

**March 2015**

The ACEL (Q) Executive acknowledges the importance of the issues identified in the ACER Report, and endorses many of the recommendations. At the same time, we have particular concerns about a small number of highly important recommendations in the Report which, if implemented as they stand, we believe are likely to have a significantly negative impact on the nature and quality of student learning in Queensland.

Most are to do with two related key principles: firstly, the nature and power of assessment to influence teaching/learning, positively or negatively, depending on the mode of assessment; and secondly, what we see as the high quality of professionalism that Queensland teachers have developed due to the responsibilities and expertise associated with the system of externally-moderated school-based assessment that was introduced in Queensland in 1972.

### **1.0 The Power of Assessment**

It is well established in educational research that the mode of assessment used to determine student achievement will dictate what happens in the classroom. If the mode of assessment is broadly conceived, drawing on a variety of ways for students to learn and show what they have learnt, and if these are reflective of the world they will soon inherit, this will be reflected in the classroom. If the mode of assessment is narrow, restrictive and out-of-date, so too will be the students' learning experiences, and their ability to show what they have learnt will be narrow and restrictive.

**This conviction is at the heart of our submission. It is our view that whatever assessment system is adopted, it must drive the kind of learning that prepares young people for the complex and difficult world of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century both in Australia and globally, and it must provide multiple and relevant ways for the students to show what they have learnt.**

### **2.0 The Professionalisation of Queensland Teachers**

Teaching is a profession, with its own complex body of theory and knowledge based on extensive research and experience. A key element in this is the power of assessment in influencing teaching/learning, and enabling students to show what they have learnt. In the early 1970s a momentous decision was taken by the Queensland Government: it took the view that the best way to determine the quality of student learning is through teacher judgement throughout the course, not through externally set and marked pen and paper examinations at the end of the course.

Since 1972 Queensland secondary school teachers have engaged in professional learning to develop a system and language that are internationally recognised as elevating teaching as a profession, and as a result, enriching the quality of learning of their students. The ACER reviewers have made clear that the system has declined in its effectiveness, and needs to be reinvigorated, updated, and properly resourced. The ACEL (Q) Executive contends that the fundamental principles of externally-moderated school-based assessment are strong and well supported in research. To abandon these principles and regress to a system that looks backward – such as a 50:50 external examinations and school-based assessment system – would short-change Queensland students and undermine teacher professionalism.

### 3.0 A Language Problem

3.1 Before the recent Queensland election, the LNP Government issued a draft response to the ACER Report, accepting it in principle while fully endorsing some recommendations and tentatively supporting others, as well as flagging some concerns that need to be addressed. Our understanding is that the ALP Government has also endorsed the Report in principle.

3.2 As well as addressing the ACER Report, the LNP Government's draft response gives significant status to a 2013 Parliamentary Education and Innovation Parliamentary Committee Report on assessment in senior Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry in Queensland. On the surface the recommendations of the two reports appear similar, but in our view they are actually poles apart in their potential impact on teaching/learning in Queensland, and the difference is in interpreting the language. Of particular concern to the ACEL Executive are the terms 'external examinations' and 'external assessment'. They are not the same thing, and must not be treated as such. We see the 2013 Parliamentary EIC recommendations for a return to external examinations as negative and backward looking; we see significant potential in an enlightened approach to the ACER recommendation to introduce external assessment.

#### 3.3 *External Examinations v External Assessment*

The ACER reviewers have suggested that the Overall Position (OP) and Queensland Core Skills Test (QCST) have served Queensland well since their inception in 1991, but their recommendation is that it's now time for a change, as the system is no longer working as was intended. With the removal of the OP and QCST – the current external assessment for an OP course - in the interest of credibility, it is reasonable that another different external component replace it. That is where the difference lies between the two reports.

The ACER reviewers recommend a sophisticated form of external *assessment* which complements externally-moderated school-based assessment and captures the special essence of each subject. Importantly, they do not recommend a return to conventional pen and paper external *examinations*, stating that this would be a backward step at a time when students need 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as group problem-solving and teamwork, high level technology skills, perseverance over time on investigating a complex issue, generating creative ideas and testing them, and discriminating among reliable and unreliable information: none of which can be assessed in traditional pen and paper external 2-3 hour examinations at the end of a two year course. The ACEL (Q) endorses this view.

The Parliamentary EIC Report simply recommends a return to traditional external *examinations*, with deliberate limitations on the kinds of investigative inquiry work that characterises the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Along with this they recommend that any school-based work must be scaled against the external examination. We see this as a backward-looking approach which shows no understanding of the way people learn in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, no understanding of what research tells us about assessment, and which discounts the proven professionalism of Queensland teachers in their ability to make valid, reliable and fair judgements about the quality of students' work.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive supports the ACER Report's concept of external assessment as opposed to traditional external examinations as a way to include an external component in students' final results while preserving the principles of externally-moderated school-based assessment. We urge the Government to take up the ACER reviewers' challenge by supporting and resourcing the development of external assessment items that encourage a variety of learning experiences for students and teachers, and provide multiple ways for students to learn, and to show what they have learnt.**

#### 4.0 Separation of School Results from Tertiary Entrance

Recommendations 1, 2, 12 and 15 of the ACER Report call for a separation of responsibilities for senior assessment from tertiary entrance processes.

4.1 While this may present some difficulties for universities, the ACEL (Q) Executive sees potential for broader and more general offerings for senior students if the idea of an 'OP course' is replaced with a general senior course. For many students, Year 10, at age 15, is the last time they will engage with the established subject disciplines. The ACER reviewers have identified 'gaming' of the OP system, where many schools counsel students out of an 'OP course' because those students have been (mistakenly, according to the reviewers) judged to be likely to impact negatively on the school's standing in media league tables. If more students are encouraged beyond Year 10 to take on general subject disciplines which prepare them for life rather than a specific job, while still offering vocational and other pathways for particular students, then that would be a positive result of the separation of senior assessment from tertiary entrance.

4.2 We note too that the trend identified in the 1990 Report by Professor Nancy Viviani – that approximately 50% of first year university entrants come from other than Year 12 - remains as true today as it was then. This must be taken into account as the purposes of senior schooling are re-examined in the light of the ACER Report.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive sees senior schooling as the human development of young people, preparing students for life and work, as opposed to directly preparing them for either university or a specific workplace. The system of senior assessment and tertiary entrance can have a significant influence on how well that is achieved. On balance, we see more to be gained than lost through separating the two processes.**

#### 5.0 Weighting of School-based and External Assessment Activities

5.1 The ACER reviewers have made clear their support for the principles underpinning externally-moderated school-based assessment. While supporting the underlying principles, they suggest that it is not working as well as it should, and change is needed. Hence their recommendation to abolish the OP and QCST and replace them with a component of external assessment to balance the school-based components. Recommendation 4 of the ACER Report reads:

*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' performances. One of the four assessment activities should be externally set and marked by QCAA.*

5.2 The ACEL Executive sees strength in Recommendation 4, but foresees a serious difficulty when this is combined with 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 ... For the vast majority of senior subjects, the external assessment should contribute 50% of the subject result.*

This is a weighting balance in which one external assessment is equal to three school-based assessments. There is no rationale in the Report or in educational research to justify this weighting. The reviewers state clearly that they support externally moderated school-based assessment, but a 50:50 weighting makes the one external component a high stakes event which will dominate teaching/learning. In addition to that it seriously reduces the benefits of school-based assessment, and, we suggest, it is an unjustified symbolic statement of mistrust in the professionalism of Queensland teachers.

Whilst it now needs upgrading, Queensland's externally-moderated school-based assessment has been evolving over 40 years. In that time a number of independent reviews by assessment experts (including one of the ACER reviewers of the current Report) have concluded that the quality of teacher judgement at the heart of the system is at least as valid and reliable as that of the markers of external examinations such as the

HSC, and at times more so. Indeed, this is in keeping with international research which makes clear that nowhere in the world has it ever been shown that student achievement in a conventional external examination regime produces more valid, reliable or fair results than in a properly resourced and well led school-based system. The aura of external examinations persists, but is based more on mythology than on research. Furthermore, research indicates that external examinations can discriminate against students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The great advantage of a school-based system is the ability of teachers to tailor the learning and assessment to their students without sacrificing standards. But that must be resourced, essentially through professional learning for teachers and school leaders.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive urges the Government to weight the external assessment component at no more than 25%: equivalent to the weighting of each of the school-based components, thus preserving the spirit and strengths of externally-moderated school-based assessment and recognition of the demonstrated professionalism of Queensland teachers.**

## 6.0 Range of Marks

6.1 Recommendation 5 of the ACER Report states:

*Students' subject results should be reported as integers on a scale of 1 to 60. Each subject result should be calculated on the sum of a student's mark on the external assessment (in the range 0-30) and marks on the three school assessment activities set and marked by teachers (each in the range 0-10). Teachers' assessments should not be statistically scaled against the external assessment.*

A range of 0-10 for a student's final school-based result is unnecessarily narrow. Firstly, teachers are currently required by the QCAA to place students on a 0-15 scale for each subject at the end of the senior course, and to make finer grade judgements within this. Queensland teachers have demonstrated that they can place their students on the 0-15 point scale with a high degree of accuracy. Secondly, if each of the four assessment events – the three externally-moderated school-based and the one external assessment event – were judged on a 0-15 scale, there would be sufficient scope to accurately place the school-based students, and it would still result in a scale of 0-60 as recommended by the reviewers. That scale could be increased beyond 0-60 as long as the equivalence of the weightings remained in place.

**The ACEL Executive recommends that each of the four assessment activities to be used for a student's final result should be judged equally on a 0-15 point scale.**

6.2 The ACEL (Q) Executive supports the reviewers' recommendation that the external component not be used to scale the school-based component. Again, there is no evidence to justify this, and no rationale for it in the Report.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive opposes the idea that the external component of students' final assessment should be used to scale their school-based component. All four assessment activities should have equal status, with no scaling.**

## 7.0 A Priority Order of Subjects

The final sentence of Recommendation 16 reads:

*A priority order of subjects should be established in the event that it is not possible to fund the development of externally set and marked assessments in all senior subjects.*

We express caution at the possible creation of 'a priority order of subjects'. One of the achievements of the current system is that all subjects are weighted equally. This suggestion could easily translate into the old idea of 'hard' and 'soft' subjects (Science, Mathematics = 'hard'; languages, Music, Drama, Phys Ed = 'soft'). Every effort should be made to ensure that all accredited senior subjects have general equivalent status.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive urges the Government to ensure that all senior subjects are accorded general equivalence of status.**

#### **8.0 Continuing Professional Learning on Assessment for QCAA Staff**

Recommendation 17 states:

*The QCAA should continue to build its staff capacity in educational assessment, educational measurement and information and communication technologies.*

This is strongly supported by the ACEL (Q) Executive. Furthermore, such professional learning should extend into schools, so that a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of assessment is developed and nurtured in school leaders and teachers. This is essential if the high quality of externally-moderated school-based assessment is to be maintained.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive believes that continuing professional learning in assessment of QCAA staff and teachers in schools should be a priority area of funding.**

#### **9.0 21<sup>st</sup> century Skills**

Recommendation 18 reads:

*The QCAA should build into its assessment processes a greater focus on skills and attributes now being identified in senior curricula as essential to life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (for example teamwork, problem solving, creativity, verbal communication).*

**The ACEL (Q) Executive strongly supports this recommendation, and we would point out the extremely limited ability of conventional external examinations to assess these skills and attributes. This poses a serious challenge to many of the 2013 Parliamentary EIC Report's recommendations.**

#### **10.0 A Revised Approach to Moderation**

Recommendation 8 states:

*QCAA should assure the validity and reliability of school assessments in each subject through a revised approach to moderation that includes three elements: endorsement; confirmation; and ratification.*

It is clear from the ACER Review that the current review panel system is not working as it should. Its effectiveness, and therefore its credibility, have declined significantly over recent years. The three part process recommended by the reviewers is a marked improvement on the current system while preserving the principles of externally-moderated school-based assessment.

**The ACEL (Q) Executive supports this recommendation and the spirit in which it is made: to address deficiencies in the current system by building on its strengths, not 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater' because of its current deficiencies.**

#### **11.0 A Team of Assessment Supervisors**

Recommendation 9 states:

*QCAA should establish a guild of assessment supervisors to lead the proposed moderation processes ... and to assist in teacher capacity building.*

**The ACEL (Q) Executive sees this as complementary to Recommendation 8. We see this as where funding should be focused: it is a demonstrated way of enhancing quality assurance, and also builds on teacher professionalism.**

## 12.0 Two Authorities?

The last sentence of Recommendation 23 reads:

*It may ...include the creation of two separate authorities, one with responsibility for curriculum and assessment in Years K-9, the other with responsibility for Years 10-12.*

**The ACEL (Q) Executive does not support setting up two authorities. We see it as ineffective and inefficient use of scarce funding. K-12 coherence is important for Queensland's curriculum and we suggest that a single authority with specialised staff in the various phases of schooling working together is the best way to achieve this.**

### Conclusion

The ACEL (Q) Executive acknowledges the weaknesses in the current system as identified in the ACER Report. We urge the Government to understand and accept the complex and powerful role that assessment plays in education, and in particular the power of assessment in determining the nature of what happens in schools, and its impact on the fairness, reliability and validity of the way students are able to show what they have learnt.

We suggest that the decisions taken by the Government in response to the ACER Report can take Queensland forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or back to a world that no longer exists. We extend our best wishes and support to the Minister and those who will assist her in this undertaking.

### About the Australian Council for Educational Leaders

The Australian Council for Educational Leaders is Australia's main professional Association for educational leadership, with membership ranging across the three education sectors and all states and territories. This submission is presented by the 2015 Queensland Executive, and is not necessarily representative of the views of all members of the Branch.