

SPECIAL PROVISIONS PROGRAM 2008 AUDIT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This audit has revealed that the Board-established benchmarks and standards for the granting of special provisions in each of the categories examined were consistently and rigorously applied across all applications. There was no evidence of the variable application of the benchmarks across the sample. As the audit was undertaken across a random sample of all schools, there is no evidence of any one schooling sector or location being treated differently from others.

The recommendations of this audit are presented in the context of a commitment to continuous improvement. The proposal for recalibration of some of the benchmarks is sound practice while other recommendations relate to enhancing the current system.

The standardised tests used as objective measures are appropriate and provide an objective basis to the decisions. Medical reports provide diagnoses and evidence of student special needs. The role of teacher comments is critical in the process as teachers observe the impact of the student's condition on their classroom and examination performance. The combination of these sources of evidence provides a sound basis for the decisions made to allocate the range of special provisions audited.

Recommendations

1. That consistent with sound practice, the Board undertake a calibration process for the writing speed benchmark.
2. That consistent with sound practice, the Board undertake a calibration process for the spelling and reading level benchmarks.
3. That the Board review the language used to designate the three types of extra time allocated under special provisions with a view to making the differences easily discernible.
4. That the Board consider ways in which the examination invigilators may be further supported in their implementation of the special provisions granted to students.
5. That the Board consider ways in which the statements about student class and examination performance could be enhanced in the teacher comments section of the application for special provisions.

6. That the Board strengthen the evidence required for the use of a computer as a special provision by requiring that a student typed work sample or HSC assessment task be produced under timed conditions.

SPECIAL PROVISIONS PROGRAM 2008

PURPOSE OF PROJECT

The purpose of this project is to undertake an audit of the conduct of the New South Wales Board of Studies 2008 Special Provisions Program for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) candidates.

TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Audit should report on the extent to which, in each of the cases drawn from a sample of 2008 applications, the aims of the Board's stated policy are being achieved. This should be done by considering each case and

- 1) establishing that the relevant documentation as set out in the Board's requirements sufficiently demonstrate the implications of the special need on the student's functioning in an examination situation; and
- 2) confirming or otherwise that the accommodation and/or adjustment offered to the student was appropriate and reasonable.

CONTEXT

The New South Wales Board of Studies (the Board) grants School Certificates (SC) and Higher School Certificates (HSC) to students who comply with the Education Act 1990 (NSW) and the Board's requirements. One of the requirements set by the Board could be a timed written examination to determine the extent of the student's learning.

The Board may approve special examination provisions for students with a special need that would in a normal examination situation prevent them from reading the examination questions and /or communicating responses.

These provisions may be made for the areas of Learning Difficulties, Medical Difficulties, Hearing Difficulties or Vision Difficulties.

At all times, the provisions granted will be solely determined by the implications of the student's functioning in an examination situation and the limitations for the student in demonstrating their learning through the

examination process. Compensation is not given for difficulties in undertaking a course or preparing for an examination and no compensation is provided for a lack of familiarity with the English language.

Appeals supported by additional information are able to be submitted and are assessed using the same framework used in assessing the original application.

A separate program to address occurrences of Illness or Misadventure affecting examination participation also is provided by the Board.

The focus of this audit is the operation of the Special Provisions Policy only as it applied to the HSC in 2008.

A separate independent audit has been commissioned to examine procedures established for the implementation of the Special Provisions Policy and the implementation of these procedures. This particular audit focuses on the information about the precise nature of the special need and the consequent effect on the student's examination performance; and the appropriateness and reasonableness of the decisions made using this information.

In 2008, 67,327 students presented for an assessment in at least one HSC subject. Of these, 65,759 students enrolled for at least one examination. There was a total of 4,613 applications for some kind of special provisions to enable the students to demonstrate the extent of their learning through the examination process. This represents 7.0% of the total cohort eligible to apply for Special Examination Provisions. Of these, 3,281 (71%) were granted the requested kinds of special provisions while 1,173 (25%) were granted some of those sought or alternate provisions. 159 (3%) of the student applications were entirely declined. (Data provided by New South Wales Board of Studies).

It should be noted that the majority of applications for special provisions included claims for more than one of the special provisions provided by the Board. Some students were granted all those provisions they sought as they met the Board-established criteria for each one, others met some but not other criteria and therefore had some special provision declined and others approved, while others were granted special provisions different from those claimed, based on the evidence provided. Data to represent the complexity of special provisions as it is operating for the HSC examinations therefore is very difficult to present in a meaningful manner.

Recent media articles focused on information gained by a Member of Parliament and based on a selection of 47 schools from the independent sector. These articles had implied that these schools were “rorting” the Special Provisions policy framework. (Sydney Morning Herald, 26 May 2008, 29 December 2008, 1 January 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The main focus of this audit was the Medical and Learning Difficulty areas of application. Within these categories students are able to seek, for example, the support of a writer, the use of a personal computer, extra time to write, extra time to work, and extra time to rest. These five provisions were selected as the focus of this audit as they vary the circumstances of the examination and attract scrutiny from some members of the community. Other provisions such as coloured paper or the use of a padded chair are ‘neutral’ and therefore not contentious.

Sample of applications provided by the Board for the audit.

To ensure that a selection of applications from the 47 nominated schools were included in this random spot audit process, the applications from these schools were separated from the other applications in each of the categories. To achieve a reasonable sample for this audit of approximately 30 applications for each provision, a proportional selection in each of the two groups for each category was made.

Use of a writer/scribe

Of the 2,009 students who were considered for the support of a writer/scribe, 1,852 students were granted this provision and 157 were declined. To achieve randomness and to ensure that a selection from the nominated schools was included, every 13th application from the nominated list of schools was selected and every 89th application from the other schools was selected. For the applications which were declined every second application from schools on the nominated list and every 13th application from other schools were selected. This provided a randomized selection of approximately 30 applications for consideration by the auditor. A random selection of approximately 20 was chosen by the auditor from the Board supplied sample.

This procedure was replicated for each of the other categories in the following manner.

Extra time to write

Of the 1,839 applications received for extra time to write, 1,374 were granted and 465 were declined. For the 1,374 applications granted, every 8th application from the list of nominated schools and every 68th

application from the remainder of schools were selected. For the 465 applications declined, every 11th one from the nominated list and every 35th one from the other schools were selected.

Extra time to work

Of the 1,539 applications for the use of extra time, 1,127 were granted and 412 were declined. For the 1,539 applications granted every 7th application from the nominated list of schools was selected and every 55th from the list of the remaining schools. For the 412 applications declined, every 10th application from the nominated schools and every 30th from the other schools were selected.

Extra time to rest

Of the 2,656 applications for extra time to rest, 2,565 applications were granted and 91 were declined. For the 2,565 applications granted, every 113th application from the list of nominated schools and every 30th application from other schools were selected. For the 91 applications declined, all from the nominated list and every 8th from the other schools were selected.

Use of a personal computer

Of the 392 applications for the use of a personal computer, 184 were granted and 208 were declined. For the 184 applications granted, every second application from schools on the nominated list was selected and every 8th application from other schools. For the applications declined, every 5th application on the nominated list and every 15th application from other schools were selected.

During the audit of the special provision of the use of a writer, it was noted that while this provision had been approved, other provisions sought had been declined. Each of these decisions was reviewed against the relevant Board-established benchmarks. As a consequence it was resolved that the audit would focus on a sample of approved applications and that no additional applications which were declined would be reviewed.

The Board provided samples of applications which were declined for each category should it appear during the audit that it was appropriate for these to be reviewed as well.

USE OF A WRITER

The application of this special provision enables a student to dictate their answers to a scribe and provides for an additional 5 minutes per half hour of examination to compensate for the dictation process.

The audit process for this category involved the auditor examining the evidence provided through the school to support the application and an assessment of this evidence against the criteria and benchmarks established by the Board. Approved applications were scrutinized as well as those which were declined.

Approved applications for a writer

Thirty four of the selected applications which were approved were scrutinized applying the criteria. Criteria used included the speed of writing which was determined by considering two pieces provided by the student, one piece being an HSC assessment task undertaken under examination conditions, and the other one being an essay undertaken in a supervised timed environment. The teacher advice about the student's writing performance observed in class and over a longer period of time was also considered.

In a small number of cases the use of a writer was granted where the student work was designated to be illegible by expert panel members. The illegibility could be due to poor letter formation or spelling limitations, the latter of which required the use of a standardised South Australian Spelling Test.

In all of these cases audited, the decision made was consistent with the application of the Board benchmark with a writer being granted where a student demonstrated a writing speed that was less than the accepted standard and the teacher comments were consistent with this result.

The use of writing speed tests and standardised spelling tests, complemented by expert panel advice and teacher comments is a strong basis for demonstrating a student's special need.

This is therefore an appropriate and reasonable evidence base to inform the decision whether a student should be granted the use of a writer in order that they may demonstrate their learning. A special provision which addresses the limitations for a student to demonstrate their learning owing to their hand writing (which is outside the normal speed range and legibility of the cohort) is an appropriate strategy.

Declined applications for a writer

Twenty one applications for the use of a writer which were declined were also audited by the same process.

In all of these cases audited, the writing speed as recorded through the pieces of student work presented indicated that this was in excess of the standard set by the Board and therefore the student was not eligible for this special provision. Teacher comments were consistent with, and supported, the decisions made.

EXTRA TIME TO WRITE

The application of this special provision provides the student with an additional 2.5 minutes per half hour of examination time.

The audit process for this category also involved the auditor examining the evidence provided through the school to support the application and an assessment of this evidence against the criteria and benchmarks established by the Board. Only applications for which the use of extra time to write was granted were scrutinized

Approved applications for extra time to write

Twenty applications for the use of extra time to write were audited against the criteria established by the Board. The evidence used for the speed of writing was the same as that described in the previous section where two pieces of student work produced under timed conditions were submitted. In the same way as the process used for the allocation of a writer, teacher comments also were used in the decision making process.

In all cases audited, the criteria were appropriately applied with only those whose speed of writing was below the Board-established benchmark being granted additional time for writing.

The submission of two pieces of student work produced under test conditions in a timed environment, including one which contributes to the HSC results, is a strong evidence base for demonstrating a special need with regard to writing speed.

For students whose writing speed is below the normal range for the Year 12 HSC cohort, it is reasonable and appropriate that they should be granted additional time to demonstrate their learning in the examination process and not have this curtailed by their writing speed.

EXTRA TIME (TO WORK)

The granting of this special provision provides students with 5 minutes per half hour of examination time. During this time, students are able to read, write, or rest. While the time allowed is the same for the category which

provides extra time to rest, the circumstances differ in that during students granted extra time to rest are not allowed to read nor write during the rest break.

The audit process for this special provision involved the auditor reviewing the reading test scores provided for the student against the Board-established benchmarks. The reading tests are administered by school-based counselors or other appropriate experts at a school and are therefore available to all students.

Approved applications for extra time

Twenty one applications for extra time (to work) were reviewed by the auditor. The results of one of two nominated reading tests administered by the school are required as evidence for this special provision.

In all cases audited, the benchmarks were consistently and rigorously applied by the Board.

The use of standardised reading tests, augmented by teacher comments on the limitations the student's condition imposes on their classroom and examination performance, provides a sound evidence base of a special need of the student.

Students who are slow readers and who need to re-read several times to ensure comprehension of examination questions (especially those that have significant amounts of contextual information as a part of the question) should not be penalised in their ability to demonstrate their learning. Allowing extra time for this is both reasonable and appropriate.

EXTRA TIME TO REST

The granting of this special provision provides the student with 5 minutes per half hour of examination time to rest. During this time, students are not able to read nor write and are required to turn over both examination paper and student work. The time is to be used for rest and refocusing.

The audit process for this special provision involved the auditor reviewing all evidence provided through the school. Teacher comments and medical advice, and notification of formal diagnoses made up most of the evidence provided.

Approved applications for extra time to rest

Twenty two approved applications for extra time to rest were included in the audit. Confirmed diagnoses of, for example, ADD/ADHD were provided by medical specialists. Teacher comments that provided evidence of student difficulty with focus and concentration in class and examination situations was also considered. Other students who demonstrated limitations in ability to write over extended periods, often incurring significant pain in the process, were also granted extra time to rest.

In all cases audited, the allocation of extra time to rest was well supported by the medical advice and the teacher comments about the student in class and under timed test conditions.

Expert advice, medical diagnoses and teacher comments about the student behavior and performance in class, and under timed test conditions, provides a sound evidence base of a student's special need and therefore the allocation of additional time to rest based on this evidence is reasonable.

The impact of the medical condition on the classroom and examination performance provided the educational context for the medical expert advice and therefore the combination of these two pieces of evidence is appropriate.

USE OF A PERSONAL COMPUTER

The application of this special provision provides the student with the use of a personal computer, large font sizes if needed and relevant software in a secure, supervised environment.

The audit process for this special provision involved the auditor reviewing all evidence provided through the school. Much of this evidence had been provided by medical experts who had an established longer term doctor-patient relationship with the student.

Approved applications for the use of a personal computer

Twenty two applications for the use of a computer which were approved were considered by the audit. The evidence provided varied according to the student circumstances. The majority of decisions examined in this audit were based on medical evidence with many students having long term medical histories supporting the use of personal computers in the

examinations. A consistent approach was used by the Board in cases where there was not sufficient evidence to support the essential use of a personal computer and instead the students were offered the special provision of the use of a writer. Some of these students provided additional medical advice that caused the Board to uphold the appeal and allow the use of a personal computer instead of a writer.

The use of the medical specialists in determining the final decision about the special provision was consistently applied and the expert panel advice implemented. In very complex cases or where conflicting advice was provided, second opinions and the involvement of more senior officers was evident. Final decisions were balanced, fair and reasonable.

The combination of medical advice and teacher comment on examination performance provides a sound evidence base of a student's special need.

The Board asserts that the HSC is a writing based assessment and by implication students should prepare for demonstrating their learning through this medium. The introduction of personal computers and associated software has enabled students to access HSC curriculum and to demonstrate their learning. It is appropriate therefore in the context of a writing based assessment that the use of personal computers is included in the Special Provisions Policy framework to facilitate student access.

ANALYSIS AND OVERVIEW

Writing speed benchmarks

In 2000, the Board undertook a research project using a sample of the 1999 student scripts for the SC and HSC examinations in two subjects for which students across the whole student cohort participated. The average writing speed of each of these was calculated and a benchmark standard for the SC and HSC was determined. It is this benchmark which has been rigorously applied across both categories of special provision where students were granted the use of a writer and extra time to write. It is an appropriate measure for the speed of writing and provides an objective benchmark to use in the decision making process.

The use of the HSC assessment task ensures that students apply themselves to the best of their ability in the preparation of the piece of work.

In view of the fact that this work was undertaken in 1999, it would be appropriate to plan for a repetition of this research during the marking process for the 2009 SC and HSC examinations or undertake some other form of calibration process. This would enable the Board to recalibrate this standard if necessary or to confirm the application of the current standard for future years.

It is important to note that this audit has not revealed any trend of inconsistency between the teacher comments and the speed of writing scores of students. The following recommendation is made in the context of sound practice and the need to regularly calibrate benchmarks and standards used.

RECOMMENDATION

- 1. That consistent with sound practice, the Board undertake a calibration process for the writing speed benchmark.**

Reading and spelling level benchmarks

The use of externally developed standardised tests to determine reading and spelling levels provides appropriate benchmarks for use in the decision making process about the granting of a writer in the case of low spelling levels, and the allocation of extra time (to work ie read or write) in the case of low reading levels. The latter allows students to manage their own examination process but accommodates limitations associated with their low reading levels.

These benchmarks were reviewed in 2000 at the same time as the research was undertaken to establish the writing speed benchmarks. Consistent with sound practice, it would be appropriate for these benchmarks to be reviewed and recalibrated at the same time as the writing speed benchmarks.

RECOMMENDATION

- 2. That consistent with sound practice, the Board undertake a calibration process for the spelling and reading level benchmarks**

Terminology

There are three types of extra time. Each one has specific and different provisions. Extra time to write allows 2.5 minutes per half hour of examination, extra time (to work) allows 5 minutes per half hour of examination. Extra time to rest while allowing 5 minutes per half hour of

examination does not allow the student to undertake any examination work.

As an outsider to the system, the auditor found this terminology confusing and difficult to quickly understand the provisions which were being provided under each classification. It is suggested therefore, that the Board review the language that is used to designate each of these special provisions in order that they are more obvious to the general community.

It is further noted that while the Presiding Officers are trained by the Board to ensure a secure and fair examination process, the invigilators receive a briefing by the Presiding Officer. The potential for confusion in the kinds of extra time that are allowed and the circumstances of a particular student's extra time classification could lead to unfair examination circumstances, either advantageous or disadvantageous to the student.

RECOMMENDATION

- 3. That the Board review the language used to designate the three types of extra time allocated under special provisions with a view to making the differences easily discernible.**
- 4. That the Board consider ways in which the examination invigilators may be further supported in their implementation of the special provisions granted to students.**

Role of teacher comments.

In all cases, teacher comments contributed significantly to the final decision for granting a special provision.

For example, the special provisions providing the use of a writer and extra time to write, require hand written essay samples under timed conditions. This provides a writing speed benchmark which is an appropriate objective basis for a decision about the granting of such a special provision. The use of teacher comments to provide further evidence strengthens the grounds for the decision. Teachers are able to observe students in class and mark their written work regularly which provides them with a sound basis for more subjective comments.

The use of at least three sources of information about the capacity of the student to write at a reasonable rate under examination conditions strengthens the final decision by the triangulation of these pieces of information. In some cases additional information provided by the

student from other professionals (eg an Occupational Therapist) was also considered as an adjunct to the primary sources of information for decision making, being the student material and teacher comments.

In the cases where standardised tests are not appropriate, the Board must recognize the expertise of professionals in other areas. This is particularly relevant in the advice provided about the impact of medical conditions on for example, a student's concentration and ability to focus for an extended period of time. The use of teacher comments again is of significance in that they observe the student's behaviour over an extended period of time in a classroom and also during timed test situations. Once again this is appropriate and strengthens the validity of the decision to grant or decline a special provision.

Teacher comments therefore are critical for ensuring the appropriate and reasonable decisions about the special provisions to be granted. During the audit, it was noted that some of the teacher comments tended to be less focused on the question of how the student's condition affected them in class and in examinations. The layout of the form has two teacher comments on the first page and the remainder of the teachers' comments on the next page. There is no refocusing question at the top of the second page and it appears that in the absence of the question to focus the teachers on the impact of the student condition, some teachers provided a more general school report card comment. A redesign of the form with a focus for each teacher comment could improve the usefulness of more of the teacher comments in the decision making process. This matter should also be addressed in any on line approach to the submission of the application forms.

RECOMMENDATION

- 5. That the Board consider ways in which the statements about student class and examination performance could be enhanced in the teacher comments section of the application for special provisions.**

Use of medical specialist evidence

Students present a variety of medical conditions which impact on their ability to demonstrate their learning through the examination process. The provision of medical evidence is therefore essential in the decision making process. The use of the expert Panel to review this evidence and provide advice to the Board is an essential strategy to bridge the gap between the education and medical professions. Once again, the teacher comment on the impact of the diagnosed medical condition on the

classroom and examination performance is critical to a sound and valid decision being made.

Typing Speed

The student population has a very diverse facility with a keyboard. Some students provided results of expert administered, timed tests demonstrating their speeds of writing, using a scribe and using a keyboard to indicate that they were not gaining an advantage by using a computer with respect to the number of words that they would be able to produce in an examination response. There was some evidence in applications (not necessarily for the use of a personal computer) that other students when tested demonstrated that their typing speed was much greater than the normal writing speed range for the HSC cohort.

It is suggested that the Board consider samples of student work, produced using a computer in a timed test environment, as evidence required to support an application for the use of a computer in examinations. A cohort norm for the range of writing speed for the HSC cohort could be adopted and this could then be used as a benchmark to ensure that students are not gaining an unfair advantage by using a computer granted under special provisions.

In the sample audited, it is the view of the auditor that given the evidence provided in the applications reviewed, students granted the use of a computer did not gain an unfair advantage in terms of the volume that could be typed in the time of the examination.

RECOMMENDATION

- 6. That the Board strengthen the evidence required for the use of a computer as a special provision by requiring that a student typed work sample, or HSC assessment task, be produced under timed conditions.**

SUMMARY

This audit has revealed that the Board-established benchmarks and standards for the granting of special provisions in each of the categories examined were consistently and rigorously applied across all applications. There was no evidence of the variable application of the benchmarks across the sample. As the audit was undertaken across a random sample

of all schools, there is no evidence of any one schooling sector or location being treated differently from others.

The recommendations of this audit are presented in the context of a commitment to continuous improvement. The proposal for recalibration of some of the benchmarks is sound practice while other recommendations relate to enhancing the current system.

The standardised tests used as objective measures are appropriate and provide an objective basis to the decisions. Medical reports provide diagnoses and evidence of student special needs. The role of teacher comments is critical in the process as teachers observe the impact of the student's condition on their classroom and examination performance. The combination of these sources of evidence provides a sound basis for the decisions made to allocate the range of special provisions audited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Ms Catherine Young, Executive Assistant to the President, ensured that I was welcomed into the work space and supported efficiently in my requirements.

Dr John Bennett, General Manager and Ms Carol Taylor, Director, Curriculum and Assessment have provided the context of the project and guidance about the boundaries of this audit in the context of other audits commissioned in this area. I thank them for this advice and for the

opportunity to undertake this project which I have found to be interesting and rewarding to undertake.