

SHANI HARTLEY

**A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE HSC ASSESSMENT BY  
INTRODUCING EXTERNALLY MARKED PROJECTS  
OR PORTFOLIOS FOR ALL SUBJECTS**

3150 words

30 May 2011

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Mr Adrian Piccoli, MP  
Level 34 Governor Macquarie Tower  
1 Farrer Place  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Piccoli

A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE HSC ASSESSMENT BY INTRODUCING EXTERNALLY  
MARKED PROJECTS OR PORTFOLIOS FOR ALL SUBJECTS

As you know, the Board of Studies has been looking at how to implement as much of ACARA's national curriculum as possible while still being at the forefront of quality education. We have also been aware for some time that the current HSC external assessment process has an excessive reliance on examinations. Therefore, the Board of Studies proposes that all subjects contain a mix of examination and other external assessment, particularly as the national curriculum is introduced to New South Wales. The attached document outlines the reasons behind this decision.

Normally the Board of Studies makes small changes to curriculum and assessment without consulting the Minister for Education but since this is a major change in policy we are submitting it for your approval. I look forward to discussing this in further detail with you at our next meeting.

Yours faithfully

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# **A PROPOSAL TO IMPROVE HSC ASSESSMENT BY INTRODUCING EXTERNALLY MARKED PROJECTS OR PORTFOLIOS FOR ALL SUBJECTS**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **The Problem:**

The New South Wales HSC currently has a heavy reliance on assessment by examination which provides limited information about students' true abilities.

### **The Proposal:**

To adjust syllabus assessment requirements so ALL subjects have a project, portfolio or performance marked externally.

### **The Benefits:**

1. Improves education for critical thinking, innovation and creativity
2. Alleviates the stress on HSC students by spreading external assessment across multiple assessment types instead of one examination
3. Accommodates individual differences amongst students
4. Brings authenticity to students' efforts
5. Less 'teaching to the test'

### **The Risks:**

1. Goes against the direction of the Federal Government's emphasis on testing (and the possibility of future national examinations at the HSC level)
2. Opportunities for plagiarism to occur
3. Extra costs of marking non-test assessments

### **Future Direction:**

Increased student choice in assessment technique to accommodate different learning styles and personalities.

### **Minister Approval:**

For such a major overhaul of the HSC external assessment system the Board of Studies seeks the Minister for Education's approval.

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## **Introduction**

### **The Problem:**

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### **The Proposal:**

To adjust syllabus assessment requirements so ALL subjects have a project, portfolio or performance marked externally.

## **Policy Analysis**

### **The research (social analysis)**

Examinations are currently the primary form of assessment in the Higher School Certificate (HSC). Numerous studies have shown examinations are not a true measure of a person's abilities but more about memory skills and the ability to regurgitate information (Brennan 2009, Fogarty 1997, Gijbels et al 2005). Examinations stifle critical thinking (Siegel 2004), innovation (Looney 2009) and creativity (Robinson 2006). Assessment types can mean the difference between surface and deep approaches to learning (Gijbels et al 2005, p.328). Some claim that examinations are less reliable and valid than other forms of assessment (Lawson 2007) and there is a widening gap between the skills expected of students and what is actually assessed (Gillet et al 2009).

Currently, subjects deemed to be of a practical nature (such as Textiles and Design) and performance (like Music and Drama) have less reliance on examinations. They have major works and performances assessed externally in addition to the HSC Examination. There are a few other exceptions, including the Society and Culture course which requires a Personal Interest Project worth 40% of the external mark with the remaining 60% based on the HSC examination (Board of Studies NSW, 2009).

Instead of an extreme examination system, resulting in an education system that teaches to a test (Looney 2009, p.3), there should be a system that reflects individualised learning via the creation of a portfolio of work or a project such as a documentary, depending on the course involved. Currently syllabus requirements places restrictions on the use of testing. For instance in the recently rewritten Business Studies Syllabus it says “No more than 50% weighting may be allocated to tests and examinations”(BOS 2011, p.6) . However, if schools were to use all 50% permitted, Business Studies students would have 75% of their mark based on test style assessment.

Non examination components of external assessment also helps to shift the focus of the HSC from being a “credential for employment” to the “value of knowledge itself” (Barcan 2003).

All of this research is already implicated in some of the stated goals of the Board of Studies:

- To have “highly-regarded, comprehensive, flexible and inclusive credentials that meet the needs of students and the community” (BOS 2010, p.25)
- To “meaningfully communicate student achievement” (BOS 2010, p.25)
- To form “policies and practices that reflect contemporary national and international best practice and research in curriculum, assessment, registration and accreditation” (BOS 2010, p.26)

To “ensure that NSW syllabuses, courses and support materials promote high standards of achievement for the full range of students in NSW” (BOS 2010, p.33)

Examinations do not mimic real life yet projects and portfolios of work can. A move away from examinations is a move towards authentic learning.

It appears the main argument for examination is the easy collation and comparison of data, as can be seen in the MySchool website. The media and industry backlash over this works in favour for this policy proposal.

## Cost analysis

The costs involved with changing the external assessment for syllabuses that won't be covered by national curriculum are associated with:

1. Formation and maintenance of the Committee for External Assessment Change to oversee the change process
2. Consultation with teachers and other stakeholders about the exact nature of the non-test component of external assessment
3. Writing the changes into existing syllabuses
4. Administration of the implementation of the changes
5. Higher expenses associated with marking non-test assessments
6. Public relations and advertising

The first four costs listed above do not add extra to the budget burden since syllabuses are reviewed regularly as part of the Board of Studies brief (BOS 2010, p.35), "through collaboration with key NSW, national and international agencies on areas of common strategic interest" (BOS 2010, p.38). As the syllabuses go through these reviews the external assessments will be changed in line with this policy.

Additionally, Goal 1 of the *Board of Studies Strategic Plan (2009–2013)* involves developing and providing comprehensive assessment resources as national curriculum is introduced (Strategic Objective 1.6, BOS 2010, p.24). This also falls within current budget parameters so there are no extra costs involved with the formation and implementation process of this policy.

As seen in the fifth point listed, the financial burden of marking non-test style assessments will be slightly more than ordinary examinations since projects and portfolios require more time and human effort to mark. However there are savings elsewhere. For instance, the examinations themselves will cost less due to the shorter length (less printing, less exam supervision and less marking). There will also be a substitution made in some papers by have a trade-off of more multiple choice questions instead of questions requiring short written responses which increases the portion of the exams that can be marked automatically by computer. Also, students provide their own paper for their projects and portfolios and teachers provide the supervision as part of their normal load.

In addition to these savings and trade-offs, there will be no need to increase the budget for HSC marking due to the recent surprise savings made by the gradual introduction of efficient on-screen marking (BOS 2010, p.169) through faster processing and reduced paper usage. In the 2010 financial year the Board of Studies

spent \$3.9 million on renting space in 12 marking sites for HSC and SC marking (BOS 2010, p.62 and p.170). It is foreseen with on-screen marking teachers will mark from home or school using their own or their school's space and equipment and thus make significant savings in this area that could be allocated to the increased load of non-examination marking. The Federal Government's National Broadband Network will further aid this process by reducing access inequity.

The only additional cost to the government would be any marketing of the new system it would want to undertake to promote how the improved assessment system will advance education in NSW or to counteract opposition. Yet, much of the funds for this will come from the federal government's grants provided to implement the national curriculum and money left over from the Building Education Revolution grants (some of this is being spent on interactive whiteboards but there is still some funds remaining unallocated).

### **Political analysis**

This is the time to move from an HSC overly reliant on examinations to a more innovative style of assessment.

As the Labor Federal Government moves further towards standardised testing, a system that has failed education in the United States of America, it is important for New South Wales to distinguish itself from this draconian method of assessment which provides limited information of students' true abilities.

Parents, teachers and the media are increasingly critical of the systematic testing of students. They are looking for results that reflect the holistic learning of thirteen years of schooling that is less reliant on how someone may perform on a particular day in an examination. The internal component of assessment was meant to address this inequity but with increasing pressure for performance in the HSC internal assessment is becoming more about 'teaching to the test'. On the heels of Premier Barry O'Farrell's announcement for investing in Interactive Whiteboards and a push to improve education in rural areas, the NSW Government, through the Board of Studies, can promote that balancing the forms of external assessment will result in better educated students with higher levels of skills, ready to contribute to community and economy.

One of the major difficulties with implementing this policy is the potential for plagiarism and other forms of cheating. As a consequence of allegations of corruption in HSC assessment in English Extension 2 (which has a major work component) an investigation conducted by ICAC (2007) did not find evidence of corruption in the particular case investigated from the HSC in 2005. However, ICAC made several recommendations that the BOS (2008, p. 22) introduced in 2007, including clear documentation of what was expected of take-home assessment tasks and commenced an *HSC: All My Own Work* mandatory program during Year 10 as part of a requirement for commencing studies for the HSC. Most importantly, a standard was developed, *Honesty in Assessment – the Standard*, which will be incorporated with all future syllabuses.

The last problem expected to be encountered involves inequity in students' access to resources in order to complete projects and portfolios. However, the digital revolution (laptop 1:1 program) and the National Broadband Network are going a long way to reduce this inequity.

## Stakeholder analysis

### The NSW Opposition

Of course the NSW Opposition and its supporters will argue against this change on the following basis:

1. The marking of non examination assessments will be too expensive
  - By referring to the cost analysis above this can be counteracted effectively.
2. The marking of non examination assessments will be too subjective
  - Refer to the esteemed Professor Gordon Stanley, President of NSW BOS 1998-2008 and currently at Oxford University (Department of Education, University of Oxford, 2011a) who researched and introduced to NSW standards-based assessment. He and the also highly respected Professor Jim Tognolini, (Department of Education, University of Oxford, 2011b) support assessment change for a “diverse student population and to take account of the skills and understandings needed for tomorrow’s uncertain future” (Tognolini et al 2007).
3. It is change for the sake of change and mere tinkering of the Federal Government’s national curriculum.
  - The Federal Government can be criticised for its emphasis on testing, its use of data in the MySchool website and the resulting ‘teaching to the test’. Refer to Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University, who recently visited Australia and was very critical of the federal government’s testing regime (Keenan 2011, Patty 2011).
  - ACARA has stated that “Certification, assessment and examination requirements for the senior secondary years will continue to be the legislative responsibility of individual states and territories” (ACARA 2010, p.2).

### Business

Many people outside the education sector, particularly older people, will have difficulty seeing the problems with external assessment being primarily examination based. It is possible some business leaders will be amongst these critical voices. However, there are many more business leaders, particularly in the IT sector, willing to support a move away from over reliance on examinations. For instance, Apple has been working with many schools within NSW to help make learning more engaging and project based (Dingwell et al). The value of this change for businesses lies in education assessment in alignment with outcomes focused on knowledge and skills desired by employers.

### **The teaching profession (and their unions e.g. The NSW Teachers Federation)**

Since much of the external assessment changes will be implemented with national curriculum, it is predicted that since assessment will be only a small component of a wholesale change there will be little problem in the particular policy being examined here. However, where the assessment changes are occurring as part of regular reviews of syllabus teachers and their representative bodies may protest that external assessment tasks involving projects and portfolios places a higher workload on them. It does. Therefore, as a trade-off, the number of internal assessment tasks required by syllabuses will be reduced when the external assessment is changed. This essentially means there will be a swap from internal assessment to external assessment of some tasks. There could be resistance to what could be perceived as overly prescribed assessment types since external assessment needs to have tighter requirements to enable it to be comparable across a whole state cohort in each subject. The BOS aims to make the new external assessment tasks as adaptable as possible for individual differences. It is vital to consult and win over the Teachers Federation because they have a strong voice in the media and hold sway with a vast number of teachers in public schools.

### **Universities**

Universities have been wanting broader assessment for some time. They will support this initiative as long as they are assured the marking process is fair and equitable. Advancements in technology will enable universities to check any work uploaded by students for external assessment.

### **Students**

Students may see it as an increased workload and more pressure because of the misconception that internal assessment has less weighting than external assessment. Students will need to be communicated the benefits of having a range of tasks more suited to individual learning preferences and thus the intrinsic motivation to do well will be emphasised. Some subjects will allow for public display of the projects and portfolios, sometimes in an online format, much in the way Art Express already does for Visual Art students which will be an incentive for many students. Technology allows this process to be completed efficiently. Winning the students over is the key to winning the parents over too. It is strongly recommended that social media is used to educate and promote this policy to students.

### **Parents and Citizens Associations**

Some parents will fall in the older category mentioned earlier that don't see how examinations could be detrimental. They may also think they will need to help their child more. It is also recommended that people such as the aforementioned Professor Gordon Stanley are formed into a group of supporters to help inform the public of the policy's benefits.

### **Aboriginal students (represented by the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group)**

This policy is a win for Aboriginal students who generally perform poorly in test situations. Project and portfolio assessments permit greater diversity in style and content.

Board Curriculum Committees created for the regular syllabus reviews are required to encompass a range of stakeholders, including representatives from the Department of Education and Training , Teachers' Federation, Independent Education Union, Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, Catholic Education Commission and the Parents and Citizens Association. For a full list and details about the role of the Board Curriculum Committee see Appendix 2.

There will always be naysayers but the majority could be convinced that this a quality proposal through media releases and other public relations strategies involving a group of supporters. Promoting this policy is a good way for Mr Adrian Piccoli, the current Minister of Education, to advance the profile of NSW Education and his newly elected party.

## Implementation

*The Board of Studies is committed to a syllabus development process that provides opportunities for consultation, establishes achievable timelines and ensures quality syllabuses.*

*The process, using a project management approach, involves four phases:*

- 1. Syllabus review*
- 2. Writing brief development*
- 3. Syllabus development*
- 4. Implementation* *(BOS 2010, p.40)*

As discussed elsewhere in this report implementation of new non examination external assessments will occur as

1. The national curriculum is introduced (starting in 2013), and
2. Normal syllabus reviews are conducted (over the next ten years).

Therefore the consultation process, particularly with teachers, will operate as it normally does under these procedures. For further details see Appendix 1: The Syllabus Development Process.

Implementing changes in the HSC Marking Centre will need to be in line with how currently other submitted works are assessed. Most of these are currently at the HSC Marking Centre but others may need to be through school visits like Drama and Music performances are currently conducted. Examination marking will be completed onscreen and moved off site (teachers' homes and schools). Much of the project and portfolio work will be able to be assessed in the same way.

As syllabuses gradually move to this policy technology will allow for greater efficiency. For instance, plagiarism detectors will become more sophisticated and students will be able to upload work during the school year, reducing the bottleneck at the end of pressure for students completing the HSC and the teachers marking it. Performances could be recorded and uploaded through resources like YouTube.

## **Evaluation**

The main quantifiable way that a shift from examination based assessment can be evaluated is simply through the HSC results. As part of the yearly analysis of HSC marks comparisons will be made on the trends in marks to previous years on a subject by subject basis.

Qualitative evaluation will be conducted through surveys of teachers to determine the changes in workload, motivation and attainment of outcomes of both students and the teachers themselves.

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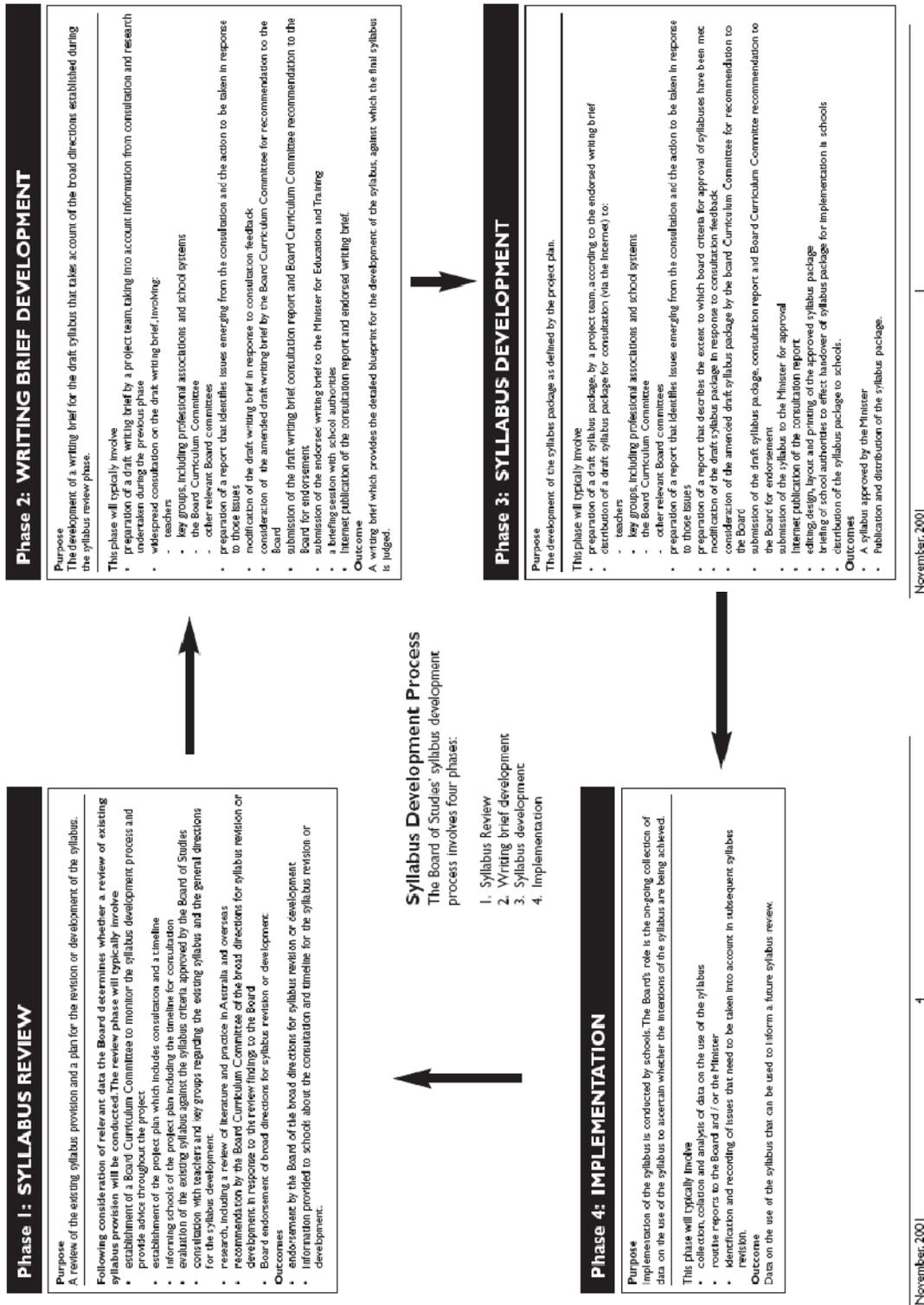
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- [@JMGubbins](#), teacher, USA
- [@MaralynParker](#), education writer, The Daily Telegraph, Sydney
- Stephen P, parent, Sydney
- [@Temmo78](#), teacher, Sydney
- [@HeidiCWatkins](#), teacher, UK
- Kirrily W, parent, Wagga Wagga NSW

# Appendix 1

## BOS Syllabus Development Process (2001)



Source:

[http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/pdf\\_doc/syl\\_dev\\_process.pdf](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/pdf_doc/syl_dev_process.pdf)

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## Appendix 2

### Board Curriculum Committees (BOS 2001)

#### Membership

The Board Curriculum Committees for each syllabus development project will be appointed by the Board and include:

- 1-2 members of the Board of Studies
- 2 Tertiary sector nominees, nominated by the Committee of Chairs of Academic Boards
- 2 NSW Department of Education and Training nominees
- 1 NSW Department of Education and Training nominee with TAFE background (for Years 7-12 Committees only)
- 2 NSW Teachers' Federation nominees
- 1 Independent Education Union nominee
- 1 Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc nominee
- 1 Catholic Education Commission nominee
- 1 Parents and Citizens Association nominee
- 1 Association of Independent Schools nominee
- 1 representative with a background in Special Education
- 1 Council of NSW Professional Teachers' Associations nominee
- 1 NSW Parents Council / Council of Catholic Schools Parents nominee
- 1 Primary Principals' Council nominee (K-6 committees only)
- 1 Federation of School and Community Organisations nominee (K-6 committees only)

#### Role

The role of Board Curriculum Committees is to:

- provide advice to project teams at defined stages throughout the project;
- provide advice on the groups or individuals to be consulted during the development of the syllabus;
- review documentation prepared during the curriculum development process;
- recommend syllabus documents to the Board for endorsement.

Board Curriculum Committees will advise the Board on:

- whether the agreed processes have been followed;
- whether due attention has been given to the views identified during consultation;
- whether the syllabus development processes have been followed;
- the quality of the syllabus package in relation to the writing brief endorsed by the Board.

#### Project Teams

Project teams will comprise various personnel from the Office of the Board of Studies and contracted writers. Project managers, appointed by the Office of the Board for each syllabus development project, will:

- coordinate and manage the production of a syllabus development proposal, writing brief and draft syllabus package by the project team;
- inform the Board Curriculum Committee on issues identified during consultation;

- co-ordinate research to evaluate particular syllabuses and make appropriate recommendations to the Board;
- receive and act on advice from the consultative network, including:
  - teachers
  - key groups, such as professional associations and school systems
  - the Board Curriculum Committee.

Given the nature of the two roles, development and monitoring, members of the project teams cannot also be members of the Board Curriculum Committees.

Selection and appointment of project team members will be undertaken by the Office of the Board of Studies.

Source:

[http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/pdf\\_doc/syl\\_dev\\_process.pdf](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/manuals/pdf_doc/syl_dev_process.pdf)

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