Assessment & Reporting

The Government’s decision to review the Higher School Certificate was in part a response to concerns that:

- the form of assessment had narrowed inappropriately to emphasise limited aspects of achievement;
- the reporting processes were unfair, providing insufficient recognition for those students who had successfully completed more advanced studies;
- Higher School Certificate reports had become too complex for employers, parents and the community to understand;
- the way in which marks were awarded did not accord with community views; and
- there was no way that systems could monitor their performance in raising levels of educational outcomes and achievements.

Assessment for the Higher School Certificate should be essentially concerned with making judgments about the extent to which students have achieved curriculum outcomes. Reporting on achievement needs to be clear, unambiguous, and accurate. Although these are matters of some considerable complexity, their meaning needs to be communicated effectively to the broader community.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment for the Higher School Certificate comprises two elements:

- external examination – designating the completion of the Higher School Certificate course of study; and
- school-based assessment – involving assessment by schools against set tasks over the period of the Higher School Certificate course.

External assessment for the Higher School Certificate has changed and expanded in form in recent years. It now includes assessment of performance, both individually and in groups. This includes practical tests, research projects, assessment against products developed over time, assessment of speaking and listening skills, as well as the use of traditional pen and paper tests.

Over the last decade or more, there have also been changes to school-based assessment practices for the Higher School Certificate in response to an increased understanding of the nature of learning outcomes within particular subjects and courses. The adoption of school-based assessment was an explicit recognition that some syllabus objectives and outcomes cannot be effectively measured through traditional forms of external examination.

Professor McGaw found substantial support for the non-traditional forms of external assessment that had been adopted in more recent times and for comprehensive forms of school-based assessment. He also observed that more recently developed subjects and courses were more likely to use strategies other than pen and paper assessment tasks.

The Review identified a number of concerns with the way in which school-based assessment had significantly narrowed its focus from its original purpose to assess a broad range of outcomes, including those unable to be measured effectively by external examinations, towards approaches that mimic the form of pen and paper external examinations.

The Government supports the need for broad-ranging assessment practices aimed at measuring outcomes from the content defined by a syllabus – knowledge, skills and understanding.

The Government endorses the strategies outlined below as a way of improving assessment practice.
ASSESSMENT FOR THE HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE

Improved assessment strategies for Board-developed Higher School Certificate courses will be adopted so that:

- reviews of syllabuses and external assessment strategies are conducted to identify ways in which assessment strategies might be extended and to estimate costs of implementation as a basis for decision making – this will first be done as part of the evaluation of all existing courses, and then on a cyclical basis;
- clear guidelines are prepared for and distributed to schools concerning the range and balance of school-based assessments to be used, to ensure that school-based assessments focus on those syllabus objectives not adequately assessed by external examination processes and do not simply mimic the external examination;
- schools fully understand their obligations to fulfil the breadth requirements for school-based assessments:
  - attested to in a formal declaration;
  - reviewed by personnel external to the school; and
- reports to schools of the correlations between external and school-based assessment be accompanied by interpretations that make clear that maximising the correlation is not the goal of the school-based assessment.

Assessing against standards

The overwhelming message about assessment that was constantly repeated in the submissions to the Higher School Certificate Review was that it must measure (and reporting must indicate) what students ‘know, understand and can do’. Many saw merit in abandoning the current methodology, arguing that norm-referenced scaling procedures arbitrarily allocated students’ scores according to a predetermined distribution of scores.

Professor McGaw noted that Higher School Certificate syllabuses set out the outcomes students are expected to achieve and that the Higher School Certificate examinations assess the extent to which they have done so. Currently, once the examinations are marked and the school-based assessment recorded, that information is ignored and the ultimate marks awarded show only how students compare with one another – without any serious explanation of what the assessment instruments have measured or what they show about individual student achievement.

The Government has decided to adopt a standards-referenced approach to assessment and reporting. This will provide specific criteria against which to judge what students know, understand and can do – that is, the standards students have attained for their Higher School Certificate. Standards-referenced assessment and reporting also enables comparisons to be made over time in the standards achieved in the Higher School Certificate.

Although this approach is a break-through in providing real information about students’ achievements in the Higher School Certificate, it is based on similar assessment and reporting systems that have been successfully used in Australia and overseas. For example, the approach has been used in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the New South Wales Basic Skills Test and similar tests in other Australian states and territories, and the New South Wales Year 7 English Language and Literacy Assessment (ELLA) program.
The development of standards-referenced assessment and reporting in the Higher School Certificate will build on these experiences. It will first be tested in the reporting formats for the new School Certificate, as outlined on pages 31-33 below. This will inform the way in which students’ achievements will be reported in the Higher School Certificate, and will help provide consistency in reporting between the School Certificate and the Higher School Certificate.

This approach does not rely on unmoderated internal teacher-based assessment; nor does it encourage a watering down of the curriculum into vague and nebulous outcome statements. Instead, it relies on external examinations. The Government strongly believes that external examinations are necessary for the rigorous, independent and equitable evaluation of secondary school students’ performance.

Focusing on standards in curriculum, assessment and reporting enhances teaching and learning. Teachers and students will develop a shared understanding of what is to be learned and the standards expected. Being explicit about standards also provides criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of the learning process and related assessment strategies.

The standards will be based on the educational outcomes expected of students as defined by the content of each Higher School Certificate syllabus. They will be objectively established by using examination ‘scripts’ (answers by students) to establish a hierarchy of task difficulty.

The Higher School Certificate will now measure not only the relative performance achieved. It will also measure the standards achieved against benchmarks of clearly defined curriculum outcomes established by performance in the external examination.

Standards-referenced assessment avoids the need to scale marks according to a predetermined distribution before they are presented on a credential. It avoids all of the perceived or real distortions of a scaling process that can demand students’ marks be set below a score, or even limit the number of students scoring high scores, regardless of their performance.

It restores the incentive to attempt more demanding courses because there will be a reward in marks for the attainment of better or more difficult performance standards.

The first task, in developing a scale of achievement in a subject, is to analyse students’ performances on individual questions in the examination. Differences in the difficulty of the questions will provide the basis for interpreting the scale from less to more difficult questions and from low to high student performance. The second task is to develop descriptors to give meaning to different levels of achievement on the scale. These descriptors, arising from the analysis of scores on individual questions, will be developed from examiners’ reports on the students’ answers and consideration of the examination and the syllabus. Applying this process to examinations from several years will enable a stable interpretation of the standards for the subject to be developed. This, in turn, will support the refinement of the syllabus outcomes.

Matching the tasks to their objectively measured degree of difficulty can establish a scale or map of achievement that grades the examination tasks or outcomes across a continuum from the easiest to the hardest. Over time, views as to what is hard or easy for students to know, understand, or do will become increasingly refined. In turn, this will better inform curriculum development.

In addition to developing descriptions of student performance derived from examination texts, work will be undertaken to complement these with descriptions derived from school assessments.
DEVELOPING ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

The Government will adopt a standards-referenced approach to assessment for the Higher School Certificate by developing achievement scales for each subject through:

- an analysis of the Higher School Certificate examination results in all courses to
  - clarify the performance scales on which student achievements and question or task difficulties can be represented within the course or, where courses are linked by a component of common assessment, across those courses within the subject,
  - develop descriptors of what the scales measure in broad bands across the range from low to high performance, and
  - identify examination questions and tasks located in the various bands to amplify the meaning of the bands;
- provision of these scales and the sample questions and tasks to schools, together with information about the distribution of student achievements on the scale, to give teachers an indication of the learning outcomes currently being achieved in each subject; and
- revision of curriculum documents to reflect the course structure to be developed and to incorporate the achievement scales.

REPORTING ACHIEVEMENT

Achievement for the Higher School Certificate in the past has been reported as a mark that compares each student’s performance only with that of other students completing that course.

This practice has denied any meaningful or valid comparison between students undertaking different courses within the same subject. In some subjects this has led to concerns that students undertaking harder courses have been penalised by the marking scale. This view is apparent in the recent debate about the inadequate benefit in scaling for the 2 Unit Related English course which has been seen as the reason for the rapid decline in the number of students attempting this more demanding course.

The Higher School Certificate Review has recommended a comprehensive package for reporting students’ achievements in the Higher School Certificate. This will see results in each course for a subject reported on a single scale.

Students’ results will be derived from the achievement scales (discussed above). These scales represent both student achievement and the difficulty of examination questions and tasks. Students undertaking standard courses will have the opportunity to perform well up the scale, but they will be less likely to do so than those successfully undertaking more advanced work. Students undertaking more demanding studies, therefore, will be rewarded for their hard work and performance. The rewards, however, will not be automatic: they will depend upon success in meeting the standards.

The methodology is similar to the present practice of statistically aligning the distribution of 2 Unit and 3 Unit courses marks on the same scale; but these new scales will have more meaning.

Professor McGaw has advanced an argument for using a scale different from that of 0-100 which is currently used, towards others such as 20-70 or 50-120. While there are some arguments in favour of
moving away from the current scale, it is clear that the community would prefer a scale that measures Higher School Certificate results over the range 0-100. The Government will retain a 0-100 scale for reporting Higher School Certificate marks, and will link these clearly to achievement bands.

The Government recognises the cogency of the Review’s proposal to report in ways that describe the knowledge, skills and understanding that students are able to demonstrate. The experience gained from analysis of several successive examinations, coupled with the judgment of the examiners, will lead to the refinement of these initial reports and the formulation of more stable scales that are able to be applied in the Higher School Certificate.

The Government will also trial this form of reporting in statewide tests for the School Certificate prior to its adoption in the Higher School Certificate.

The Government’s strategies are designed to report student achievement as fairly and as accurately as possible. How the achievements of individual students are evaluated will be determined by the purposes of that evaluation.

The report will indicate the minimum standard expected of Higher School Certificate students in that subject. This will be set at a mark of 50 on a 100 point scale.

The Board of Studies will report on students’ achievement as set out below, and as illustrated in the sample reporting portfolio in Appendix A.

**REPORTING STUDENTS’ RESULTS**

In the reporting of students’ results:

- each student will receive a comprehensive package including
  - the Higher School Certificate testamur,
  - a summary of results, and
  - a course result sheet, providing additional information for each course completed;

- the course result sheet for each subject will indicate
  - an examination mark with a numerical value in the range 0 to 100; the marks for a subject will represent a gradation of student achievement along the scales on which student achievement levels and the difficulty levels of examination questions and tasks are represented in that subject,
  - a school-based assessment (having first been statistically moderated against the external examination marks),
  - a graphical representation of where students lie on the performance scale for the subject (see example in Appendix A) showing the location of the student’s Higher School Certificate Mark (obtained from a 50:50 combination of the examination result and school-based assessment),
  - descriptors for the bands in which students’ achievement lies to provide a summary indication of what they know and are able to do in the subject, and
  - an indication of the minimum standard expected of Higher School Certificate students in the subject.
**Reporting key competencies**

The Government supports Professor McGaw’s advice that there be no central reporting of students’ performance on key competencies. Professor McGaw’s comments, along with the findings of the *New South Wales Key Competencies Pilot Project*, indicate that it is best to focus on the key competencies within the context of the curriculum and not develop a separate system-wide approach to assessing and reporting on key competency achievement.

Key competencies can provide a useful language for describing attributes that are valued by teachers, trainers, students, parents and employers. These attributes have been variously described and used in school reports, references, job advertisements and recruitment practices. Reporting that provides additional information on student achievement in these areas is broadly supported.

The Government agrees with Professor McGaw that there should be no central reporting on key competencies, but that schools should have the option of providing reports. Reporting at school level provides better opportunities for including contextually rich evidence of students’ achievements of key competencies.

The Board of Studies, Department of School Education and TAFE New South Wales will provide support to schools and colleges issuing their students with reports on achievements of those aspects of the Higher School Certificate that are consistent with the key competencies.
Selection for post-school pathways

Students completing the Higher School Certificate seek entry to a variety of post-school opportunities in employment, training and higher education. The vital significance, real and perceived, of the Higher School Certificate arises from its use in selection into these post-school pathways.

There are usually more young people seeking entry into each of these sectors than there are places available. There are concerns that pressures on students, and the community generally, to gain entry to these limited pathways have shifted the purpose of the Higher School Certificate away from providing a comprehensive education towards its significance as a selection device.

Currently, around 20% of students leave school on completion of their Higher School Certificate and enter full-time or part-time employment without engaging, in the short term, with further education and training. A further 33% go on to TAFE and other training. Some 37% proceed directly to university study. While these data reflect direct entry from school, many young people will enter and re-enter a variety of pathways throughout their lives. Nevertheless, the Higher School Certificate remains the most widely-used initial criterion for selection.

EASING THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO EMPLOYMENT

Although, generally speaking, there has been a reduction in the number of students transferring direct from school to employment, one in five young people still enter full-time or part-time employment on leaving school. Many will use their Higher School Certificate report as part of a portfolio of achievements and capacities they present to employers.

The Government recognises that the failure of current reporting arrangements to provide for comparison of results achieved on different courses within the one subject has led employers to use the Tertiary Entrance Rank inappropriately as a comparative measure.

Reporting more clearly on a single scale according to a standards-referenced framework within each subject on what students know, understand and can do should be more useful for employers. These more comprehensive and comparable reports will help employers to select future employees using criteria that more accurately relate to the purposes of their fields of employment.

Reporting by schools on key competencies will also provide information that is valued by many employers.

While these data are important, they are not the sole criteria used for employment. Employers also exercise judgment across a broader range of qualities including the student’s initiative, interest, confidence, organisational ability, leadership qualities, capacity to work with others, and qualities of personality and character. Comments on school reports and references will continue to be an important supplement to Higher School Certificate reporting and to impressions gained through interviews for employment.

TRANSFERRING FROM SCHOOL TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Access to vocational education and training is also becoming more competitive, with some courses offered by TAFE New South Wales now having higher entry requirements, because of student demand, than some university courses.

Providers of education and training usually use a broad range of criteria for selection. TAFE, as the major provider of vocational education and training in this State, has explicitly rejected the use of the Tertiary
Entrance Rank as an entry criterion, preferring to use broader subject-based data and the results of interviews in its selection processes.

In making its selections, TAFE New South Wales sets minimum entry requirements for some of its courses. To do this, TAFE must compare relative performance across courses within Higher School Certificate subjects. Currently, these judgments are made subjectively.

The Government believes that its decision to report achievement against standards and on a single subject scale for each subject will assist providers of vocational education and training to refine and justify their selection criteria to a greater extent than currently. These could be augmented, in some cases, by school reports on key competencies that articulate with vocational education and training curriculum.

ADMISSION TO UNIVERSITY

Undoubtedly, the issue that raised most response to the Review was that of university admission practices. The Government acknowledges that there are major public concerns about the current Tertiary Entrance Rank and its impact on the curriculum, on students, schools, employers and the community more generally. The Government is also concerned at the excessive, and often uninformed, public concentration on the Tertiary Entrance Rank and its inappropriate use in ‘benchmarking’ the performance of schools.

The Government’s position, like that of many universities themselves, is that the Tertiary Entrance Rank is a less than perfect indicator of a student’s potential to undertake university studies. In addition, current practice does not fully acknowledge the effect of measurement error in the calculation of the Tertiary Entrance Rank when discriminating between students. General acknowledgment of these truths, together with more transparent processes for calculating indexes, would benefit the community and its understanding of university selection and provide the basis for the development of a fairer and more justifiable system for allocating university places.

Many submissions to the Review called on the Government simply to withhold students’ results from the universities. The Government recognises that it is under no obligation to release students’ Higher School Certificate results to universities. But it concedes that the consequences of not doing so would require universities to implement their own testing regimes. As well as causing extra expense to universities, this would impact even more inappropriately on the secondary school curriculum and the Higher School Certificate, and potentially lead to less open and public selection practices.

There are clear disadvantages for students, schools and school systems from any irresponsible use made of the Tertiary Entrance Rank. The Government has a legitimate expectation that data will not be used in ways that adversely impact on the goals of school systems and the needs of students.

Professor McGaw recommended a range of measures aimed at reducing the emphasis on and influence of tertiary selection upon the Higher School Certificate.

The Government has adopted a position consistent with the Review’s recommendations. The Government will release the data to universities, but only on the condition that these are confidential to universities and to individual students. Reporting on students’ achievement in the Higher School Certificate will be separated from universities’ admission processes.

The Government is strongly of the view that the consequence of universities’ gaining access to the data entails an obligation to use the data responsibly. The Government respects the independence of the universities in New South Wales, and the State legislation under which they operate. Universities are, at the same time, part of the public framework for education and, as such, are exempt neither from public accountability nor from the responsibility to act fairly and openly.
As recommended by Professor McGaw, individual results will be treated as confidential and will not be provided to other parties, including the Board of Studies. The only exception would be for policy research agencies who can guarantee to protect the confidentiality of individual, school and system information.

The Government has commenced negotiations with universities on other issues identified in Professor McGaw’s report. Although there are differing views amongst universities on key elements of the Review’s recommendations, universities have reached in-principle agreement on their response to a number of the proposals. The Government also notes that some decisions will be dependent upon the outcomes of the investigative work to be undertaken on curriculum described earlier.

There will need to be ongoing negotiations with the universities on the implementation details for the new system. These will cover a number of areas: arrangements for providing information for the calculation of the universities’ selection index, while protecting students’ and schools’ confidentiality; establishing the number of units of study to be included in the calculation of the index, taking into account final decisions on the curriculum structure for the Higher School Certificate; and eliminating the categorisation of courses in the calculation of the index.

**ADMISSION TO UNIVERSITY**

The Government will:

- ensure that the university selection index calculated from an individual student’s results and related information are treated as confidential and not released to parties other than the Universities Admissions Centre and the universities to which the student has applied; and
- separate the processes of reporting on the Higher School Certificate from the release of university entrance information to students.

Matters on which universities have provided in principle agreement:

- changing the name of the Tertiary Entrance Rank to the *Universities Admission Index*;
- continuing to combine (50:50) external and statistically moderated school-based assessments as the basis of calculation of selection indices;
- extending the use of additional flexible criteria for selection purposes and making existing arrangements more transparent;
- including strengthened, high quality vocational education and training courses in the Higher School Certificate, that would enable students who study these courses to leave their options open for admission to university;
- discontinuing the use of scaled results in French and German to locate results of other Languages other than English courses;
- taking no action at this stage on the development of separate indexes based on patterns of study in the areas of mathematics-science-technology and humanities-social sciences-creative arts;
- reporting publicly on the validity of the use of Higher School Certificate results in university admission decisions; and
- providing a step by step explanation of the way in which students’ Higher School Certificate marks are scaled and calculated as a Universities Admission Index.
The Government reiterates its strong support for providing vocational education and training courses of the highest standard in the Higher School Certificate, and that students undertaking vocational studies should not be precluded from tertiary entrance. Negotiations with the universities will work through the details of the way in which strengthened vocational education and training courses will be included in the Universities Admission Index.

The Government and the universities have agreed on interim arrangements for 1997. This involves providing universities with data for all eligible students, but without identifying the names of non-applicant students or their schools. Only students who apply for university entrance will be identified to universities. Advice of university entrance offers will be mailed directly to students from the Universities Admissions Centre, but not prior to the release of Higher School Certificate reporting information.

These arrangements represent a major milestone in the history of the Higher School Certificate. They affirm the integrity of the Higher School Certificate curriculum in its own right, while acknowledging the importance of continued collaboration with the universities. They meet the criterion of openness in the way the universities will use Higher School Certificate information for their selection purposes. Most importantly, the new arrangements act in the interests of the young people whom the Higher School Certificate is intended to benefit.