

The curious case of Queensland and a middle way for senior schooling assessment

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Campbell's chapter highlights the historically unique approach of Queensland to senior schooling and tertiary entrance assessment in the Australian context, particularly in the sole reliance upon school-based assessments for these high-stakes purposes. While other Australian jurisdictions have also historically had their own standards-referenced assessment and external moderation practices for senior schooling assessment (Wyatt-Smith, Alexander, Fishburn, & McMahon, 2017), external examinations have typically taken precedence. This precedence is reflected in the use of external examinations to moderate (or 'scale') the school-based marks, as these examinations are perceived as more reliable and trustworthy, even though they are potentially limited in terms of providing more contextualised and authentic assessment of students' learning (Maxwell, 2006).

The recent reforms in Queensland, including the reintroduction of external examinations, bring their practices closer to other Australian jurisdictions. Nonetheless, the continuing systemic emphasis upon teacher-driven assessment in this high-stakes context, which is blended with improved centralised control and monitoring processes to ensure the reliability and comparability of these assessments represents a middle way in senior schooling assessment. This middle way balances a trust in teachers' professionalism and assessment practices, underpinned by an emphasis upon assessment related professional development, with centralised processes concerned with accountability and gathering evidence to ensure that the individual schools' and teachers' assessment practices reflect the systemic and curricular expectations (Hopfenbeck, Flórez Petour, & Tolo, 2015). As a result, the success (or otherwise) of the reformed Queensland senior schooling assessment system will be an interesting case study for researchers and policymakers interested in a balanced approach to high-stakes educational assessment.

Queensland's teacher-centred approach to senior-school assessment is consistent with a more general push in Australia to train assessment capable teachers, as reflected in the national standards for teaching and teacher training introduced in 2012 (Wyatt-Smith et al., 2017). Despite this push, there is a scarcity of published research on the reliability and validity of high-stakes teacher assessments in Australia. Johnson (2013) suggests that this scarcity is reflected globally and the limited evidence available on this topic suggests that teachers are commonly influenced by construct-irrelevant factors when making their assessments, including the gender, socio-economic background, effort and behaviour of their students. Hay and Macdonald's (2008) case-study of senior secondary Physical Education teachers in the Queensland context was consistent with this claim. Teachers were found to make their judgements along somewhat 'intuitive' lines and were influenced by the attitudes and sporting histories of the students, rather than explicitly referenced to the criteria and standards of student performances set out in the syllabus. Based on this limited evidence, the reforms to the Queensland assessment system to provide additional oversight, scaffolding and resources to teachers to ensure that their assessments are explicitly referenced to the relevant syllabus are welcome. Nonetheless, the influence of construct-irrelevant factors on the teacher assessments should be a key concern in monitoring processes and explicitly addressed in teacher training and professional development in assessment.

On a more critical note, the requirement for teachers to assess students' performances by rating them on a small number of coarse-grained levels, along with the use of marking guides that

are somewhat generic with respect to the specific assessment tasks, are concerning elements of Queensland's reformed assessment system. Andrich (2006) argued that similar features present in the Western Australian assessment system at the time lead to systematic biases in teacher judgements and were insufficiently precise for purposes of tertiary entrance selection. Therefore, as the Queensland system is further developed and implemented, an eye should be kept to the mistakes made by other Australian jurisdictions in the past.

References

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