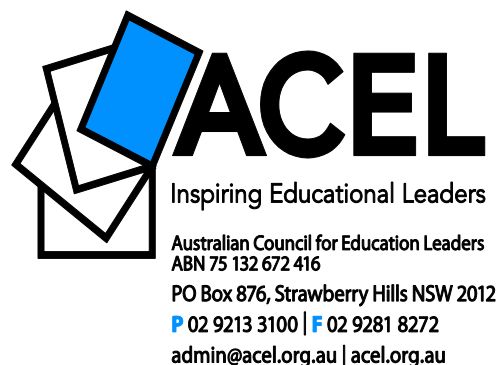


**A Submission to the Minister for Education,  
Training and Employment Re the ACER Review  
of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance in  
Queensland**

**November 2014**



**Topic:** The ACER Queensland Review of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance.

**Submitted by:** The Executive Committee of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, Queensland Branch.

**ACEL:** The Australian Council for Educational Leaders is Australia's main professional association for educational leadership, ranging across all states and sectors. This submission is from the Queensland Executive, and is not necessarily representative of the views of all members of the Branch.

**The Review:** The ACEL(Q) Executive commends the reviewers on the comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Queensland's education system and its processes, and in particular its assessment culture. In our view the Report addresses all the key issues, including those raised by this Executive in our detailed submission. We find ourselves supportive of much of the reasoning and most of the recommendations.

**The Submission:**

This submission relates specifically to Recommendations 4 and 6, about which we have serious concerns.

**Recommendation 4:**

*The certification of student attainment in each senior subject should be based on a set of four specified types of assessment activities. QCAA should specify the nature of each activity, the conditions under which it is to be completed and the marking scheme for assessing students' performance. One of the four assessment activities should be externally set and marked by QCAA.*

**Recommendation 6:**

*An External Assessment in each subject should be set and marked by QCAA and completed at the same time under the same supervised conditions in all schools. If resourcing is an issue, priority should be given to developing External Assessments for subjects with high enrolments, subjects which are foundational for university courses, and subjects for which*

*external assessment is most practicable. For the vast majority of senior subjects, the External Assessment should contribute 50% of the Subject Result.*

**Key Message 1:** We urge caution in addressing Recommendations 4 and 6 in the review, which would substantially change Queensland's Year 11 and 12 assessment system from externally-moderated school-based assessment to a combination of three school-based assessment pieces and one external subject-based assessment, with the external component contributing 50%. The 50% loading makes the external component a high stakes exercise, which will inevitably flow through to the classroom in narrowing and restrictive ways that have not been seen in Queensland since the late 1960s and early 70s.

Further, we suggest that it would be an expression of lack of trust in the ability and professionalism of Queensland teachers to make the necessary judgements about student work that have characterised Queensland's assessment regime since 1973. Independent studies over the years have demonstrated Queensland teachers' ability to do this when properly resourced and when they have undertaken the necessary professional learning. While we acknowledge the finding in the Report that this may not currently be the case, we urge the Minister to have confidence in Queensland's track record in this area and resource it and strengthen it, rather than moving to a major external component which has no guarantee of greater success or higher standards for students than under the current system.

#### **An external component:**

We acknowledge the need for an external component to students' final certification of achievement, both for validity and credibility. This is currently served by the Queensland Core Skills Test, which scales student results across subjects and schools for tertiary entrance purposes. The reviewers make a strong case for the ending of the Overall Position (OP) process for tertiary entrance purposes, which therefore means the end of the role of the QCST, and the need for an external assessment to replace it.

At the same time, we can find no rationale in the Report, nor are we aware of any evidence in educational research, to suggest that an external assessment component of 50% of a student's final subject result is likely to bring about higher standards or more valid results than a regime that gives stronger weighting to externally-moderated school-based assessment while still including a meaningful external component.

#### **The Power of Assessment:**

It is well established that assessment is inseparable from the learning experiences that teachers engage in with their students. In any education system, the mode of assessment has a major influence on the learning experiences in the classroom. This is particularly the case when a high stakes component is introduced.

While we acknowledge the weaknesses in the current moderation and tertiary entrance processes highlighted in the Report, the ACEL(Q) Executive believes that Recommendation 6 does not take sufficient account of important issues regarding teaching as a profession, the strengths of the current system in Queensland, and the documented limitations of external exams, particularly when they become high stakes exercises, as they inevitably will if the 50% recommendation is taken up. We urge that these issues be given serious attention in the light of Recommendations 4 and 6.

***We recommend that any external assessment component contribute no more than 25% toward a student's final subject result.***

### **Key Message 2 - External Exams & External Assessment:**

Queensland already has an external assessment component – the Queensland Core Skills Test – which is used for scaling subject and school results for tertiary entrance purposes at the end of Year 12. The QCST is a far more sophisticated external assessment instrument than conventional external exams, & we would expect any new external assessment process replacing it to be of similar sophistication.

We note that this is also the intent of the reviewers. They make a clear and compelling distinction - even documented as a supplementary paper to the Report – between external exams and external assessment. They are not recommending a return to conventional pen and paper external exams. Their conceptualising of external assessment is more complex and enlightened, indeed strongly supporting the principles of externally-moderated school-based assessment: complementing it rather than supplanting it.

The complexity and the resourcing implications of the external assessment concept as proposed in the Report may be seen as too complex, and a 'compromise' solution could be to return to conventional external exams. The ACEL(Q) Executive believes this would not be a compromise: it would be a major setback to much that has been achieved in Queensland for students and teachers over the past 40 years. It would in fact be a significant change in Queensland's education culture, for the worse, not the better. It would undermine teachers' professionalism, it would be in contravention of the recommendations of the reviewers, and there is no likelihood that it would improve student achievement.

***We recommend that the concept of external assessment as distinct from external exams as recommended in the Report be accepted, and explored in depth so that the many different ways in which students learn can be reflected in their classroom experiences, and most importantly, that the opportunities to show what they have learnt in those ways can be offered to them in their external assessment processes.***

### **Key Message 3 - The Importance of School Leadership**

The ACEL(Q) Executive suggests that the reviewers may not have made the link in recent research between student achievement, teacher professionalism, and the quality of school leadership, particularly when 'distributed' or 'parallel' leadership is developed at the school level, and how externally-moderated school-based assessment has nurtured such teacher leadership in Queensland schools.

***We recommend that the link between the nature and quality of school leadership, teacher professionalism and student achievement play an integral role in decisions about the new regime of senior assessment.***

### **Key Message 4 – Benefits and Costs:**

We have already referred to the need to properly resource any new process, and we suggest that investment focused on professional learning for teachers and the quality of school leadership is more likely to generate improved student achievement than is the introduction of costly high stakes external assessment.

Further on resourcing, we urge that the funding implications of the addition of external assessment to Queensland's education budget be considered in a benefit/cost analysis by the Minister and his advisers. In particular, with regard to the significant establishment and on-going costs of external assessment, is consideration being given to what benefits are likely to justify the increased cost of high stakes external assessment as opposed to other initiatives such as funding increased professional learning for teachers and school leaders?

***We recommend a benefit/cost analysis on the possible ways to allocate scarce resources, balancing the introduction of external assessment with the other options suggested in this submission.***

The ACEL(Q) Executive commends this submission for consideration by the Minister and his advisers, and offers our best wishes in the complex decision-making processes that will follow.

Dr Deb Kember (President) & Mr Norm Hunter (Vice President) on behalf of the ACEL(Q) Executive