



Response to:

Draft 1 of the redeveloped QCAA senior syllabuses

JUNE 2016

INTRODUCTION

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to QCAA on the first **draft** of the 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.

Whilst Independent schools in Queensland are characterised by diversity, one feature in common is the genuine commitment of each school to implementing 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 committed significant 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 senior syllabuses.

This response was developed as a result of feedback from a large number and wide range of Curriculum Leaders across the sector.

BROAD COMMENTS ABOUT THIS RESPONSE

In the feedback that follows, both positive and negative comments are included. Some of the negative comments are clearly linked to the frustrations independent schools are experiencing with the first draft syllabuses being 'silent' on assessment. For example, the quotes below:

It is difficult to give accurate and meaningful feedback without the assessment guidelines and criteria in the syllabuses.

There is no direction pertaining to assessment – this is disturbing as there is no evidence of backward mapping from what is expected at the 'end'.

ISQ understands that many of these concerns will be accounted for in the next draft of the syllabuses.

ISQ has also received significant feedback indicating concerns with timelines.

Concerned that the timeframes seem to 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 appreciates the significance of the senior secondary reform agenda, however, the importance of adequate timelines, resources and support the successful transition and implementation of the new syllabuses – particularly for our smaller, regional and rural high schools, should always be recognised.

ISQ's response is clustered around key themes that are of particular concern to independent schools as follows (where feedback on a particular draft syllabus has not been received, no comments are offered):

1. Issues raised across the subjects
 - a) Amount and nature of content
 - b) Lack of options for some students
 - c) Taxonomy of processes
 - d) Lack of flexibility for composite classes
2. English
3. Mathematics
4. Science
5. Humanities and social sciences
6. The Arts
7. Technologies
8. HPE
9. Languages

Feedback is provided in each of these areas as received from independent schools without judgment or testing of validity. It is provided in good faith to assist QCAA in the redevelopment of syllabuses.

1) ISSUES RAISED ACROSS SUBJECTS

a) Amount and nature of content

ISQ has received a significant number of responses from schools stating that they believe they will be expected to cover too much content in the current drafts of these syllabuses.

There is too much crowding in the curriculum. With the loss of the ability to tailor a school's work program to suit the location, clientele, staff and available resources, my concern now is that there will be so much more added to what everyone 'has to do'.

A part of these concerns (which range across all subject areas), is based on an assumption that four units will need to be taught across four equal terms of learning. The current practice of Year 12 students finishing early in term 4 means that the fourth unit is compromised if it is to be offered in term 4.

Does this mean that a senior course of study will need to begin in term 4 of Year 10 so that students have the time to adequately cover the content of the two-year course? If that is the case, there will be significant ramifications for the organisation of secondary schools and of course that reorganisation will need to commence next year.

A second part of these concerns about the amount of content, relates to the current practices our secondary schools have around allowing students to some extent, to lead divergences in learning into areas of their interest and context. ISQ acknowledges that teachers will need to approach these new syllabuses in a different way to how they work and translate current syllabuses into work programs. Teachers in Queensland have been used to a wider amount of flexibility in their programming and this is causing concerns such as whether they will have the capacity to switch units 1 and 2 in Year 11.

All draft syllabuses seem quite prescriptive.

I have concerns about lack of teacher autonomy and flexibility.

Unit 1 is not appropriate as the beginning unit. Switching with Unit 2 would be better (not sure if schools have the flexibility to do this or not, if both are formative & covered in Year 11).

Finally, the other feedback in regard to content is the perceived notion that external assessment is driving the nature, scope and extent of content being defined in the draft syllabuses.

External assessment seems to be the 'tail wagging the dog'. It is only one (or two for maths / science) pieces of assessment evidence - it is not the learning experiences taking place in our classrooms over a two-year period.

On behalf of independent schools, ISQ asks QCAA to consider:

- The content described in the next draft of these syllabuses will be at an appropriate amount to allow for deep disciplinary learning – both in terms of knowledge and understanding and in terms of the processes or skills being articulated
- Teachers will still have some autonomy and flexibility with regard to the programming of their students' learning – particularly in Year 11.

b) Lack of options for some students

ISQ has received significant levels of feedback from schools about the changes from Pre-Vocational Mathematics to Essential Mathematics and English Communications to Essential English. 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 too hard in their expectations for these groups of students. ISQ has given QCAA this feedback since the first draft versions of those Australian Curriculum offerings were developed. ISQ continues to hold concerns that unless appropriately 'pitched' (but challenging) syllabuses are developed for these cohorts of students, they will not have access to rich learning in English and mathematics suited to their levels of achievement.

Schools have also asked ISQ to clarify that students will continue to have the flexibility to cover their senior program of learning across three years. This flexibility is particularly important for students in independent schools who are on sporting scholarships / representative obligations and may have to travel; students who suffer significant medical conditions (whether they be physical, mental or emotional conditions) and students who have carer and other family obligations.

The current proposal for four sequential units may also impact on students who are on a variable progression rate and completing studies over three years.

c) Taxonomy of processes

Independent schools 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.

Independent schools have expressed a desire that if Marzano and Kendall's New Taxonomy (2008) is the basis for the development of these syllabus documents, (QCAA Board decision, 25 November 2015), then this taxonomy needs to be consistently applied across all syllabus documents. At the moment, ISQ believes that some syllabuses do this much more effectively than others. Although Marzano and Kendall's work is a development from Bloom's work, in some syllabus documents it seems that Bloom's work is the underpinning framework. Currently it appears that some syllabus documents (Ancient and Modern History in particular) seemed to be reflecting more of Bloom's taxonomy than Marzano and Kendall's work. This could be a reflection of the short timeframes in which these syllabuses have had to be developed and ISQ would encourage some editorial work on consistency for the next draft versions.

Corresponding to this feedback indicated the lack of higher order thinking skills (e.g. many descriptors are recall, describe and explain) and therefore the lack of opportunity for students 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.

ISQ acknowledges that both these issues are a reflection of the flaws of the original Australian Curriculum documents, however ISQ does believe that QCAA would be justified in addressing these through additions and adjustments within the Queensland syllabuses.

d) lack of flexibility for composite classes

ISQ has received significant feedback from our member schools about their concerns regarding composite classes. These concerns are not just from regional and rural schools but also for small cohorts of students in almost every independent school.

Currently independent schools have the option to follow a true composite work program structure. The current senior system allows for true composite classes in many subjects that can be arranged in a Year A / Year B topical fashion, i.e. Years 11 and 12 in the one room,

common topic, common assessment type, but with different expectations on ability to demonstrate meeting learning objectives during learning experiences, classroom discussions and assessment pieces. Even with an external assessment regime included in the new senior syllabi, ISQ believes it is possible for syllabi developers to structure a course in such a way that allows for true composite classes (not just 'combined' classes). The same subject topic for the external assessment could be set and covered each year at the set time - Year 11s complete an internal piece of assessment (practice for the external assessment) while the Year 12s complete the actual assessment. The remaining curriculum covered in Years 11 and 12 could rotate through a Year A / Year B program.

ISQ believes many subjects simply could not be offered due to low numbers and therefore would not be financially viable if that composite arrangement was removed. If composite classes aren't catered for, there will be many ramifications for smaller populated subjects.

The course structure may affect the ability for the course to be delivered as an A/B Composite Program. Currently, our English Communication program is approved as an A/B Program. If certain units needed to be taught in specific years, this would make an A/B composite cyclic arrangement impossible and severely impact upon the delivery of the subject within our context.

ISQ does not believe that 'combined classes' are a viable option although schools may be forced into this situation if they want particular subjects to 'survive'. Combined classes could include cohorts with 10-14 students in each year level - not just a small number per year level. ISQ strongly encourages QCAA to consider how composite classes may be accommodated in the new regime.

2) ENGLISH

Overarching comments:

ISQ received some very positive comments about the new direction of the English suite of syllabuses with many welcoming the changes in the new structure.

However, independent schools would like clarification about the current lack of direction in the English draft syllabuses regarding choices of texts. Will this information be forthcoming in the assessment section to be developed later?

Literature:

Schools are unclear on the how the four units are to be used through the core learning – are they directives or choices? If they are choices then why is there a choice to “do” Creating Analytical and Imaginative texts, when in the unit description it assumes that students will be doing one or the other. Are there only two text types/genres that will be assessed? There appears no inclusion of reflective/persuasive texts to be created.

English Essentials:

ISQ received positive comments about the reflective nature of the units and ISQ acknowledges that students will find the examination of media representation and popular culture, relevant and engaging for learning.

3) MATHEMATICS

Essential mathematics:

Teachers of Pre-Vocational Mathematics in independent schools have concerns about a reduction in emphasis on life applications of mathematics. Students in this subject need that life-related context to make connections, as well as to set them up for life after school. Financial Maths and Maths around the home (construction, landscaping etc) are topics that have featured heavily and been well received in the past. These teachers are especially concerned **financial maths** appears to be seriously underplayed in the draft Essential Mathematics syllabus.

Finance is outlined as a key aspect of the course, however there is minimal reference to actual finance skills within the course. A large percentage of our students are of a low socio-economic status and as such money management and budgeting are critical life skills for our students. In order to meet the rationale of the course, we believe that it is vital that there is more of a focus on the financial side through the duration of the course, not limited to specific units. It is understood that the units can be taught in a contextualised manner,

around “themes” but even with this in mind it would be difficult to cover the scope that we believe is required with reference to finance.

ISQ acknowledges that this is a flaw in the original Australian Curriculum: Essential Mathematics but encourages QCAA to address this very important topic for this cohort of students in the Queensland syllabus.

4) SCIENCE

Overarching comments:

ISQ has received numerous positive comments about the new draft science syllabuses being clear, easy to follow with increasing complexity for students.

The guidance section, like the IB syllabuses, outlines specific examples to be covered, and specific content to be covered, units to be used etc..and the depth required.

Biology:

Teachers are pleased with the greater exposure to a wider range of topics in Biology and more appropriate preparation for the academic intensity of university.

Chemistry:

Teachers in independent schools are supportive that the recommended experiment section outlines the type of practical skills to be covered or particular experiments that should be completed and where extended experimental investigations may be included.

The assumed knowledge section will be useful in order to check that this work has been covered well up to year 10.

5) HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Geography:

Some topics are quite topical and will be engaging for students. Although it is a concern that the emphasis is still on human Geography, rather than physical Geography.

It does appear that the syllabus is quite specific in terms of some content such as the study of natural hazards, where earthquakes seem to be mandated – is this the most relevant for students in Queensland given the other natural hazards that our students have personal experience of?

Legal Studies:

The draft syllabus seems to have narrowed the scope of the current syllabus with most things proposed to be covered over the 4 units currently being studied in Year 11.

Some feedback expressed disappointment that the Independent Inquiry is not included – scope for choice of passion within the law seems to be gone.

Modern History:

ISQ has received feedback that teachers are having difficulty with the options of sub-topics within topics in order to examine interrelationships between them or themes. The suggestion is that this could lead to quite disjointed programmes. The syllabus needs a structure for each option to help with continuity of concepts and development. For example, if students study the French revolution, the sub-topic from the second set in this unit should be...

The inequality of time spans of different elements could make some schools' focus very narrow and others very broad within a similar study time frame which then begs the question, "How will schools adequately prepare for external examinations?"

Ancient History:

This syllabus is very detailed in terms of subject matter - a diversity of studies with more inclusion of medieval studies than previously incorporated – and in particular feedback welcomed the inclusion of the "Crusades". However, as with Modern History, ISQ has received criticisms that the four units are disjointed and it will be difficult to make connections between them.

Overall, the structure of the course discourages a true understanding of History as it encourages topics to be taught in isolation. Students should be able to make connections between topics and see the interrelationships between issues/periods/individuals/events.

ISQ has also received very strong comments about the lack of alignment of the Queensland Ancient History syllabus to the Australian Curriculum.

I'm trying to understand what is so wrong with the Australian Curriculum that it has to be changed so much? I mean, why is it that all of a sudden Boudicca must be included as an option, but nowhere in the entire Queensland draft syllabus are we permitted to study Early Christianity, despite that one at least appearing in the Australian Curriculum?

Coinciding with this is a significant concern about the amount of content being prescribed. For example, the unit on 'Digging Up the Past' lists as its content requirements 11 separate dot-

points and 31 sub-dot-points! The Australian Curriculum does identify all of those as "significant issues" however the Australian Curriculum suggests that only 2 need to be studied. The Queensland syllabus also demands one case study elective be chosen too, as the Australian Curriculum version does, except that there is almost zero correlation. The options are: Hatshepsut, Akhenaten, Xerxes, Hannibal, Boudicca, Cleopatra and, Richard the Lionheart.

The only one that is the same as the Australian Curriculum is Cleopatra.

On the positive side, ISQ has received the following comment from another Christian schools. As the comment below indicates, what could have been a potential issue for this (and many other Christian schools) is now not actually perceived to be a concern at all.

I had been worried that with more prescriptive syllabus topics, we would have to deal with Neolithic Ages etc - stressing the "Old Earth Theory".....but not so. There is only the representative, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander archaeological case study to include that would raise the dating issue.

Economics:

Unit 2 is a totally new unit that is unnecessary and crowds the curriculum. Recent Economics syllabuses have grappled with this issue of three basic, sensible unit topics (Markets and Models; Contemporary Macro-Economics [Domestic]; and International) and the senior years having 4 separate semesters. The last two syllabuses have 'created' an extra semester long unit to 'fit the 4 unit' model. Unfortunately, this has happened again with this draft of the new syllabus - Unit 2 is a totally new unit that really doesn't add very much to the learning experiences for a student.

6) THE ARTS

Music and Music Extension:

The Music syllabus provides lots of examples of pieces of music which could be attached to specific concepts. The way it is written is quite complex and would be confusing for teachers whereas a different table arrangement for all this information could prove much more user-friendly.

Senior music teachers in independent schools were not appreciative of the listing of suggestions of specific pieces of music as some people will feel obligated to use them.

7) TECHNOLOGIES

Home Economics:

Critical and creative thinking skills are central to Home Economics and integral to its inquiry process. Inquiries and design challenges require critical and creative thinking in order to effectively engage in the learning experiences, assessment and design challenges. Both of these skills are not sufficiently prominent in the draft syllabuses.

ISQ received strong feedback that senior teachers of Home Economics believe it would be ideal for this to stay as one complete subject with perhaps a name change to reflect the intent of the subject. If was to be split into 'food' and 'textiles' areas, this does not represent Home Economics as a third of the subject is related to individuals, families and communities / living environment and therefore there would be significant concerns about losing the integrity and intent of home economics i.e. wellbeing. This must be taken into consideration if QCAA is to propose splitting the subject. It is this link with wellbeing that is the crux of the subject and what nurtures the critical and creative thinking.

8) HPE

Heath:

The rationale in itself does not read well nor flow logically, impacting on its clarity. The rationale is quite verbose and jumbled in its writing making it hard from a teacher's perspective to clearly understand.

For the most part, the syllabus objectives do align with the rationale however there is not always clear alignment then to the unit descriptions. Two key areas that require further refining are the links with the inquiry process and the emphasis on advocacy. Overall there appears to be limited opportunity for students to be actively involved in advocacy.

Links to resilience are quite limited and need to be stronger if this is a key element of the syllabus.

Will schools be able to explore multiple electives or just one? This is not clear.

9) LANGUAGES

Concerns in languages were mainly about Chinese and Japanese and whether there are going to be a separate 'streams' for native speakers?

Should QCAA have any enquiries or wish to follow up on any comments or information in this response please contact:

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