HSC Advisory Bulletin 2010

Advice for the 2010 Higher School Certificate following a review of the 2009 examinations

The purpose of this annual advisory bulletin is to provide general advice to teachers of all Higher School Certificate courses to share with their Year 12 and Year 11 students.

This document should be read in conjunction with other significant HSC information, most importantly:

- detailed advice on specific subjects in the 2009 Notes From The Marking Centres
- HSC Assessment Policies including the new report on exam rule breaches
- 2009 HSC Performance Band Descriptors
- How Your HSC Works a new, plain English description of the entire HSC process.

2009 HSC Examination Summary

A record candidature with results released in record time.

In 2009 a record 69,261 students were entered for about 450,000 individual external examinations, including major projects and performances. Exams were held in 747 centres in NSW, as well as a number of interstate and overseas venues.

About 10 percent of all exams were marked onscreen via secure internet. The speed, efficiency and success of this program means it will be expanded in 2010.

Term 4 in 2009 was unusually short, and the Board thanks schools, markers and support staff for making it possible to conduct the examination and marking program, and release the results, before the end of Term 4.

Incidents such as the North Coast floods and the state-wide dust storms during Music performance examinations were well managed by schools putting alternate arrangements in place for students. The Board’s illness/misadventure appeals program also supported students adversely affected by these events.

Some schools and students expressed concern about questions in Studies of Religion and English Paper 1. However, marking and review processes ensured that all responses were treated fairly and that results were a valid and reliable reflection of students’ knowledge, skills and understanding.

Alerts for 2010 Examination Specifications

Be aware that new examination specifications apply for some courses in 2010.

In 2008 the Board decided to change the specifications for some HSC exams from 2010. This will result in new formats for some exam papers this year. Advice about these changes has been issued on many occasions since 2008 and full details are available on the Board’s website. In many courses, the changes are very small or non-existent; in others, the Board has produced important support material to help teachers understand the new approach. Any teachers who are not yet familiar with these changes should check the Board’s website for full details and ensure the advice is passed on to HSC students.
Glossary of Key Words

The key words published by the Board are not the only verbs used in examination questions.

The Board’s Glossary of Key Words contains some terms commonly used in examination questions. The glossary is a useful guide to question formats, but it is not exhaustive; HSC students must be prepared for many kinds of questions. Teachers should ensure students are not solely relying on the glossary in their preparation for the exams. Teachers should advise students that not all HSC questions will start with or even include one of the key words from the glossary. The Board may ask questions such as ‘how?’, ‘why?’ or ‘to what extent?’ and use verbs that are not included in the glossary, such as ‘design’, ‘translate’ or ‘list’.

Question Format

Examination committees will use a range of question types that may vary from year to year.

In 2009 some HSC students showed concern if a style of question was introduced that had not appeared in previous exams or specimen papers. Teachers should ensure students do not assume they can prepare for an exam solely on the basis of past papers. Each year the examination committees follow a framework provided by the specifications found in the Assessment and Reporting document for each HSC subject. These specifications give committees flexibility to vary previous question formats. While committees will never set out to ‘trick’ students, they will also avoid creating an overly predictable examination. Committees will use a range of question types that may vary from year to year.

Questions with Stimulus Material

Examination committees may use stimulus material where they believe it is necessary. This may change from year to year.

In 2009 some students reported being surprised by the inclusion of stimulus material in particular examination papers. Stimulus material – such as artwork, quotations or maps – may be included in a question for a number of reasons. For example, a map, drawing or quotation may provide a focus for analysis or interpretation. The question will make clear the intention of the images or words in the stimulus. Teachers must prepare students to carefully read and analyse each question on its merits.

The appearance or absence of questions with stimulus material in any given year does not indicate that stimulus material will be used in the same section in subsequent years’ examinations.

Multiple-choice Questions

Multiple-choice questions require selecting the best of the available answers.

In 2009 a number of students reported concern about particular multiple-choice questions. Multiple-choice questions provide students with a range of possible answers (distractors) from which to choose. This type of question requires students to have a degree of certainty about their knowledge and understanding of the subject.
The purpose of distractors is to present a range of options that appear to be feasible. Some distractors could be correct in a given set of circumstances but are not the best overall answer. In other cases distractors may be partially right with some element of incorrect information. If teachers find their students are uncertain how to judge the ‘best possible’ answer they may need to provide additional advice. The Board’s Test Yourself online multiple-choice questions are recommended as a useful way to practise this judgement.

Managing Difficult Questions

Students should expect that examinations will be challenging. Students should not expect that HSC exams will support the use of answers prepared in advance. HSC examinations are intended to be rigorous and to challenge students of all abilities. During 2009 the Board’s presiding officers reported an unusual number of students raising concerns about the difficulty of certain questions and, as a result, being unsettled during the examination. In some cases these students complained they had prepared and memorised answers that did not ‘fit’ the question, in other cases they were confused about the question itself.

Students should know that HSC questions are not designed to support answers prepared in advance. It is important that teachers prepare students to answer the questions revealed on the day of the exam rather than anticipating a particular type of question and memorising an answer to suit. Students must also understand that partially modifying an otherwise irrelevant memorised response will not lead to high marks. This point is made repeatedly in the Notes from the Marking Centre.

If students have difficulty understanding the question they should look for key words and identify the aspect of the course to which these relate. They are then in a position to formulate their answer from their relevant knowledge, understanding and skills.

If a student finds a question difficult they can expect that other students will also find it challenging. Making a best attempt at a question is a better strategy than a non-attempt. Markers are briefed to read each answer carefully to see the merit in the answer and to mark in a positive manner – that is, to look where marks can be awarded rather than taken away.

Student Entry for Vocational Education and Training (VET) Examinations

Vocational education students wishing to sit the HSC examination in these subjects must ensure that they have been entered for the exam by their school.

Exams are not compulsory in the Board’s vocational education and training courses but many students will choose to sit the exam, particularly if they want the course to be counted towards their ATAR calculation. Teachers may need to remind students to check their course entry details on Students Online for the correct information about whether or not the student will sit an exam.

In 2009 a very small number of VET students arrived at the wrong venue for their exam, being confused about whether it was held at school or TAFE. Additionally a few students arrived at school to sit a VET examination that they had not been entered for. These incidents were all resolved but could have been prevented by closer attention to VET students’ course entry details.
If students find the wrong information about their VET exam arrangements when they check Students Online they should immediately notify the school principal or Year 12 adviser.

**Acceptable Behaviour**

*Behaviour that impacts on the conduct of the HSC examinations can incur serious penalties.*

In 2009 the Board’s presiding officers raised some concerns about poor behaviour during the examinations. It is unacceptable for students to create disturbances during reading time or the examination. Examples include loud protests about the content of the exam, aggressive behaviour towards exam supervisors, shifting furniture, or generally distracting other students.

Presiding officers are instructed to exclude offending students from the examination room until they settle, then allow them to return to complete the examination. No additional time will be given to such students. If a student does not settle they will remain excluded from the examination and their paper will be marked on the work completed at that stage. Disruptive students may be reported for a breach of exam rules, which could result in cancellation of the examination and loss of their HSC.

**Courses Containing Projects and Performances**

*Students should be fully aware of and follow the requirements for major projects and performances.*

In 2009 a range of projects were received for marking where students had contravened the published rules in terms of size, scope and types of materials used, or that were received after the required date. Students must understand they may lose the chance to gain full marks if they do not meet the project requirements. The *Notes from the Marking Centre* identify this problem and should be read carefully by all teachers of subjects with major works.

Non-certification was also reported in 2009. In some cases the supervising teacher could not certify the authenticity of a student’s project as too much work occurred away from school. Other cases involved the student using assistance without appropriate acknowledgment.

These cases are investigated by the Board and penalties may be applied.

There were 147 cases of non-certification of projects in 2009. Upon investigation 79 received no penalty, 51 cases resulted in a reduced mark, 12 received zero marks and the penalty for five cases was cancellation of the course.

More advice exists on the Board’s website in the document *HSC examinations: projects, submitted works and performances – Information for Teachers.*

**Non-serious and Non-attempts**

*Students must be aware of the importance of making a genuine attempt at all questions.*

Students should enter the HSC exams knowing they have to make a genuine effort at each paper. The *HSC Rules and Procedures* describe the Board’s requirement that students make a ‘serious attempt’ to answer the exam questions – failure to do so is called a ‘non-attempt’.
The Board considers a student’s paper to be a non-attempt if there is no evidence of academic engagement with the paper. It is insufficient to answer multiple-choice questions only. Merely rewriting the question is not considered to be an adequate attempt at the paper. Non-serious attempts include frivolous or objectionable material.

Students identified as providing non-serious or non-attempts will be asked by the Board to justify why they should receive a result in the course concerned. The consequences may be significant and may include not receiving an award in the course concerned. This may render some students ineligible for the award of the Higher School Certificate.

In 2009 there were 211 non-attempts. The penalty in most cases was cancellation of the course.

Application for Special Examination Provisions

Applications for special provisions should be received by the end of Term 1 so that students can know, and be familiar with, the provisions granted well before the examination period.

In 2009 the Board received 4817 applications for special provisions. 2901 of these were approved in full, 1694 partially approved and 222 fully declined.

Students seeking special provisions can apply from the beginning of the year but should make their application no later the end of Term 1, except for emergencies (accidents and illness). Delayed applications can result in finalisation of arrangements very close to the examination with insufficient time to prepare for the approved provisions. Resolving matters early allows for the school to factor provisions in their planning, for the Board to produce appropriate papers for you where necessary and for you to practise and become familiar with working under these conditions.

A new booklet can be downloaded from the Board’s website to provide more information on Special Examination Provisions policy and procedures.

Breaches of Examination Rules and Malpractice

The Board’s rules and procedures regarding the HSC examinations are designed to ensure fairness for all. Know the rules and understand the consequences of breaches and malpractice.
During the 2009 HSC examinations there were a number of cases where students brought unauthorised material into the examination room. This included both written notes and recorded material on a phone or other electronic device. Individual consequences can be severe, including an award of zero marks for an examination, the cancellation of a course or loss of the HSC.

At the commencement of each examination presiding officers ask if anyone has unauthorised material. At that point all candidates may hand in any material accidentally brought into the room with no penalty.

Each student has signed on their confirmation of entry to the HSC that they are aware of the rules specified in the HSC Rules and Procedures booklet and have discussed these with their parent or guardian. Students should not complete this declaration lightly as action will be taken against students who fail to comply with the rules and procedures.

A common defence raised by students against allegations of malpractice is that they did not refer to unauthorised material they were found with. When their exam answer includes large proportions of the notes, some students claim that they have memorised their answer and did not refer to the unauthorised notes. This raises two important points for teachers to reinforce:

- firstly, students need to understand the Board will not accept this argument as a defence against having unauthorised material in the exam room
- secondly, this raises a broader concern that students are entering examinations with the intention of replicating a previously drafted and memorised answer without regard to the specific requirements of the question.

A further common defence is that the student discovered the material after the examination had commenced and thought it was too late to hand it in. Students are strongly advised to notify the supervisor immediately they become aware that this is the situation. Embarrassment is not an adequate reason for failing to hand in material.

In 2009, 11 cases of malpractice or breach of rules resulted in cancellation of these students’ exams; another three students received zero marks for a part of the paper.

**Illness/Misadventure**

*Illness/misadventure applications need to be supported by independent evidence that clarifies the impact on performance at the time of the examination.*

In 2009 there were a significant number of unsuccessful applications for illness or misadventure that did not include supporting documentation. An important principle is that the documentary evidence is obtained as close as possible to the time of the illness/misadventure. For example, a student who is ill during an examination should seek a doctor’s certificate immediately after the exam to support their application.

Misadventure provisions exist to support students where their performance is affected by circumstances beyond their control. Students should attend the examination even if they believe that they should be entitled to having an appeal upheld.

An important exception to this advice is that students should never risk harm in order to attend an HSC exam. Students isolated by flood, for example, should try to contact the Board of Studies and their school to see if other options exist, such as sitting the examination at a different centre. If not, they should remain wherever they are safest and be assured the appeals process will apply.
Students with an upheld illness/misadventure application will receive the higher of their examination mark (if any) and moderated school assessment mark as their examination mark for that course.

In 2009, 4400 individual illness/misadventure appeals were received. Of these 3987 were fully or partially upheld and 413 fully declined. In addition, schools submitted 104 group appeals and 60 were fully or partially upheld.

This advisory bulletin is intended to help teachers better prepare students for the HSC. If you have suggestions for possible improvements please forward them to service@bos.nsw.edu.au.