

Queensland review of senior assessment and tertiary entrance

Draft Queensland Government response



In June 2013, the Queensland Government commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to conduct a major independent review of Queensland senior assessment and tertiary entrance processes. View the [Terms of reference](#) for the review.

The review's final report *Redesigning the secondary-tertiary interface: Queensland Review of Senior Assessment and Tertiary Entrance* was published on the ACER website on 28 September 2014. The final report provides 23 recommendations: seven relating to tertiary selection and eleven relating to senior assessment and reporting. A further five recommendations focus on the implementation of new arrangements across these two areas.

The current system

For senior students studying the curriculum set by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA), the assessment system has the following features:

- school-based assessment with no external subject assessment
- assessment and reporting based on students' performance against standards
- external moderation of school-based assessment to ensure comparability of teacher judgements across schools.

Since 1992, Queensland's system of selecting Year 12 leavers who are seeking to enter tertiary study has been the Overall Position (OP) system. QCAA constructs the OPs and provides them to the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC), a company formed by the universities, that manages the selection process for the tertiary sector. In addition to the OP system, QTAC selects candidates using its own Selection Rank process.

In most other states and territories, the equivalent of the QCAA has responsibility for determining students' subject results, and the equivalent of QTAC has responsibility for constructing the tertiary entrance rank.

Parliamentary Education and Innovation Committee report on *Assessment Methods for Senior Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics (Report No. 25)*

On 14 February 2013, the Queensland Parliament asked the Education and Innovation Committee (EIC) to inquire into assessment methods in senior mathematics, chemistry and physics subjects. The EIC report was tabled on 14 October 2014. The Queensland Government response to the EIC report, released on 6 January 2014, referred a number of recommendations for further consideration as part of the independent review of senior assessment and tertiary entrance. These included:

- that an external examination count for 50 per cent of a student's overall achievement mark in senior mathematics, chemistry and physics (*Recommendation 2*)
- that the subject-based external examination for mathematics, chemistry and physics be used to scale school-based assessments in these subjects (*Recommendation 4*)
- that inquiry-based tasks contribute a defined proportion (between 12.5% and 25%) of a student's overall subject mark (*Recommendation 9*)
- that a reduced mechanism to enable teachers to set and review school-based assessment tasks continue to operate for senior mathematics, chemistry and physics subjects, but that this mechanism is not used to moderate school-based assessments (*Recommendation 14*).

In addition, aspects of three other EIC recommendations were also referred to the review of senior assessment and tertiary entrance. These included:

- the provision of more detail in syllabus documents about the standards of achievement against syllabus criteria (*Recommendation 6*)
- having the syllabus prescribe that inquiry-based assessment tasks be completed in class time under teacher supervision, and subject to a maximum number of hours that can be spent on these tasks (*Recommendation 7*)
- that, in the context of standards-based assessment, numerical marking be strongly promoted in mathematics, chemistry and physics subjects, with syllabus documents to include mark ranges that equate to each of the five standards of achievement for each syllabus criteria (*Recommendation 13*).

Draft Queensland Government response

The Queensland Government supports the following key elements of the review recommendations, **subject to further feasibility assessment in collaboration with the tertiary sector and detailed analysis of financial implications:**

- separation of responsibilities, with QCAA to be responsible for senior assessment and QTAC for tertiary entrance ranking
- transitioned discontinuation of the OP system
- a new senior assessment and reporting regime, including external assessment
- fine-grained subject results that allow tertiary entrance ranks to be derived
- new quality assurance processes for school assessment.

The Queensland Government response would accommodate key measures recommended in the EIC report. Unlike the EIC report, ACER does not recommend that the results of school-based assessment be scaled against the results of an external assessment activity. This aspect of ACER's proposal will be subject to further feasibility assessment. In recognition of the EIC proposals, preliminary trials of new external assessment and quality assurance processes would include select science and mathematics subjects.

General principles

It is proposed that any changes to Queensland's senior assessment and tertiary entrance arrangements be guided by the following general principles:

- The types of assessment adopted for each senior subject should be appropriate to the subject matter and to the knowledge, skills and understanding being assessed.
- Reports of students' subject results should be presented in a format that is meaningful to them, their families and their potential employers.
- Tertiary selection processes should be transparent and fair for all Year 12 students seeking entry to tertiary education.
- Implementation timeframes should be adequate for students and families to plan their senior pathways, and for new systems to be developed and implemented.
- The new senior assessment and tertiary entrance processes should be coordinated in their introduction.
- Students who complete their senior program in the usual two year timeframe should do so under the same system that they began under.
- Any new arrangements will be designed to minimise workload impacts for schools and teachers.

Draft Queensland Government response to specific recommendations

The Queensland Government's proposed response to specific review recommendations is set out below, with recommendations addressed in five groups:

1. Separation of responsibilities for senior assessment and tertiary entrance ranking, and discontinuation of the OP
2. New tertiary selection processes
3. A new senior assessment and reporting system
4. New quality assurance arrangements
5. Implementation.

1. Separation of responsibilities for senior assessment and tertiary entrance ranking and discontinuation of the OP system

Recommendation 1

The OP system should be discontinued and the interface between secondary completion and university selection should be redesigned. The implications are that Subject Achievement Indicators (SAIs) would no longer be generated, Overall Achievement Indicators, OPs and Field Positions (FPs) would no longer be calculated, and the Queensland Core Skills (QCS) Test would be discontinued. Under the new model, subject results would be reported on a finer scale for use by universities in their selection decisions.

Recommendation 2

Responsibility for certifying student attainment in senior subjects should be separated from responsibility for selecting applicants for admission to university courses. The former should be the responsibility of QCAA, working directly with schools. The latter should be the responsibility of the universities and their agent QTAC.

Recommendation 12

The current responsibilities of QTAC for processing applications to undergraduate courses and implementing institutions' admission rules and procedures should be extended to include any scaling and aggregation of senior subject results to produce rankings of course applicants.

Recommendation 15

The Queensland Government should make the legislative changes required to divest the QCAA of its current responsibilities relating to tertiary selection (including scaling and aggregating results to produce rank orders of tertiary applicants).

The Queensland Government agrees in-principle that QCAA should continue to be responsible for senior assessment and reporting, with tertiary institutions (through QTAC) adopting responsibility for tertiary selection, including all tertiary entrance ranking. Tertiary institutions understand the knowledge, skills and aptitudes that students need to successfully complete their chosen tertiary studies.

The government supports a managed transition away from the OP tertiary entrance ranking system. While the OP system has served Queensland senior students well, it now operates in an environment where other tertiary entrance arrangements provide for the transition of nearly half of senior students into tertiary education.

The QCAA's current responsibility for tertiary entrance ranking involves oversight of processes that take place in schools—the assignment of Subject Achievement Indicators (SAIs) and administration of the QCS Test. Transfer of tertiary selection functions to the tertiary sector and calculation of a tertiary entrance rank directly from senior subject results would remove the need for QCAA to engage in school-based ranking or a common scaling test and enable QCAA to focus on core curriculum, testing and certification functions.

These changes would necessitate a redesign of the secondary-tertiary interface, with finer grained senior subject results enabling more direct calculation of tertiary entrance ranks. If enacted, the government would work closely with the tertiary sector to manage the transition to the new arrangements.

Pending the outcomes of consultation on this draft response and further feasibility assessment, any agreed changes in the final government response would be enacted as required through the appropriate legislative framework.

2. New tertiary selection processes

Recommendation 11

Tertiary institutions should make as transparent as possible the basis on which applicants are selected for admission to tertiary courses. This should include clarity about the nature of the evidence to be considered (for example, subject results, aptitude test scores, interviews), course prerequisites, any preferential weighting to be applied to subject results, and any processes for aggregating student results to rank applicants.

Recommendation 13

If tertiary institutions choose to construct an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR), then this should be computed using an inter-subject scaling of subject results reported by QCAA (each on a 60-point scale). In setting new eligibility rules tertiary institutions should consider reducing the number of subjects and restricting combinations of subjects.

Recommendation 14

Tertiary institutions, in collaboration with QCAA, should conduct ongoing monitoring of the impact of tertiary selection processes on the senior secondary school (particularly possible impacts on students' choices of senior subjects). Institutions should also continue to explore improvements to their selection processes and alternatives to rankings such as ATAR.

Recommendation 20

Queensland tertiary institutions should undertake a review of their admissions processes, including options for comparing and selecting applicants to competitive tertiary courses. This review should consider the appropriateness of constructing a single rank order of school leavers regardless of the course or institution to which they are applying and options for ranking course applicants (ATAR; a "points system").

Recommendation 21

Queensland tertiary institutions should consider enhancing technical capacity within QTAC to undertake any new scaling procedures to produce rank orders of course applicants. Consideration also should be given to establishing a high-level technical committee to oversee the technical quality of these procedures.

Recommendation 22

The proposed QTAC technical committee should, as part of its responsibilities, monitor on an ongoing basis any impact (positive or negative) that tertiary selection processes have on the senior secondary school, including any impact on students' choices of subjects, and recommend changes to selection processes where appropriate.

As stated above, the government accepts in-principle that tertiary selection processes should be the responsibility of the tertiary sector and agrees it is critical for tertiary selection processes to be equitable and transparent, while offering flexibility for student entry and tertiary institutions.

If this shift is enacted, the government would work cooperatively with QTAC and the tertiary education sector to achieve these goals and inform students about all tertiary selection processes.

The government acknowledges that Queensland tertiary institutions have indicated a strong preference that the ATAR be used as the primary selection mechanism for Year 12 completers. As a fine-grained entrance rank, the ATAR is regarded by tertiary institutions as administratively efficient and straightforward in its application. As it is applied in most other Australian jurisdictions, use of the ATAR supports applications by Queensland students to tertiary institutions in other states and territories.

ACER has suggested the calculation of an ATAR could be based on results in four senior subjects (rather than the five generally required for an OP), and that senior subject combinations could be required as prerequisites for some tertiary courses. More fundamentally, ACER has questioned the continuing need for a single tertiary entrance rank that represents students' "overall" position and applies across the full range of tertiary courses.

The government accepts in-principle that these are decisions for tertiary institutions and QTAC, but notes that these decisions may have impacts on student subject choice and school subject offerings. The government therefore seeks to work collaboratively with key stakeholders to consider minimum subject requirements for the calculation of an ATAR, how fine-grained subject results need to be and comparability with other Australian states and territories. The government also supports the consideration of future options for recognising a more inclusive range of senior student attainment.

To this end, the government proposes the establishment of a multilateral Ministerial Tertiary Entrance Taskforce. The taskforce would bring together expertise in the operation of tertiary admissions systems, knowledge of the skills and capabilities that are required for tertiary studies (with a particular emphasis on mathematics and science related course work), and an understanding of the relationships and flow on effects between tertiary selection and senior schooling. It would comprise representatives with relevant expertise from universities (including subject discipline experts), the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, QTAC, QCAA and the state and non-state schooling sectors.

Ultimately, any changes adopted as a result of the final government response should be monitored to identify the impact of tertiary selection processes on secondary schooling, with joint evaluation following an agreed period of implementation.

3. A new senior assessment and reporting system

Recommendation 3

Student attainment in each authority subject should be reported by QCAA in the form of a subject result indicating the level of knowledge, understanding and skill that the student has attained. Subject results should be directly comparable across teachers and schools and function as stand alone measures of senior secondary attainment, independently of how they might subsequently be used.

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

Recommendation 5

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

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 per cent of the subject result.

Recommendation 7

Three school assessments should be specified for each subject. The nature, intentions and parameters for these three assessment activities should be specified by QCAA, with teachers in schools annually designing local versions of each. The three school assessments and the external assessment should be designed jointly to provide appropriate coverage and balance of the subject syllabus and in general should address different kinds of learning and achievement within the subject.

Recommendation 10

The senior external examinations currently developed by QCAA should be discontinued. Instead, all students who are undertaking a senior subject should be required to complete the four assessment activities specified by QCAA for that subject (the three school assessments and one external assessment).

Recommendation 16

The Queensland Government should invest additional funding in the creation of high quality assessment and certification processes to underpin a reformed senior secondary credential. 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.

Recommendation 17

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

Recommendation 18

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

The Queensland Government endorses the value of school-based assessment, which is integral to senior school assessment in every Australian state and territory. Consultation for the review demonstrated strong support for school-based assessment, as well as support for the addition of external assessment to strengthen the rigor and credibility of the assessment system.

The government proposes in-principle support for four summative assessment activities: three school assessments plus one external assessment, generally contributing 50 per cent of a senior subject result. Four assessments in a common format and administered under similar conditions can support comparable teacher judgements and robust subject results, and ensure proper coverage of syllabus content. The reduced number of assessments may also ease teacher workloads.

Subject to resourcing constraints, external assessment could be introduced in all subjects unless there were compelling practical or educational reasons not to do so. Further consideration will be given to this matter, including the possibility of a staged introduction. Consistent with the government's response to the Parliamentary Education and Innovation Committee (EIC) report, 50 per cent external assessment is supported in senior mathematics, chemistry and physics. While the government supports in-principle external assessment contributing 50 per cent of the subject result in other subjects, further work is required to determine whether there are any subjects where this approach is less applicable (e.g. performing arts).

Introduction of a common external assessment would be a significant change in Queensland's long standing senior assessment arrangements. Accordingly, the government is proposing pilots to be commissioned in a small number of senior subjects during 2015, so that suitable external assessment activities could be developed and tested. Assessment conducted as part of these trials would not form part of a student's final result.

Results of senior subjects are currently reported on a five-point scale as Exit Levels of Achievement, ranging from Very High Achievement to Very Limited Achievement. The government anticipates that finer grained reporting of subject results could more fully reflect the rich assessment evidence from a two year course of senior study and better support the generation of a tertiary entrance rank.

However, a 60-point scale made up of three 10-point school assessments and one 30-point external assessment would need to be tested to check whether a 10-point marking scale for each school assessment would provide sufficient differentiation of student achievement, particularly at the upper levels; and whether 60 points is enough to produce a tertiary entrance rank (ATAR). This testing could be done as part of the implementation pilot in selected senior subjects.

Once it has been established that the scale of the subject result is fine enough, the government agrees in-principle that simple numerical addition of the results of the four assessment activities would be sufficient to give a subject result for each subject. This would be a clear and straightforward approach in which students and teachers are always aware of the contribution of each assessment activity to the overall subject result.

ACER argues against scaling school assessment results against the results of the external assessment, asserting that upfront specifications of the assessments and simple addition of results would make scaling unnecessary. This recommendation is contrary to the findings of the EIC report and will be subject to further feasibility assessment.

At this stage, the government has some reservations about the 60-point scale being able to communicate enough information for students, parents and prospective employers. Further work is needed to ensure that senior subject results provide a clear statement of what students know and can do in a format that is meaningful to an ordinary person. A clear, meaningful representation of student achievement would need to be developed and tested as part of any implementation pilots.

The government proposes that a dedicated Senior Assessment Taskforce led by the QCAA could oversee the pilots. The taskforce would comprise experienced school practitioners and discipline experts, as well as representatives from state and non-state schooling sectors, principal and parent groups, and QCAA officers.

While school-based assessment has been the mainstream assessment system for senior schooling in Queensland since 1972, the QCAA also maintains external senior syllabuses in 21 subjects in which assessment is limited to a single External Senior Examination (ESE). The government notes ACER's recommendation that ESE should be discontinued with commencement of a new senior assessment system. This issue will be the subject of further consultation in the development of a final government response, with a view to ensuring appropriate alignment in senior assessment across all settings.

4. New quality assurance arrangements

Recommendation 8

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.

- Endorsement of proposed assessment activities—for each of the three school assessments, QCAA checks locally devised assessment activities, instruments and marking schemes for their consistency with QCAA specifications and endorses their use with students.
- Confirmation of accurate application of marking schemes—for each of the three school assessments, QCAA checks that schools' applications of marking schemes are accurate and consistent across teachers and schools. This is done through moderation meetings in which teachers undertake blind re-assessments of student work against the relevant 10-point scale. QCAA also conducts annual spot sampling and blind re-assessments to check the consistency of marking across schools. Where a problem is identified, all student work in that subject in that school is re-marked. QCAA will determine which assessments, in which subjects, in which schools will have moderation meetings in a particular year.
- Ratification of subject results—at the end of Year 12, QCAA checks each school's results on the four assessments for anomalies. If anomalies are identified, then these are investigated and resolved before verifying students' marks on the four assessments. Once anomalies are resolved, the ratification of students' subject results for certification follows.

An appeals process will be available to students after they receive their Senior Statements from QCAA (or in some other way as determined by QCAA). QTAC should be included in discussions about the appeals process.

Recommendation 9

QCAA should establish a guild of assessment supervisors to lead the proposed moderation processes (the endorsement of assessment activities; the confirmation of the accurate and consistent application of marking schemes; and the ratification of subject results) and to assist in teacher capacity building.

In the new senior assessment system proposed by ACER, quality assurance of school assessment would begin with upfront specification of all assessments, and advance endorsement of schools' proposed assessment activities and marking schemes. The government supports in-principle ACER's proposals for a revitalised moderation process, with a focus on the quality of teacher-devised assessment activities and independent blind reassessments of teacher judgments. ACER's recommendation is consistent with recommendation 14 of the Parliamentary EIC report.

These new processes would need to be trialled as part of any implementation pilot in a small number of senior subjects with consideration given to potential administrative burden. For example, approval of the next year's school assessments might compete with other critical end of year activities.

While the government also endorses in-principle the introduction of dedicated assessment supervisors with specific subject expertise and demonstrated knowledge of assessment principles and practice, further consideration would need to be given to processes for the selection and engagement of these officers and associated resourcing implications.

In the interim, the effectiveness of the existing panel moderation process could be strengthened through additional measures to be implemented in 2015. This may include QCAA directly selecting sample student work folios for panel reviews, additional exemplars and resources to support teachers in developing high quality assessments, and additional training and resources for panel members. A trial of supervisors with particular expertise in maths, science and chemistry subjects could also be tested in 2015 and could act as a support group for panel reviews.

5. Implementation

Recommendation 19

The Queensland Government should devise a multi-platform information strategy to precede and accompany any significant changes or reforms to senior assessment and tertiary entrance.

Recommendation 23

As part of the Queensland Government's commitment to further development of the Queensland Certificate of Education, consideration should be given to enhancing the capacity of QCAA to develop and deliver a world-class senior secondary qualification. This may include establishing a group of specialist staff within QCAA capable of further conceptualising, leading and implementing the recommendations of this review. It may also 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.

Should the above changes be adopted, the government would ensure that ongoing development and implementation of new arrangements was conducted in a clear and transparent manner. Practitioners and organisations responsible for the administration of these activities would be directly involved in their formulation though involvement in the two ministerial taskforces and preliminary pilots in selected senior subjects. The government would also employ a comprehensive communications strategy to ensure schools, teachers, students and their families are informed of how new arrangements will operate and the timelines for their commencement.

The terms of reference for the review did not require a review of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). However, the senior assessment model proposed by ACER has potential implications for the QCE that would need to be the subject of further consideration. For example, introduction of senior subject results on a 60-point scale would require further work to determine how a minimum level of attainment would be defined for the purposes of the QCE. It is proposed that this issue be considered further by the senior assessment taskforce.

The government does not support the concept of further structural changes in which the QCAA would be replaced by two separate authorities with responsibility for Years K–9 and Years 10–12. The *Education (Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority) Act 2014* already provides a clear delineation between QCAA's senior and P–10 curriculum responsibilities.

Timelines for implementation

Introduction of any new arrangements will have major implications for a large number of young Queenslanders and their families. This currently includes nearly 45,000 Queensland Year 12 students of whom around 25,000 are currently eligible to receive an OP tertiary entrance rank. It may also have implications for approximately 20,000 persons seeking tertiary selection each year through the QTAC Selection Rank.

The government acknowledges that in many Queensland schools, the senior phase now effectively begins in Year 10, and students and their families begin planning senior pathways as early as Year 9.

Significant additional development and testing will be required to translate the recommendations of the review into systems that work successfully together upon introduction. In light of these challenges, the government proposes that for students beginning Year 11, any new senior assessment and tertiary entrance arrangements would not commence before 2017.

Implementation would require an initial transitional phase in which students entering Year 11 would commence under the new arrangements, while students who commenced Year 11 in the previous year would complete their Year 12 studies under the existing senior assessment and OP systems. Careful consideration would be given to how to support students who may be completing their senior studies over a period of more than two years.

Next steps

A final government response will be informed by further structured consultation with key stakeholder organisations and the broader Queensland community over a three month period. The government's final response will also be subject to further detailed consideration of implementation timeframes and resourcing impacts. It is intended that the final government response will be provided in mid-2015.

