



Sevenoaks Senior College

Draft Response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Changes to the Post-Compulsory Curriculum in Western Australia

Purpose

This is a draft response from Sevenoaks Senior College to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Changes to the Post-Compulsory Curriculum in Western Australia.

Introduction

Much discussion has been generated recently about outcomes focussed education as it relates to the proposed curriculum reform for Years 11 and 12. While the introduction of this educational approach into Year 11 and 12 is relatively new, we need to bear in mind that outcomes focussed education was introduced in Western Australian schools 10-15 years ago. It has increasingly been adopted in Years K to 10 and in Years 11 and 12 through wholly school assessed subjects. The last bastion of syllabus based education is found in TEE courses.

College Board members and staff provided feedback to a draft document. This was revised in the light of significant feedback. Three of our fifty staff indicated that they do not wish to be associated with this response.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

1. The basis and merit of the proposed changes

What changes does outcomes based education bring?

- All students will now be taught according to the level of knowledge, skills and understandings that they have *already* demonstrated. Teachers will have clear information about what students have already demonstrated provided by previous teachers. They may also evaluate students' understandings and skills *prior* to introducing new concepts. This will be the starting point in planning their programs. It is therefore essential that teachers of Year 8 to 10 are clear about what is expected of them in terms of assessment and that they can provide accurate data.
- In the old syllabus system (and currently in TEE courses) a teacher was required to teach a course that contained specific content, concepts and skills and students were required to meet set standards regardless of their readiness or ability. Within an outcomes focussed approach teachers have greater flexibility to tailor courses to fit the particular needs of their students. As a result, instead of a whole class being taught the same material in an identical way, there may be more variety in teaching and learning strategies to take account of the different starting points, interests and learning approaches of different students. In a practical sense, it is likely that a number of groups of students will be working on different areas of the same topic at any one time, as already happens in many wholly school assessed courses under the current system.

- It is imperative to ensure that the nature of the external exam and benchmark testing does not reverse this focus, as has happened in the U.K.
- Outcomes focussed education takes account of students' educational and social background as well as their interests and future career/study goals. Therefore teachers will be able to customise programs so they align with the students' interests and capabilities. As a consequence, students will learn more effectively although there are obvious implications for teachers' workloads in developing and teaching customising programs.
- Description of student achievement will be more specific and incorporate fine grained assessment within broad levels. Instead of A, B, C, D and E/F grades being allocated to a range of subjects that vary greatly in difficulty, students will be assessed against levels based on clearly identified demonstration of skills, knowledge and understanding. Federal Government requirements may add an extra layer to reporting but need not detract from the outcomes based reporting in levels. Again, the implications are that there will be a much greater workload if teachers are to be thorough and rigorous with this process.
- For primary and lower secondary schools a scale of 1 to 8 is used to describe students' achievement levels. In Year 11 and 12 Course of Study assessment scales will be identical with the anticipation that most students will enter year 11 at level four or above, although there will be a significant group who will not demonstrate outcomes at this level.
- Reports will indicate an achievement level in each of the main ideas or skill areas (called aspects) required within courses of study. This will allow students, their parents and the school to see how each student is progressing. For example, rather than a grade or percentage being reported in English, Senior English or Vocational English, outcomes will be reported in reading, writing, viewing, speaking and listening.

What is the merit of the new system?

- We will know what students can do when they enter Year 11 because all schools, government and non-government, will assess and report using levels 1 to 8 at the end of Year 10. This will be a very significant advantage for us because we draw students from many different schools.
- Instead of a "one size fits all" approach (the current syllabus system in TEE subjects), teachers have far more flexibility to develop programs that are relevant to their particular class. As a result of the flexibility, we expect that more students will engage in learning and, therefore, more will complete their schooling.
- The new system will enable the integration of vocational education and training into students' programs and place high level value on this for secondary graduation. So students who are more vocationally oriented will enjoy equal esteem to their peers who may be aspiring to university studies.
- All courses of study will be considered for university entrance. At the moment there is a restricted number of subjects that count.
- Students are less likely to be "left behind" in classes where they are taught concepts and skills far above their capacity at that time in their development.

- Students will also have the chance to be extended into areas of vocational or academic interest and challenge. As a result, we can reasonably expect more students to demonstrate visible improvement in their existing levels of achievement.
- Teachers will be able to account directly for the achievement of their students by identifying and describing exactly what they can do.
- Having a common achievement scale that is used to report achievement from Year 8 to 12 will allow us to accurately determine our effectiveness.

2. The readiness of the education system for the proposed changes

The readiness of the community, teachers and parents to embrace the changes are influenced by a number of perceptions, many of which are not based on accurate information or understanding. They are largely dependent on the press, which often seeks to promote a sense of crisis rather than to objectively evaluate changes.

Community perceptions of education and of schools will improve when governments publicly value education and endorse the efforts of schools to provide the educational, vocational, social and emotional foundations for their students.

Key concerns and responses to these perceptions include the following.

- **There will be no commitment to high standards within the system.**

In fact, teachers will be more challenged to extend high achieving students and those who have not achieved well will have greater opportunity to do so under this reform. However, a concern of teachers is that many students may not take the opportunity to improve their skills and understandings. Motivating students to take responsibility for their own learning is not an easy task and may depend on many external factors such as parental attitudes and aspirations. Senior secondary schools will rely heavily on the comprehensive nature of the groundwork done in primary and middle schools. Gaps in learning will prejudice the chances of students reaching higher levels in Years 11 and 12.

With a rigorous approach to providing the building blocks in each subject area in middle schooling, accurate levelling and the inclusion of approaches which acknowledge a range of aspirations and attitudes to education, we will have greater flexibility to provide appropriate programs and opportunities in years 11 and 12.

- **A student may remain at the same level over two or more school years in one or more subject areas.**

This does not take into account the decision to recognise and report on improvement within levels so students have a sense of their own progress. If they need more time to demonstrate skills at a higher level, they will have the opportunity to take advantage of an extended time line and appropriate support from teachers.

- **Levelling has not been consistent in K-10**

The concern is that students may enter years 11 and 12 at levels which are inappropriate and therefore, may be unable to sustain or improve those levels in their senior school years. A sense of progress is a key motivator and is essential to keep students engaged in their final two years of soon to be compulsory education. Working in partnership with middle schools, the senior education sector can ensure accurate levelling.

- **There will be a lengthy transition period where two systems of education will run concurrently.**

It should be recognised that this is not an ideal situation for those students who are completing their schooling in the next few years. Allowances will have to be made by the system to ensure students are not disadvantaged by this transition and that their progress towards further study is safeguarded.

- **The complexity of the new reporting system will make it difficult for parents and employers to understand.**

The new reporting will be more informative in that it will describe achievements on the main aspects of students' courses of study and it will be more relevant to the requirements of further study and employment.

Employers will receive more detailed information about what students have *demonstrated* (on more than one occasion), so they will know what students can do. Students will have greater opportunity to link their education with career options. Therefore, employers can expect students to have developed some skills directly relevant to the workplace.

- **Moderation and standardisation processes may be unreliable**

This concern relates to the question of standards across different learning areas. Doubt has been expressed that comparisons of academic subjects such as Calculus and vocational subjects such as Career and Enterprise can be valid. It will require a combined position articulated by universities, TAFE and senior secondary schools to defend the standardisation process.

- **The external exam and benchmark testing have the capacity to place these potential benefits to drive the educational and assessment process.**

This must be scrupulously avoided if the integrity of the outcomes based approach is to be maintained. A clear statement to this effect will help to allay fears.

3. The financial implications of the proposed changes

There will be a significant cost to schools in implementing this reform:

- Professional development costs will be very high and this will need to be provided centrally.
- Once teachers have had their initial central professional development, it will be important that a range of models are available to provide continuous support to teachers. Their largest need will be for time to develop their programs and to come to terms with the implication of an outcomes focus for their teaching. They will also need opportunities to discuss and share their ideas with colleagues.
- The most significant cost to the system will be the disruption to normal teaching while preparation for the change occurs. Teachers should be given the option of working on a contract basis after school, on weekends and during holidays to minimise the impact on their existing classes. This should be managed at the school level, with the principal accountable for the professional development outcomes.
- Although we anticipate that the majority of curriculum resources will be similar to those existing, some courses of study may require different resources, such as textbook sets. These needs must be monitored carefully and one-off supplementary resources provided in the school grant on a case by case basis.
- Once the new system is in place, there will be a significant cost to the system of conducting external assessments that validly assess outcomes in the diverse range of courses of study proposed. Moderation activities will be a major cost to schools and systems.

4. The effect of extending outcomes-based curriculum, assessment and reporting to upper secondary education

The following two points may need to be reconsidered in light of the recent agreement with Federal Minister for Education.

- Assessment of student achievement will be much more specific and teachers will be able to be more specific in setting standards.
- Reporting will provide more meaningful information to parents and students about their progress.
- Students will complete K-12 schooling under the same system and will find it much easier to progress through levels when all sectors are using uniform systems and procedures.
- The overall standard of education should increase because many who are currently 'left behind' in our system will be catered for.
- We will be in a better position to cater for students who are at educational risk because we can tailor programs to suit their needs.
- Transition between sectors and from Year 10 to Year 11 will be much smoother and student academic data will be transferable, enabling a continuous monitoring of progress.
- Teachers and schools will be able to account more directly and accurately for the quality of their programs and the achievement of their students.

5. The effect of the amalgamation of TEE and non-TEE subjects and assessment

- The traditional division of students into 'University' and 'non-University' groups will no longer exist. In the new system, students will choose courses based on their existing achievement level, interests and future needs. They will choose the University option when they elect to sit an exam similar to the current TEE.
- Instead of a "one size fits all" approach (the current syllabus system in TEE courses), teachers will have far more flexibility to develop programs that are relevant to their particular class. As a result of the flexibility, we expect that more students will engage in learning and, therefore, more will complete their schooling before taking up employment and training.
- Students are less likely to be "left behind" by being offered content far above their ability. Contrary to concerns about "dumbing down" of education, students will also have the chance to be extended into areas of vocational or academic interest and challenge. As a result, we can reasonably expect more students to demonstrate visible improvement in their existing levels of achievement.
- There will be greater capacity to expose university bound students to vocational as well as academic learning. Currently, these students learn little about the practicalities of employment.
- Students will have more choice in their post-school options as they will not be locked in to either University or TAFE/employment. There will still be clear standards to enter TAFE or University courses and students will be able to keep their options open until they are more certain of their goals. Currently, TEE students are limited to University entry pathway. If they fail to achieve the necessary grades in their more difficult TEE subjects then they have little chance of getting into TAFE. Students who do not elect TEE subjects have difficulties if they find that a University course is more suited to their career aspirations.
- The balance between school-based and external assessment is a key question that needs to be addressed. There are many questions concerning the role, place and cost of external assessment, but there is also undeniable pressure from the community and many teachers to have external assessment as a key component of our reform. We believe that if the current proposal to retain a 50:50 mix of school based and external assessment is implemented, then it is likely that the external assessment will continue to drive the curriculum as it does in TEE subjects currently. This will narrow course scope and reduce flexibility at a time when we had hoped these would increase.
- We believe that teachers provide more valid judgments of students' achievement levels because they make these judgments over time and within more authentic contexts. It therefore follows that teachers' assessments should be highly valued and a dominant component of students' final ratings or academic achievement score, and that external assessments should have a less dominant role. This could be achieved by reducing external exams in length and have school assessment contribute 75% and the external assessment contribute 25% to the final result.

- The exam component could be used to 'validate' the schools' assessment and thus give the community confidence in the school-based assessments although there is a grave danger that it may be given more weight than teachers considered and detailed judgement of a student's work over several years. It also has the potential to become the benchmark by which teachers' assessments are assessed.

6. Any related matters that the Committee considers necessary to investigate

How will the new system affect employers?

- There is no question that the new reporting system will be a major change for employers to absorb. However, employers will receive more detailed information about what students have *demonstrated* (on more than one occasion) and will thus be able to be more confident about students' potential as future employees.
- Students will have greater opportunity to link their education with career options. Therefore, employers can expect students to have developed some skills directly relevant to the workplace.

A unified approach to TAFE and university selection

- In the last decade TAFE has done a great job in establishing and implementing its selection processes based on academic merit and relevance. The universities have continued to support a single system for university entrance based on the Tertiary Entrance Rank. If two distinct systems continue then the public view that university entrance is more important than TAFE entrance will continue. It would be highly desirable if the 'academic merit' could be derived in a similar way for TAFE and university entrance.

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