content descriptions from the Australian Curriculum for Biology. Importantly, this same syllabus has not taken the same approach to the other two strands of Human Endeavour and Science Inquiry Skills, so these are not given the same attention as the Knowledge and Understanding strand. In doing this, the Biology syllabus does not accurately reflect the intentions of the Australian Curriculum Senior Biology.

c) Too much content

The length of many of the documents is excessive and many include large volumes of information that may be better published elsewhere.

d) Emphasis on knowledge

Feedback received from member schools indicates that senior teachers are concerned about the lack of higher order thinking skills evident in the syllabuses. A scan of the internal assessments in Biology demonstrates a propensity for lower order verbs such as *define, identify, recall, explain, and recognize*. Therefore, students might have limited opportunity for to evaluate, justify, predict, and recommend. The draft syllabuses appear to provide limited opportunities for students to predict for the future and to solve real world problems, design and innovate.

In the same Biology draft syllabus there is limited evidence of science inquiry skills being valued. One could argue that it is not a skill to *determine the genotypes and phenotypes of the offspring using probability models (including Punnett squares)*, students can very effectively achieve this through rote learning and memorization.

Independent school personnel have concerns that there appears to be confusion across a number of draft syllabuses in terms of the inquiry process and the design process. Inquiry processes are a way of working for the future (with significant inclusion of critical and creative thinking) and these should not be limited in the revised suite of senior subjects. ISQ would support the inclusion of a common language for all subjects in terms of inquiry processes, design processes, etc.

e) Assessment

Independent school personnel have expressed concerns about some of the ambiguities and inconsistencies within the assessment sections of the various draft syllabuses. Some of these are outlined as examples below:

- Why is it that in Essential English, Biology, Physical Education and Economics there are two lines and arrows below Units 1 and 2 stating:

Students will have opportunities in Units 1 and 2 to respond to the types of assessment they will encounter in Units 3 and 4.

However this statement is not included in the Drama syllabus?

- There is ambiguity about is it 1.5 hours long or it is 2 hours long?
- In the first Drama assessment, is it reasonable to expect as indicated on p. 27 of the draft syllabus that students can carry out a performance to the following specifications AND in that time, demonstrate *synthesis of dramatic languages to create impactful and consistently engaging dramatic action* in order to achieve the top score?
 - *performance time: 3–5 minutes (all students must be actively engaged on stage for a minimum of 3 minutes and no more than 5 minutes)*
 - *presented as a small group (2–4) — assessed individually*

There has been positive feedback about the instrument specific marking guides in some subjects. There appears however to also be a lack of consistency at times. Biology has taken the approach of having a number of qualities wrapped up into one mark – as opposed to the Economics for example where the descriptors are broken down into smaller components with fewer marks allocated to each. But then there are inconsistencies both across and within syllabuses about which descriptors are used. In an Economics assessment top marks are awarded for *comprehensive and valid* or *insightful and comprehensive*. Why are these descriptors not the same across all tasks in Economics and indeed why not the same across all subjects so the students have the same understandings about what is expected of them? The Drama syllabus would benefit from having a common set of descriptors for quality as their criterion on p. 28 might need some reworking given that this is not a clear sequence of development. Also, the Physical Education syllabus has the discriminators of quality within the stem of each criterion and this seems to work quite well – although the descriptors of quality don't match those used in Economics. It will be difficult for some teachers to distinguish between a *discerning and insightful* response versus a *purposeful and coherent* one (see p. 36).

On the issue of Physical Education, some member schools expressed concern that the 2nd internal assessment is over an 8-week period of time (including drafting) and that this is too long for some students who will lose focus over that time frame. Additionally, those students are expected to complete a 2000-word research report and many felt that this was too much for the vast majority of the PE cohort. Another concern about the Physical Education syllabus is that there is a strong statement about the key ideas of learning about, through and in physical activity. However the assessment in Year 12 is two exams worth a combined 50%, one analytical exposition and one investigation – so it is unclear where the assessment of IN physical activity occurs.

Some examinations specify perusal time while others don't? When perusal time is given it is unclear whether it is 5mins or 15mins??

f) 21st century skills

The inclusion of 21st century skills plus literacy and numeracy skills is highlighted across all syllabuses.

Independent school personnel have concerns that there appears to be confusion across a number of draft syllabuses in terms of the inquiry process and the design process. Inquiry processes are a way of working for the future (with significant inclusion of critical and creative thinking). ISQ would support the inclusion of a common language for all subjects in terms of inquiry processes, design processes, etc.

There are long descriptions of inquiry in Economics and Biology but these appear to be resources and support to the syllabus and should not be included in the syllabuses themselves. What is not clear is why these particular models of inquiry have been chosen? How do these models relate to the content, objectives, standards and assessment? In some cases, the alignment appears very strong (such as Physical Education) but in other cases there appears to be no alignment at all (e.g. Biology).

The *Teaching and Learning* section in Physical Education is clearly linked to the objectives and key concepts of the syllabus and although inquiry is integral to this subject, it is not just “tacked on” but is clearly valued as a significant part of the student learning (for example the subject matter reflects the inquiry engage, plan, etc.) and is linked to the key concepts – learning about, through and in, Physical Education.

There could be an opportunity in the Biology DNA unit for students to deeply explore some of the ethical dilemmas of advances in this work. If the syllabus is genuinely

about developing 21st Century skills, then it could be argued that it is insufficient to suggest that as a guidance (not mandated) students could *Discuss implications of genetic screening technologies such as Preimplantation Genetic Diagnosis and CRISPR on reproductive technologies.*

g) Subject development

Member independent schools are reporting significant confusion around subjects such as Graphics which had a trial external assessment but now, in the second stage syllabus redevelopment will be a significant component of a new subject called DESIGN. Teachers are anxious and confused about what that subject will look like given the subjects that are being combined in it.

Schools are expressing a similar issue with the new Stage 2 Business subject.

Some independent schools are committed to small cohort language subjects such as Indonesian. Some independent schools have strong histories and cultures in offering these languages (often sister school relationships, reciprocal visits etc.). ISQ's preference would be for the QCAA to develop a senior syllabus in these languages such as Indonesian, rather than to 'import' a curriculum from another jurisdiction. A 100% exam will mean that these smaller language subjects are going to become even less attractive to students in the future.

h) Other comments

Each syllabus states in the Course Overview

Units 1 and 2 allow students to begin engaging with the course subject matter. Units 3 and 4 consolidate student learning. However, it is unclear how Units 3 and 4 CONSOLIDATE student learning when they are introducing completely new content?

Finally, ISQ has received significant feedback from our senior teachers about their concerns with timelines.

Concerned that the timeframes seem to be becoming tighter and wondering how schools will have the time to adequately prepare in 2017 for commencement of the course in 2018.

The Technology suite and Business subjects are not yet in development, and yet we are still meant to commence teaching these in 2018.

The SAS subjects, which may also contribute to the ATAR, are to be developed in 2017, when are schools to have time to prepare for the teaching of these in 2018?

ISQ encourages QCAA to ensure that adequate timelines, resources and support are available for the transition and implementation of the new syllabuses – particularly for our smaller, regional and rural high schools.

If you have any enquiries or wish to follow up any comments made here please contact:

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