

## HSC Advisory Bulletin 2011

The purpose of this advisory bulletin is to provide general advice to teachers of all Higher School Certificate courses to share with their Year 12 and Year 11 students. It highlights some of the issues that were raised during the 2010 examinations that affected student performance in the examinations.

This document should be read in conjunction with other HSC information, such as:

- detailed advice on specific courses in the *2010 Notes from the Marking Centre*;
- *Assessment and Reporting* documents for each HSC course on the Board's website at [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus\\_hsc](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc);
- *How Your HSC Works* – a plain English description of the entire HSC process;
- *2011 HSC Rules and Procedures* – issued to all HSC students.

### **2010 HSC examination summary**

In 2010 a record 71,310 students were entered for about 450,000 individual examinations, including major projects and performances. Examinations were held in more than 700 centres in NSW, as well as a number of interstate and overseas venues.

About 20% of all examinations were marked onscreen via secure internet. The speed, efficiency and success of this program means it will be expanded in 2011.

Two errors in examination papers early in the examination period attracted wide media attention. In the Business Studies examination, the alternatives in one multiple-choice question were out of order, while in the Ancient History examination, a source related to two questions was incorrectly labelled. There is no evidence that either of the errors affected students' ability to answer the questions associated with them.

### **Changes to the format of examination papers**

*The parts of examinations to be handed in for marking are identified by an orange-coloured stripe.*

In 2010 some changes were made to the design of HSC examination papers. All HSC examination papers and writing booklets were printed on white paper. All parts of the examination to be handed in for marking were identified with an orange-coloured stripe.

Examination papers will have the same format in 2011.

Small black angle brackets are printed on the corners of some examination papers, on all writing booklets and on some question and answer booklets. These black angle brackets are reference marks to assist the positioning of pages if they are to be scanned. Student responses that fall outside the black angle brackets are still able to be scanned. However, students should be aware that writing close to the edge of the page makes it very difficult for markers to read their responses. Students should ask for an extra writing booklet if they need more space to write.

## **Colour in examination papers**

*Colour images will appear in some examination papers in 2011.*

Colour has always been a feature of HSC Geography and Visual Arts examinations. For these examinations, students with a colour vision disability should apply for disability provisions (see page 7).

In 2010, colour images were also included in the following examinations: English (Standard and Advanced) Paper 1, English (Standard) Paper 2, English (ESL) Paper 1, Aboriginal Studies, and Ancient History. Colour images will again appear in some HSC examinations in 2011. Where colour is included in an examination, questions will not depend on a student's ability to see colour.

## **Changes to the format of writing booklets**

*Students should be aware that they may request additional writing booklets if they need them during the examination.*

In 2010, instead of being issued with stapled four-page or eight-page writing booklets, students were given writing booklets consisting of a sheet of A3 paper folded to A4. The new writing booklets included a cover page for the student's identification details and examination details, and three ruled pages for the student's written response. Slight alterations to line spacing and line length mean that the new writing booklet provides the same amount of writing space as the previous four-page writing booklet.

While lighter and easier to handle for students, the lack of blank pages meant that many students used additional booklets for planning extended responses. Students should plan any essays on the first page of the writing booklet they are using for that question. Students will be issued with multiple writing booklets for extended responses, and may request additional writing booklets if necessary.

Personalised writing booklets with the student's identification number and centre number printed on them were provided for a small number of examinations.

## **Examinations with question restrictions**

*Students should be aware that there are question restrictions in some examinations.*

In some examinations there are particular requirements about the questions that students may answer. Students need to be aware that penalties may apply if they do not comply with these requirements.

For example, in Section III of the Studies of Religion examination, students must answer a question that is on a different religious tradition from the question(s) they answered in Section II. In the 2010 Studies of Religion examination, candidates who answered two questions on the same religious tradition were awarded marks for only one of them.

Similarly, in the Society and Culture written examination, students must answer questions on a different Depth Study in Section III to that used in Section II. Again, in

the 2010 examination, candidates who answered two questions on the one Depth Study were awarded marks for only one of them.

### **Use of dictionaries in language examinations**

*Dictionaries should be used carefully in languages examinations.*

In languages written examinations (except classical languages), students are permitted to use monolingual and/or bilingual print dictionaries. In 2010, comments in the *Notes from the Marking Centre* from a number of languages supervisors of marking indicate that some students are not using dictionaries effectively. When looking for a word in the dictionary, students must ensure that they choose the most appropriate meaning for the context.

### **Glossary of key words**

*The key words published by the Board are not the only verbs used in examination questions.*

The Board's *Glossary of Key Words* contains some terms commonly used in examination questions. The glossary is a useful guide to question formats, but it is not exhaustive; HSC students must be prepared for many kinds of questions. Teachers should ensure students are not solely relying on the glossary in their preparation for the examinations. Teachers should advise students that not all HSC questions will start with, or even include, one of the key words from the glossary. The examination may include questions that ask, for example, 'how?', 'why?' or 'to what extent?' and use verbs that are not included in the glossary, such as 'design', 'translate' or 'list'.

### **Question format**

*Examinations will use a range of question types that may vary from year to year.*

Teachers should ensure students do not assume they can prepare for an examination solely on the basis of past papers. Each year the examination committees follow a framework provided by the specifications found in the *Assessment and Reporting* document for each HSC subject. These specifications give committees flexibility to vary previous question formats. While committees will never set out to 'trick' students, they will also avoid creating an overly predictable examination. Committees will use a range of question types, which may vary from year to year.

### **Questions with stimulus material**

*Examination committees may use stimulus material where they believe it is necessary. This may change from year to year.*

Stimulus material – such as artwork, quotations or maps – may be included in a question for a number of reasons. For example, a map, drawing or quotation may provide a focus for analysis or interpretation. The question will make clear how the images or words in the stimulus are intended to be used in answering the question. Teachers must prepare students to carefully read and analyse each question, and answer it on its merits.

The appearance or absence of questions with stimulus material in any given year does not indicate that stimulus material will be used in the same section in subsequent years' examinations.

### **Multiple-choice questions**

*Multiple-choice questions require selecting the best of the available answers.*

Multiple-choice questions provide students with four possible answers from which to choose the correct (or best) one. This type of question requires students to have a degree of certainty about their knowledge and understanding of the subject.

The purpose of the other answers (distractors) is to present a range of options that appear to be feasible. Some could be correct in a given set of circumstances but are not the best overall answer. In other cases, distractors may be partially right with some element of incorrect information. If teachers find their students are uncertain about how to judge the 'best possible' answer they may need to provide additional advice. The Board's Test Yourself online multiple-choice questions are recommended as a useful way to practise this judgement.

### **Managing difficult questions**

*Students should expect that examinations will be challenging.*

HSC examinations are intended to be rigorous and to challenge students of all abilities. During 2010 some students expressed concern about the difficulty of certain examinations. Students should not expect that exactly the same topics or types of questions will be asked every year. The examination committee uses the syllabus content and outcomes in formulating questions and, obviously, they may develop questions from different areas of the syllabus from year to year.

If students have difficulty understanding the question they should look for key words and identify the aspect of the course to which these relate. They are then in a position to formulate their answer from their relevant knowledge, understanding and skills.

If a student finds a question difficult they can expect that other students will also find it challenging. Making a best attempt at a question is a better strategy than a non-attempt. Markers are briefed to read each answer carefully to see the merit in the answer and to mark in a positive manner – that is, to look where marks can be awarded rather than taken away.

If students believe that there is an error in an examination paper, they should inform the presiding officer, who will advise on how to proceed.

### **Prepared responses**

*Students should not expect that HSC examinations will support the use of answers prepared in advance.*

Students should know that HSC questions are not designed to support answers prepared in advance. It is important that teachers prepare students to answer the questions they encounter in the examination, rather than anticipating a particular type of question and memorising an answer to suit.

Students must also understand that partially modifying an otherwise irrelevant memorised response will not lead to high marks. Again in 2010, supervisors of marking noted that some students tried unsuccessfully to fit prepared, memorised answers into questions without addressing the requirements of the question.

In addition, if students submit a prepared response that borrows heavily from the thoughts or words of others, they are breaching examination rules and may be penalised. (See *Breaches of Examination Rules and Malpractice* on page 7.)

### **Write in black pen**

*Students should use black pen in examinations to record their answers.*

The *Rules and Procedures for 2011 HSC Candidates* booklet advises that students should:

*write preferably with black pen but blue pen is also acceptable. Pencil may be used only where specifically directed.*

Black pen is recommended, as it is easier for markers to read than blue pen. Students should never use glitter, metallic effect or highlighter pens to record their answers. Students should also use black pen – not pencil – to record answers on multiple-choice answer sheets. Answers recorded in pencil are very difficult for the electronic scanner to detect.

It is in a student's interest to ensure that all their answers are clear, legible and easy to read.

### **Major projects and performances**

*Students should be fully aware of and follow the requirements for major projects and performances.*

In 2010 a range of projects were received for marking where students had contravened the rules in terms of size, scope and types of materials used, or submission by the required date. The requirements are detailed in the *Assessment and Reporting* document related to each syllabus. Students must understand they will not gain full marks if they do not meet the project requirements. The *Notes from the Marking Centre* identify this problem and should be read carefully by all teachers of subjects with major works.

In 2010, as part of the changes to the examination specifications, there were changes to the word limit in the Society and Culture Personal Interest Project. The word range for the central material in the Personal Interest Project is 2500–4000 words. In 2010, it was clear that students at some schools were not aware of the new word limit. Students and teachers should ensure that they read the *Assessment and Reporting in Society and Culture* document on the Board’s website.

Students and teachers of Design and Technology and Industrial Technology are reminded that from 2011, the written folio should not exceed 80 A4 pages or 40 A3 pages (printed on one side only). Advice regarding these requirements can be found in the *Assessment and Reporting in Design and Technology* and *Assessment and Reporting in Industrial Technology* documents on the Board’s website.

### **Certification of projects**

All projects must be certified by the supervising teacher and the principal that they were developed under the teacher’s supervision, are the students’ own work and that they were completed by the due date. If either the teacher or the principal is unable to certify a project, a non-certification report form is provided to the Board. These cases are investigated and penalties may be applied.

There were 184 cases of non-certification of projects in 2010. In some cases the supervising teacher could not certify the authenticity of a student’s project, because too much work had occurred away from school. Other cases involved the student using assistance without appropriate acknowledgment.

After investigation, 104 students received no penalty, 63 cases resulted in a reduced mark, and 17 received zero marks.

More advice exists on the Board’s website in the document *HSC examinations: projects, submitted works and performances – Information for Teachers*.

### **Entry for Vocational Education and Training (VET) examinations**

*Students wishing to sit the HSC examination in a VET framework subject must ensure that they have been entered for the examination by their school.*

If students doing the Board’s Vocational Education and Training courses want to receive an HSC mark (which can be counted towards their ATAR calculation), they must be entered for the relevant HSC examination, in addition to the 240-hour course.

In 2010 a number of students arrived at school to sit a VET examination that they had not been entered for. In some cases, there were no papers available for them or even a presiding officer, and this resulted in a delayed start to the examination for these students.

Students should check their course entry details on Students Online to ensure that they are correctly enrolled. If students find incorrect information about their VET examination arrangements when they check *Students Online*, they should immediately notify the school principal or Year 12 adviser.

## **Applications for disability provisions (previously known as special examination provisions)**

*Applications for disability provisions should be submitted by the end of Term 1 so that students can know, and be familiar with, the provisions granted well before the examination period.*

In 2010 the Board received 5117 applications for disability provisions, of which 2688 were approved in full, 2022 partially approved and 407 fully declined.

Students seeking disability provisions can apply from the Term 4 of Year 11, and schools should have submitted their students' applications no later than the end of Term 1, except for emergencies (accidents and illness). Delayed applications can result in finalisation of arrangements very close to the examination with insufficient time to prepare for the approved provisions. Resolving matters early allows the school to factor disability provisions in their planning, and for students to practise and become familiar with working under these conditions.

Information can be downloaded from the Board's website to provide more detail on disability provisions policy and procedures.

## **Illness/misadventure**

*Illness/misadventure applications need to be supported by independent evidence that clarifies the impact on performance at the time of the examination.*

Illness/misadventure provisions exist to support students where their examination performance is affected by circumstances beyond their control.

Students should never risk harm in order to attend an HSC examination. Students should not attend an examination against a doctor's advice. Students isolated by flood, for example, should try to contact the Board of Studies and their school to see if other options exist, such as sitting for the examination at a different centre. If not, they should remain wherever they are safest and be assured the appeals process will apply.

Students with an upheld illness/misadventure application will receive the higher of their examination mark (if any) and moderated school assessment mark as their examination mark for that course.

In 2010 there were 4631 individual illness/misadventure appeals of which 4152 (90%) were fully or partially upheld. In addition, schools submitted 153 group appeals and 45 were fully or partially upheld.

## **Breaches of examination rules and malpractice**

*The Board's rules and procedures regarding the HSC examinations are designed to ensure fairness for all. Students should know the rules, and understand the consequences of malpractice and breaches of rules.*

During the 2010 HSC examinations there were a number of cases where students brought unauthorised material into the examination room. This material included

written notes and unauthorised equipment such as a phone or other electronic device. Individual consequences can be severe, including an award of zero marks for an examination, the cancellation of a course and loss of the HSC.

At the commencement of each examination, presiding officers ask if anyone has unauthorised material. At that point all candidates may hand in any material accidentally brought into the room with no penalty.

Each student has signed on their confirmation of entry to the HSC that they are aware of the rules specified in the *HSC Rules and Procedures* booklet and have discussed these with their parent or guardian. Students should not complete this declaration lightly as action will be taken against students who fail to comply with the rules and procedures.

A common defence raised by students against allegations of malpractice is that they did not refer to unauthorised material they were found with. When their examination answer includes large proportions of the notes, some students claim that they have memorised their answer and did not refer to the unauthorised notes. This raises two important points for teachers to reinforce:

- firstly, students need to understand the Board will not accept this argument as a defence against having unauthorised material in the examination room
- secondly, students should be prepared to answer the set question, not replicate a previously drafted and memorised answer.

A further common defence is that the student discovered the material after the examination had commenced and thought it was too late to hand it in. Students are strongly advised to notify the supervisor immediately they become aware that this is the situation. Embarrassment is not an adequate excuse for failing to hand in material.

In 2010, six cases of malpractice or breach of rules resulted in cancellation of these students' examinations; another three students received zero marks for a part of the examination. A total of 63 students were awarded zero or reduced marks in a question or section for a response that borrowed heavily from the thoughts or words of others (plagiarism).

### ***Acceptable behaviour***

*Behaviour that impacts on the conduct of the HSC examinations can incur serious penalties.*

In 2010 the Board's presiding officers raised some concerns about poor behaviour during the examinations. It is unacceptable for students to create disturbances during reading time or the examination. Examples include aggressive behaviour towards examination supervisors, moving around without permission, shifting furniture, or generally distracting other students.

Presiding officers are instructed to exclude offending students from the examination room until they settle, and then may allow them to return to complete the examination. No additional time will be given to such students. If a student does not settle they will remain excluded from the examination, and their paper will be marked

on the work completed at that stage. Disruptive students may be reported for a breach of examination rules, which could result in cancellation of the examination and loss of their HSC.

### ***Non-serious attempts and non-attempts***

*Students must be aware of the importance of making a genuine attempt at all questions.*

Students should enter the HSC examinations knowing they must make a genuine effort at each paper. The *HSC Rules and Procedures* describe the Board's requirement that students make a 'serious attempt' to answer the examination questions – failure to do so is called a 'non-attempt'.

The Board considers a student's paper to be a non-attempt if there is no evidence of academic engagement with the paper. Students are required to attempt a range of question types throughout the examination paper. It is insufficient to answer multiple-choice questions only. Merely rewriting the question is not considered to be an adequate attempt at the paper. Non-serious attempts include frivolous or objectionable material.

Students identified as providing non-serious or non-attempts will be asked by the Board to justify why they should receive a result in the course concerned. The consequences may be significant and may include not receiving an award in the course concerned. This may render some students ineligible for the award of the Higher School Certificate.

In 2010 there were 186 non-attempts or non-serious attempts. The penalty in most cases was cancellation of the course, often with consequent loss of the HSC.

### ***Alerts for 2011 examination specifications***

*Be aware that new examination specifications apply for some courses in 2011.*

In 2011, revised syllabuses in Agriculture, Food Technology and Legal Studies will be examined for the first time. These courses have new examination specifications, and the syllabus documents and sample questions or specimen papers are available on the Board's website.

Any teachers who are not yet familiar with these changes should check the Board's website for full details and ensure the advice is passed on to HSC students.