Securing Their Future

The New South Wales Government’s reforms for the Higher School Certificate
Foreword

It is three and a half decades since the decision was taken to restructure New South Wales secondary education and establish the Higher School Certificate. Thirty-five years on, a number of problems have emerged. The Government is now reforming the Higher School Certificate to enhance its intellectual rigour, fairness and relevance to the needs, interests and capacities of senior school students. This will ensure its continuing quality and standing into the twenty-first century.

The New South Wales Government’s White Paper, Securing Their Future, introduces substantial reforms which respond to the significant increase in the range of young people who now wish to study for the Higher School Certificate. They also tackle the new challenges facing the curriculum at this level.

The Government is indebted to Professor Barry McGaw for the leadership and insight he has exercised in writing the Green Paper, Their Future, and, following the most extensive consultations in the history of the Higher School Certificate, his final report, Shaping Their Future. Professor McGaw has clearly identified problems in curriculum, assessment, and reporting and has recommended a comprehensive set of solutions.

The Government has accepted the major directions proposed by Professor McGaw, but will pursue other strategies in some cases. The final decisions, like Professor McGaw’s reports, reflect the over-riding themes of challenging students to achieve their best and of achieving greater fairness.

Securing Their Future honours the Government’s commitment to a stronger Higher School Certificate that parents, students, and the wider community will be able to understand. Students will be assessed fairly and validly on what they know, understand and can do. The Higher School Certificate will establish clear links to post-school pathways of education, training and employment.

The measures adopted by the Government in Securing Their Future build on the best features of the current Higher School Certificate and realise substantial improvements. The New South Wales Higher School Certificate will become a more rigorous, competitive, and externally-assessed credential meeting the educational needs of young people and securing their future.

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Overview

WHY CHANGE THE HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE?

The New South Wales Government was elected on a platform of creating a stronger, simpler and fairer Higher School Certificate. This was to achieve a number of key goals:

- to increase the rigour and quality of the HSC curriculum;
- to ensure HSC marks fairly reflect the standards achieved by students;
- to better equate the method of reporting achievement with concepts understood by the community; and
- to enhance the chances for more equitable educational outcomes.

These goals aim at providing the educational platform which will secure the future for our young people and place New South Wales at the forefront of Australian education.

To achieve these goals, the Government commissioned Professor Barry McGaw, the Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, to undertake an extensive public review of the Higher School Certificate. His report, *Shaping Their Future*, confirmed major concerns with the current Higher School Certificate:

- an inconsistent, at times ad hoc, approach to curriculum development, which produced an excessively differentiated range of courses within subjects beyond the capacity of many schools to offer and which, by lowering expectations, may be against students’ best interests;
- a significant decline in the number of students studying courses at an advanced level;
- an assessment and reporting methodology that allots marks based on the rank order of students rather than the standards they have achieved; and
- university entrance procedures that dominate the Higher School Certificate, and too often encourage students to select courses on the basis of beliefs about maximising their chances of university entrance rather than on their educational needs, interests and capacities.

The Government accepts the validity of these criticisms. The policy directions in this paper set out solutions to them, while retaining what is positive in the current Higher School Certificate.

THE GOVERNMENT’S REFORMS

Improving curriculum standards

To solve the problem of an excessive number of courses within some subjects, and to preserve and strengthen the intellectual rigour of the Higher School Certificate, the Government will establish strict new guidelines for new and existing subjects. This will streamline the curriculum, removing some existing subjects and courses.

*(This is explained in full on pages 7 - 8.)*

Arresting the decline in advanced study

The Government will take steps to reverse the significant decline in the number of students studying courses at an advanced level.

Each subject will be reported on a single scale, to remove the present disincentive for students to study more demanding courses within subjects. Capable students will be rewarded for advanced study.

*(This is explained in full on pages 10 - 11.)*
The Government endorses in principle the development of a 2 unit structure for courses in the Higher School Certificate to broaden opportunities for students to study at more demanding levels, including advanced and standard level courses. This is aimed at increasing the amount of study time in existing advanced courses from 1 unit to 2 units. It will also help overcome difficulties experienced in many schools forced to offer advanced courses outside the normal timetable.

Before proceeding with this new curriculum structure, the Government will conduct a detailed investigation of its implications for raising standards, for flexibility of student choice, equity of participation and subject availability, and delivery within schools’ timetables and resources.

(This is explained in full on pages 11 - 12.)

Strengthening English

In view of the urgent need for a new English curriculum, the Government authorises the development of a new structure for English, including:

- a 2 Unit Advanced course and a 2 Unit Standard course with overlapping content;
- a new 2 Unit Literature course, set at a demanding level, to enable students for the first time to undertake 4 units of English in the Higher School Certificate;
- a new 2 Unit English as a Second Language course, with strict entry criteria, for students recently arrived in Australia; and
- a new course in Fundamentals of English available only in Year 11, for those students who require additional help with literacy.

(This is explained in full on pages 12 - 13.)

More flexible study requirements

To provide students with the opportunity to increase their depth of study and allow schools greater flexibility to offer advanced options, new study criteria for the Higher School Certificate will require students to undertake at least 12 units of study in the Preliminary Year (Year 11), reducing to at least 10 units in the Higher School Certificate Year (Year 12). English will be the only compulsory subject.

(This is explained in full on pages 18 - 19.)

Enhancing the quality of vocational studies

Vocational studies in the Higher School Certificate have not been sufficiently rigorous to earn industry and university respect, and have not always led to clear pathways to further training or employment. The Government will provide vocational courses that meet the standards expected of all Higher School Certificate courses and which lead to industry-recognised vocational qualifications. This should also enable recognition of more vocational courses for university entrance.

(This is explained in full on pages 15 - 17 and pages 27 - 28.)
Setting explicit standards

Central to the Government’s concerns over the present Higher School Certificate is a marking and reporting system that is now out of step with community perceptions of the meaning of marks and in which no information is provided on the performance standards achieved by students.

The Government will introduce explicit standards against which student achievement will be measured which will:

- derive standards from existing examinations and reflect syllabus content, thus enabling clear reporting of what students know, understand, and can do;
- no longer report student achievement according to pre-determined distributions of marks;
- give students and teachers a clearer understanding of what is expected of them; and
- enable schools to track how their students’ performance changes from year to year.

(This is explained in full on pages 22 - 25.)

Reforming tertiary entrance

The Tertiary Entrance Rank has become a surrogate performance index for Higher School Certificate achievement. Thirteen years of schooling is reduced to a single number. Individual subject achievement is played down. It does not mean the same thing from year to year and is a poor measure of school performance.

The Tertiary Entrance Rank will be abolished. Students who apply for university entrance will receive their Universities Admission Index number direct from university authorities. This will remain confidential to students and the university authorities to which they apply. Higher School Certificate results will be released separately and prior to the release of Universities Admission Index information to students. University selection will not be allowed to capture the Higher School Certificate at the expense of its proper focus on teaching and learning.

(This is explained in full on pages 28 - 29.)

Reviving the School Certificate

With the current School Certificate Reference Tests being conducted in the middle of each year, many schools experience a wind-down in the Year 10 effort for the second half of the year. This can mean some students are not adequately prepared in the foundations for the more demanding expectations of Year 11 and 12, and of employment and further training if they leave school before Year 12. Moreover, students’ grades are not directly based on their individual performance in Year 10 Reference Tests.

External examinations in foundation areas – English literacy; Mathematics; Australian History, Australian Geography and Civics; and Science and Technology – will be conducted in November each year. Students will receive their own results in December. This will effectively add six months to the school calendar. Year 10 will be restored as a significant and important stage of schooling.

(This is explained in full on pages 31 - 33.)
Principles for reform of the Higher School Certificate

The Government’s Review of the Higher School Certificate has been founded on its commitment to two overriding, and related, principles: high educational standards and equity.

STANDARDS

The Charter for the Review made it clear that the Government wanted the community to have confidence in the standards and rigour of the New South Wales Higher School Certificate.

The reforms outlined in this White Paper are designed to strengthen the Higher School Certificate curriculum, to raise students’ and teachers’ expectations, and to encourage a greater range of students to undertake more demanding levels of study.

Students, parents, potential employers and further education and training providers are entitled to clear reporting on the standards of learning achieved. Students should understand the standards expected of them when they finish their Higher School Certificate studies. Teachers should know explicitly what is expected of their students. Schools and school systems should be able to track how their students perform from year to year. The Government and the community should know whether standards are improving over time.

This focus on rigorous and explicit standards should be the foundation for improved teaching and learning in the Higher School Certificate.

EQUITY

The Government’s review of the Higher School Certificate has been firmly grounded in a commitment to educational equity.

The Government recognises that equity becomes a hollow concept unless it is linked to high standards. Equity demands higher expectations of all students, especially those who benefit least from the present system.

Equity is not achieved by watering down the curriculum to meet the needs of students who are perceived to be of lower ability. The curriculum for the Higher School Certificate must be able to cater for the interests and abilities of the full range of students, without compromising standards or lowering expectations.

The Government cannot ordain higher expectations. It can, however, establish a climate conducive to raised expectations, and which does not reinforce social divisions.

The proper concern of the Higher School Certificate is with attaining curriculum outcomes of the highest standards for all students. The Higher School Certificate should not fundamentally be about assessing, and potentially exaggerating, differences between young people for use in a competition for social and economic rewards. The current system, which measures students’ performances in the Higher School Certificate against each other rather than against clear standards, disguises the real achievements of students.
The Higher School Certificate of itself cannot guarantee equity. The Government’s reforms embody real options for achievement. These will complement the Government’s *Charter for Equity in Education and Training* and the consequent strategic plans of agencies within the education and training portfolio. These strategies will be designed to move away from a system that permits students’ social and economic background, and their geographical location, to determine the quality of their educational experience.

**CONCERN FOR STUDENTS**

The Government recognises that students undertaking a Higher School Certificate program of study are subject to a range of pressures and personal stress. Much of this can be constructive and can contribute considerably to the sense of achievement students experience on successful completion of their program of study. Many students will inevitably find themselves under a degree of pressure. Students will cope with this in a variety of ways.

But there are other more negative pressures on students. These often arise from uncertainty about what is expected of students, the amount of study required for the Higher School Certificate, and a sense of unfairness in the current system. Under the Government’s reforms, the degree of unjustifiable uncertainty associated with Year 11 and 12 curriculum, assessment and reporting will be reduced.
Purpose of the Higher School Certificate

The issue of the diverse, sometimes competing, purposes ascribed to Years 11-12 education was consistently and vigorously raised in submissions to the Review and related consultations. The Government recognises the multiple roles assigned to the Higher School Certificate, and is conscious of the differing educational needs of young adults emerging from school.

The Higher School Certificate is more than an examination. The New South Wales Higher School Certificate is a nationally and internationally recognised program of study by which the achievements of students are measured and reported through both school-based assessments and formal external examinations. The Higher School Certificate is currently offered in government and nongovernment schools, through distance education, through TAFE New South Wales, and can be undertaken by students studying at home and privately. The Internet and other technologies bring new possibilities for the future.

Everyone is entitled to high quality education and training that provides recognised credentials and clear pathways to employment and lifelong learning. The Government recognises that the senior years of school must cater for all students who participate.

To cater for the needs of students with intellectual disabilities in the senior years of schooling, the Government will extend its existing special curriculum and reporting arrangements that were established for the School Certificate. These will ensure that the learning achievements of all students who choose to remain in school are acknowledged.

The Government accepts the following statement of purpose to guide the future development of the Higher School Certificate.

PURPOSE OF THE HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE

The purpose of the Higher School Certificate program of study is to:

■ provide a curriculum structure which encourages students to complete secondary education;

■ foster the intellectual, social and moral development of students, in particular developing their
  – knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes in the fields of study they choose,
  – capacity to manage their own learning,
  – desire to continue learning in formal or informal settings after school,
  – capacity to work together with others,
  – respect for the cultural diversity of Australian society;

■ provide a flexible structure within which students can prepare for
  – further education and training,
  – employment,
  – full and active participation as citizens;

■ provide formal assessment and certification of students’ achievements;

■ provide a context within which schools also have the opportunity to foster students’ physical and spiritual development.