

PROPOSED CHANGES TO HSC EXAMINATIONS AND SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

Background Paper

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Introduction

A complex program like the NSW Higher School Certificate maintains its 'gold standard' reputation through regular monitoring and evaluation, and by responding to issues as they arise through refinements to policies and practices.

Recently, the Board has been considering aspects of the examinations and school assessment. This follows the findings of the Board's 2006 Assessment Roundtable and the ICAC report released in 2007 that have provided important insights into the HSC program and identified inconsistencies and other issues that need to be addressed. The regular evaluation reports the Board receives have also raised issues that need further consideration.

These issues can be summarised as:

- concerns about over-assessment and excessive examination pressure leading to an increase in stress levels for students
- inconsistencies in the assessment and examination requirements of different courses that create an imbalance between the workload for students.

The Board of Studies is proposing to respond to the issues by:

- reducing the complexity of the assessment requirements and examination structures to make them clearer and more manageable for students and teachers, while still maintaining high standards and rigour
- amending the requirements and structures, where necessary, while ensuring that for each course the examination and assessment program allow for sound, fair and reliable measures to be made of each student's achievement
- providing greater guidance to students and teachers about the Board's requirements for examinations and school assessment.

The changes proposed should be seen as "fine-tuning" a program that is running well but nevertheless can always be improved. Any changes will not be implemented before the 2010 HSC.

General issues and proposed actions to address the issues

1. Concerns about the excessive examination and assessment workload for students leading to an increase in stress levels

The NSW Higher School Certificate is a rigorous program that challenges students of all abilities to reach their highest standards of achievement.

Many students are likely to be anxious about the challenges of the HSC. It is important, however, that any negative stress they may experience is not exacerbated by an unnecessarily heavy workload imposed by over-assessment or excessive examination requirements.

In July 2006 the Board of Studies conducted a forum to consider the emerging features of the school assessment program in the 'New' Higher School Certificate. It was generally agreed that the assessment load on many HSC students was too great.

The school assessment program and the HSC examination should be the minimum sufficient to enable reliable assessments to be made of each student's achievement. Adding unnecessarily to students' workload by over-assessing can actually lead to a decrease in the reliability of the measurements.

To address the issues of over-assessment and workload and to reliably measure student achievement in each course the Board is proposing the actions outlined below.

a. Being more explicit in stating its requirements in relation to the number of tasks for each course

Currently the Board advises that three to five tasks are sufficient to assess a course, except in English where it is stated that five or six tasks are considered sufficient. Many schools set the number of tasks at the upper end of that limit, and some even set a much higher number of tasks in some courses.

This means that a student who is undertaking five two-unit courses could complete a total of 15 assessment tasks over four terms, or 25 (or more) tasks over four terms depending upon the practices of the school they attend. In the second case the student needs to prepare for and complete nearly twice as many tasks as in the first case. This would be on top of any other assessment activities or class exercises the student is given that are not part of the formal HSC assessment program.

Students and parents are often concerned when they realise there are such inconsistencies in the number of assessment tasks between schools and sometimes between courses within the same school.

PROPOSITION FOR RESPONSE

The Board will state that for a two-unit course only four assessment tasks are to be used and for a one-unit course only three assessment tasks are to be used.

b. Ensuring tasks and questions do not require excessively long responses or excessive amounts of materials to be produced to achieve a high mark

Many courses require students to produce a major project or deliver performances either as part of their school assessment or external examination. Students who take such courses are usually very committed to producing high quality works or performances. In some cases their enthusiasm leads them to spend a very large amount of time in their preparation. The time spent on such works and performances can be at the expense of their other learning or important activities outside of school. In the worst cases this commitment can lead to unhealthy stress and anxiety.

It is important to give students many opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills, and to achieve to their potential in these practical components. It is equally important to set manageable requirements so that students can still achieve the highest standards without needing to produce a large amount of material or spend an excessive amount of time. Students need to be reminded that they do not need to produce large amounts of materials in order to demonstrate that they have achieved the highest standards. Schools and students also need to be reminded that major projects do not require the use of expensive materials or equipment in order to achieve high marks.

c. Emphasising the features of a quality response to a question or task

A well designed assessment task or extended examination question requires students to think carefully about what is being asked, draw upon the knowledge, skills and understanding they have learned, and produce a well-argued and well-structured response that addresses the specific question. These features are emphasised in the rubrics in examination papers.

There is evidence that students would benefit from time in the examination to think and plan for these features. Students could use this time to study the question and plan their response. Students could also use some of the time to read through their response at the end and correct any errors or refine their response. This is a strategy that many teachers already emphasise with their students.

Students could also use the time to plan how to balance their answers in the examination as a whole so that they do not penalise themselves by not addressing all aspects of the question or by writing an unnecessarily long response and using time they should spend responding to other questions.

PROPOSITIONS FOR RESPONSE

The Board will review the specifications and requirements for each major project or performance that is part of its requirements in either the school assessment program or the external examination to ensure they do not require students to spend excessive amounts of time in producing these components.

The Board will ensure that works of a high standard chosen for inclusion in its HSC Standards Packages and in the showcase events and exhibitions (such as ArtExpress and DesignTech) are works that illustrate how that high standard can be demonstrated within a reasonable amount of time, cost and effort.

PROPOSITIONS FOR RESPONSE

The Board will incorporate reading and planning time into examinations. During this time students will be able to read the questions and make notes or prepare an outline of the structure of their responses. They will not be allowed to write their actual responses during this time.

In order not to extend the duration of the examination this time will be included as part of the examination time. That is, for a three-hour examination, 10 minutes of that time will be reading and planning time.

d. Providing further advice on what is expected of students in responding to examination questions

Examination questions and assessment tasks must give students guidance about the expected length and scope of their response. This will help students to avoid spending too much time on questions worth few marks and not having sufficient time to respond to questions where a more detailed response is required. At present:

- All examination questions have their mark value printed on the examination paper.
- Suggested times to spend on various sections of the examination are provided.
- Where students respond on the actual question paper printed lines are provided on which they write their responses.
- Some examinations provide an indication of the length of response expected. For example, some questions in the extension languages examinations requiring a written response include an instruction “Write approximately 300 words”. In addition, the Musicology elective of the 2 Unit Music course requires students to “submit ONE essay of 1500 words on an aspect of the additional topic studied in the HSC course”.
- The Examination Specifications for Performance components of examinations also include details about the scope of the performance. For example, in the Core Composition of the Dance examination students “choreograph a solo ‘Dance’ of between three and five minutes duration . . .”.

Students will be given further advice about what is expected when answering different types of questions. This can be done by:

- reinforcing that a question worth (say) three marks does not require an answer of the length and complexity as a question worth (say) 10 marks.
- demonstrating through examples that where lines are provided the number of lines is sufficient to produce an answer that will receive full marks.
- providing in the examination specifications an indicative number of pages, or similar advice, to give students and teachers a clear understanding of the scope of the response expected.

Students may write less than or more than what is expected and their responses will be marked on their merits.

This advice will be an important guide to the Board’s examination committees when they are preparing the papers. They will need to check that students can produce high-quality responses covering the full scope of the questions within the time and indicative writing space.

PROPOSITION FOR RESPONSE

The Board will provide further guidance on how much is required in answers to various types of questions, including an indicative number of pages, or similar advice, for all examination questions requiring an extended written response.

2. Inconsistencies in the assessment and examination requirements of courses with the Board's principles

a. Removing limits on the proportions of certain types of tasks that can be used in the school assessment component

The ICAC report released in 2007 identified a corruption risk for the Board to address in identifying and dealing with cheating and malpractice in 'take home' tasks used as part of the HSC assessment component.

The Board of Studies has endorsed a plan of action that includes modifying HSC assessment and examination specifications as necessary to remove excessive or problematic requirements.

The Assessment Requirements for some courses include a limit on the proportion of marks that can come from tests and examinations. A typical statement is "Examinations such as class tests, term tests and trials must not exceed 30% of the assessment program".

The Board proposes to remove any prescribed limit on particular types of assessment tasks so that teachers have greater flexibility in using assessment tasks that can be more carefully supervised for authenticity. Removing this constraint also means that teachers will no longer need to create a range of non-test type tasks that often require a substantial amount of work and commitment of time on the part of the students.

Schools will still have the freedom to select the tasks to be included in their assessment programs provided those tasks are suitable for the knowledge, skills and understanding being assessed.

In courses where a particular type of task is considered fundamental to the learning in the course then this will be specified.

PROPOSITIONS FOR RESPONSE

For those courses where they currently exist the Board will remove specified limits on the proportion of a school's assessment mark that can come from tests and examinations.

Where a particular type of task is essential to the valid assessment of a course and that task can be conducted in a reliable and efficient manner that task will be included in the Assessment Requirements for that course.

b. Providing greater consistency in assessment components and weightings

The mandatory components used for the HSC internal assessment program vary in nature across – and sometimes within – the key learning areas. Types of components generally fall into three categories:

- groupings of objectives or outcomes (Mathematics, Science and Languages)
- syllabus topics (English, some HSIE, TAS, PD/H/PE, Creative Arts)
- types of assessment tasks (some HSIE, English Extension 2).

In some courses a mixture of types is used.

Components that are based on syllabus topics create difficulties in devising assessment programs that meet the requirements. It can be difficult to devise an effective and efficient assessment program based on topics that gives an appropriate percentage to each topic, particularly when teachers strive to complete as much of the course as possible before the trial examination.

Similarly, there is no sound basis for having task types as assessment components, other than an attempt to ensure the program uses a variety of types of tasks.

Objectives and outcomes are fundamental to courses. Components that are based around objectives or groupings of outcomes are the most appropriate approach. They allow teachers to use assessment tasks that are appropriate to the outcomes being assessed, and to design an assessment program that links appropriate content to the various outcomes and tasks.

c. **Making the duration of each examination consistent with the Board's principles for developing examination specifications**

The Board's principles require that the time allowed for an examination will be the minimum required for reliable measurement of the outcomes being assessed. In practice this means that written examination papers worth 100 marks are between two and three hours duration. Consequently, written examination papers worth 50 marks should be between one and one and a half hours in duration. However, while most written examinations worth 100 marks have three hours examining time, written examinations that are worth 50 marks are usually two hours in duration. The examination time for each course, particularly those outside the ranges need to be consistent with the Board's principles.

d. **Using different question types more consistently**

Most written HSC examinations contain several different types of questions. These can be classified as follows:

- Objective items – these questions usually require students to select the correct answer to a question from a number of possibilities. They include multiple-choice items, true/false items, cloze items, constrained response items, matching exercises and so on. Each of these items is usually worth one mark.
- Short-response items – these questions usually require students to provide a short written response to a question. Such items are often part of a larger question which has been broken into several parts. Students may need to write from a single word or short phrase up to perhaps one or two pages; or they may need to answer a mathematical, scientific or technological problem. Short-response items usually carry a mark value of between one and 10 marks.
- Extended response items – these questions usually require students to produce a single, substantial response. The response may require students to write perhaps four to six pages, although students often write more than this in some examinations. The questions usually have a mark value of between 15 and 25 marks.

PROPOSITION FOR RESPONSE

The Board will revise the components used as part of the Assessment Requirements to ensure they are based on a manageable set of objectives or groupings of outcomes.

PROPOSITION FOR RESPONSE

The Examination Specifications of all courses will be amended to ensure that the duration of each examination is consistent with the Board's principles.

Each different type of question has particular strengths and a combination of question types is used to give balance to the paper and to capitalise on the benefits each can bring. Too great a reliance on one question type can lead to inadequate coverage of the course content and may prevent all students from demonstrating the level of knowledge and skills they have developed.

In a number of cases the examination papers in courses that are based on similar outcomes have quite different proportions of the different item types. The Board proposes to modify the examination specifications in some courses to obtain greater consistency in the different item types used and to obtain a more even balance of item types across examinations.

e. Simplifying the complex structure of certain examinations

Many courses require all students to study a core section and then choose to study one or more optional sections. Students' performances in the examination questions based on the core section are used to obtain parity between the questions based on the optional sections.

In a number of examinations the core also contains optional questions itself. This means that some of the questions in the core are not answered by all students. This reduces the effectiveness of the core in obtaining parity between the different options. It can also be difficult in obtaining comparability between the different optional questions within the core.

In some courses students are required to study two or more options. The examinations in these courses often contain optional questions for each of the options. In other courses, there is only a single question in each option, but students have a choice as to which option(s) they will respond to.

This work will also provide an opportunity for the Board to improve the layout and structure of certain examination papers.

PROPOSITION FOR RESPONSE

The Board will revise the Examination Specifications to ensure the written examination in each course contains an appropriate mix of different item types and a better balance between the different items types.

PROPOSITION FOR RESPONSE:

The Board will review the Examination Specifications in those courses which have a core section and optional sections and make appropriate adjustments to obtain greater consistency in the structure of the examinations and optimise the measurement properties of the examinations without compromising the particular knowledge domain of the course.

Specific changes for assessment and examinations for each course

For many courses there will be minimal or no change to the existing arrangements, as any adjustments will be within the scope of the current Examination Specifications and Assessment Requirements. In other cases some relatively minor changes to these documents will be required.

In the few cases where the changes are likely to be more significant the specific proposals or options will be the subject of broad consultation with the relevant parties.

Conclusion

The Higher School Certificate provides quality syllabuses that make clear to teachers what they are expected to teach, and quality examinations and assessment tasks that sample the syllabus content and enable valid and reliable judgements to be made about what students know and can do.

The HSC program deserves its high reputation. It is now timely to use the comments and information collected since the implementation of the changes to the Higher School Certificate in 2001 to review and fine-tune the examinations and assessment program to provide clear and manageable expectations for students and teachers and deliver the best and the fairest outcomes for all students.