

Consultation Survey on Proposed Changes to HSC Examinations and Assessment

Description of Respondents and Summary of Comments Made about the General Proposals in the Background Paper

Description of Respondents

1 Number of Responses

A total of 922 responses were received to the survey (686 by email, 236 by fax or post).

2 Type of Respondents

Table 1: Types of Respondents

Respondent Type	Number	%
Individual	684	74%
• Teacher	362	39%
• Head Teacher	228	25%
• Other School Executive	28	3%
• Parent	7	1%
• Student	32	3%
• Curriculum Consultant	9	1%
• University Academic	4	0%
• Other	5	1%
• Unknown	9	1%
School-based Group	202	22%
• Whole School	18	2%
• School Executive Group	10	1%
• Faculty	147	16%
• Group of Teachers	27	3%
Other Group	36	4%
• School System Authority	4	0%
• Teacher Association	17	2%
• Teacher Network	10	1%
• Other	5	1%
Total	922	100%

It can be seen from Table 1 that 74% of responses came from individuals, particularly school teachers (39%) and head teachers/subject coordinators (25%). There were also 28 responses (3%) from other members of school executive and 32 responses (3%) from students (mostly relating to Society and Culture), while there were about 5–10 responses from each of parents, curriculum consultants, university academics and others.

The remaining 26% of responses came from groups, particularly school faculty groups (147 responses, 16%). There were a number of responses from very large groups, including 18 from whole schools, 17 from teacher associations (ie professional associations or unions), 10 from regional networks of teachers and 4 from school system authorities (eg diocesan Catholic Schools Office).

3 Responses from Schools

There were 825 responses in which the respondent had identified their school, with a total of 366 different schools identified.

Table 2: Responses by School Sector

School Sector	No	%
Government	454	55%
Catholic Systemic	179	22%
Independent	192	23%
Total	825	100%

Table 3: Responses by Location (BOSLO Region)

Region	No	%
Metropolitan	500	61%
• Metropolitan East	160	19%
• Metropolitan North	164	20%
• Metropolitan North West	87	11%
• Metropolitan South West	89	11%
Non-Metropolitan	323	39%
• Hunter	81	10%
• North Coast	58	7%
• North West	15	2%
• Riverina	61	7%
• South Coast	73	9%
• Western	35	4%
Overseas	2	0.2%
Total	825	100%

It can be seen from Tables 3 and 4 that:

- about 55% of responses came from government schools, with the remainder evenly split between Catholic systemic and independent schools
- about 60% of responses came from metropolitan schools and 40% from non-metropolitan schools
- the two regions with the greatest number of responses were Metropolitan East and Metropolitan North (with about 160 each), but there were also about 90 responses from each of the other two metropolitan regions and about 60–80 from four of the six non-metropolitan regions.

These figures closely resemble the distribution of the total HSC student candidature across schools. In 2008, 58% of HSC students attended government schools and 42% non-government schools (compared to 55% and 45% respectively for responses in Table 2). There are 59% of candidates in metropolitan schools and 41% in non-metropolitan (compared to 61% and 39% above), and, as in Table 3, Metropolitan East and Metropolitan North are the two largest regions (each about 16% of the candidature).

4 Focus of Comment

While about half of the respondents (55%) made some sort of general comments about the proposals, the great majority (87%) made specific comments about one or more HSC course or group of courses. There were a total of 1162 course-related comments, as detailed in Table 4 (overleaf).

It can be seen from Table 4 that comments were made in relation to over 70 courses across the full range of HSC subjects. Comments were most frequently made about English (Standard and Advanced) (147 comments), Society and Culture (96) and Ancient and Modern History (68), but there were also more than 40 comments in relation to each of English Extension 1, Languages courses, Agriculture, Music 1 and Visual Arts.

Table 4: Number of Comments about each Course (or Course Group)

Course	Responses	Course	Responses
English	239	• Latin Continuers	15
• English (Standard and Advanced)	147	• Latin Extension	9
• English as a Second Language	20	• Other Language Courses (one or two each from 22 courses)	27
• English Extension 1	48	• Languages (Multiple Courses)	69
• English Extension 2	17	TAS	134
• English (Multiple Courses)	7	• Agriculture	42
Mathematics	29	• Design and Technology	29
• General Mathematics	2	• Engineering Studies	4
• Mathematics	6	• Food Technology	19
• Mathematics Extension 1	3	• Industrial Technology	13
• Mathematics Extension 2	2	• Information Processes and Technology	6
• Mathematics (Multiple Courses)	16	• Software Design and Development	6
• Science	37	• Textiles and Design	13
• Biology	2	• TAS (Multiple Courses)	2
• Chemistry	5	Creative Arts	200
• Physics	3	• Dance	20
• Science (Multiple Courses)	27	• Drama	20
HSIE	277	• Music 1	49
• Aboriginal Studies	2	• Music 2	19
• Ancient History	33	• Music Extension	13
• Modern History	23	• Music (Multiple Courses)	11
• Ancient History and Modern History	12	• Visual Arts	67
• History Extension	28	• Creative Arts	1
• History (All Courses)	2	PDHPE	52
• Business Studies	12	• Community and Family Studies	22
• Economics	6	• Personal Development, Health and PE	27
• Geography	28	• PDHPE & CAFS	3
• Legal Studies	14	VET	35
• Society and Culture	96	• Business Services	4
• Studies of Religion	17	• Entertainment Industry	2
• HSIE Courses	4	• Hospitality	9
Languages	159	• Information Technology	4
• French Continuers	9	• Primary Industries	11
• French Extension	5	• Retail Operations	1
• Japanese Beginners	4	• VET Courses	4
• Japanese Continuers	9	Total	1162
• Japanese Extension	12		

Comments on General Issues and Proposed Actions

1 Introduction

A total of 513 respondents (about 55% of all respondents) made comments on the general issues and proposed actions in the Board's Background Paper. Although most of these responses were directed at one or more of the specific actions proposed by the Board, about half also provided more general comments.

In these general comments, there was broad agreement on the need to address issues of student stress and workload and to improve consistency in examination and assessment requirements across different subjects and schools. The Board's directions were seen as leading to a system that was fairer and more equitable and that would allow more teaching and learning time. Respondents expressed appreciation at being consulted and a number indicated that their school or faculty was already taking similar measures to those proposed.

Offset against these trends was a minority of responses which saw the changes as unnecessary, ineffective or potentially even counter-productive. There were concerns that the proposals were primarily directed at cutting costs and would adversely affect the rigour of the HSC. There were also calls to provide more evidence to justify the changes, while a small number of respondents (less than 20) sought longer consultation or implementation timelines.

Other issues raised (each by between 10 and 25 respondents) included:

- consistency across subject areas was difficult to achieve or unnecessary
- student stress is the result of a wider range of causes, such as parental and societal pressure to succeed
- changes were ill-timed with the potential introduction of a national curriculum
- the proposed changes would necessitate changes to syllabuses and Standards Packages.

Responses to each of the nine proposals in the Background Paper are summarised below.

2 Issues Relating to the Examinations

2.1 Introduction of Reading and Planning Time

This proposal attracted a substantial amount of comment, mostly very positive. Those in favour agreed that better answers would be produced with more reading and planning time being provided to students and that this, in turn, would reduce the stress for students.

However, many respondents were sceptical about how reading and planning time could be supervised and asked for more detail concerning its proposed implementation. There was confusion about whether or not students would be able to write anything during the planning time, and, if they were, about how this could be supervised. Some speculated about whether the plans would be marked.

There were frequent calls for the reading and planning time to be additional to the examination time. Any diminution of writing time was felt to be disadvantageous to students and a potential 'dumbing down' of the subject or examination.

Teachers in Mathematics, Music (Aural) and Languages (Oral) questioned the need for additional reading and planning time for their subjects' examinations. Conversely English teachers were often hostile to the idea of reducing the time for writing responses.

2.2 Ensuring Major Projects or Performances do not require excessive amounts of time

About one third of those responding to the general section of the survey expressed an opinion on this proposal, with those in agreement outnumbering those who disagreed by two to one.

Those in agreement saw major projects as one of the significant causes of HSC stress. It was felt that students have a perception of an ever-increasing standard, as demonstrated in exhibitions of exemplar projects, that even average students feel they must achieve. There are also equity issues as exhibited projects often involve significant cost in producing and these are perceived as indicative of the standard required. There was a view that subjects with major works totally dominate other subjects at critical times of the HSC year as students immerse themselves in meeting project deadlines or rehearsing during class time of other subjects, to the detriment of student performance in those other subjects. It was felt that students have difficulty managing their time equitably amongst all courses and major works take up a disproportionate amount of students' time.

Those who disagreed with the proposal saw changes to the project as reducing the integrity and rigour of the courses involved and possibly leading to a lowering of standards. Major works produced over a period of time were seen as allowing students to show their ability under less stressful circumstances. There were concerns that changes may limit students' passion for the subject and encourage mediocrity rather than excellence. It was felt that the major work is often the most fulfilling part of a student's HSC year. There was also a view that as part of the learning process, students have to regulate their own work habits and that projects foster the development of responsible, independent learners.

It was noted by some respondents that it may be difficult to enforce a restriction on project costs or to dissuade talented students from spending large amounts of time on their major works. It was suggested that guidance be provided on how students can achieve high standards within 'reasonable' time and cost constraints. Other suggestions for consideration included:

- Project guidelines would need to indicate time and marks for each section.
- The proposal would need to be reflected in marking guidelines for projects.
- All major works that are externally marked should be submitted at the end of term 2. This would limit the time students spend on their projects, allow students three terms to plan and complete, and one term to 'collect themselves' and work evenly on all their subjects.
- A Board specified maximum time allocation to projects (in percentage terms) would assist classroom planning and project planning maps (perhaps provided in syllabuses) would assist.

2.3 Using a balance of different item types in examinations, where applicable

About 60% of those who made general comments responded to this proposal. Of these, about two-thirds agreed with the proposal and one third disagreed.

Positive responses identified variety in test question types as good assessment practice as it caters more effectively for the learning preferences of students. Agreement by some respondents was based on the perception that lower ability students or students with limited literacy skills would be better served by the use of objective style questions. Several teachers of subjects in the TAS area agreed that ‘other courses’ could have a better balance of question types and that questions that were ‘not just testing their ability to write and plan extended responses’ would allow greater success to students.

A number of respondents expressed the need to have research-based evidence and models illustrating the implications of increasing objective questions in the examinations. Several expressed concern that it is difficult to set good items and the risk is that objective style questions may not permit a focus on deep understanding and higher order thinking skills. One response suggested that any change ‘needs to be accompanied by widely available training and consultation on creating those kinds of items in assessment and examinations’.

Around 30% of responses expressed general disagreement with more consistent use of objective testing. Several respondents questioned the rationale that consistency was a positive step, feeling that acknowledging the differences between subjects was important. Opposition was greatest in regard to English and History.

The most common objection was on the grounds of perceived loss of intellectual rigour in the testing process. Many saw the use of multiple-choice questions as ‘dumbing down’ the assessment process, encouraging or rewarding lower order thinking rather than analysis, evaluation or synthesis and thus not pedagogically sound. Objections were focused primarily on the use of multiple choice questions; there was limited discussion of the other objective question types proposed in the Background Paper and very little comment on short-response or extended response items.

Other concerns focused on the potential for impact on the equity of the process with less double marking while a few respondents were concerned that the setting of these questions is difficult, and that they are, paradoxically, often contentious in the marking process.

2.4 Providing Guidance about the extent of answer intended, including word range or page length

About one third of those responding to the general section of the survey expressed an opinion on this proposal, of whom about 55% agreed fully or with some qualification, 25% disagreed and 20% made a general comment.

Those in favour saw the proposal as encouraging students to be more succinct and to be more likely to plan and focus their answers, favouring quality over length. Some also saw the proposal as encouraging weaker students to aim higher. Where support was qualified, it was related to such issues as ensuring that word ranges are carefully defined and that students are not be penalised if they write more or less than the suggested amount. There were also some who felt that guidance should be in terms of number of words or in approximate time students should spend, rather than number of pages, and that assistance could be provided by support material such as rubrics or sample answers.

Those opposed to the proposal felt that merit, not length, should be paramount and that setting limits would reduce expectations and provide inadequate opportunities for candidates to demonstrate high achievement. There were also concerns that indicative word range would increase stress for students and that some would waste time counting words. It was felt that

exam papers already provided guidance in terms of mark value and time and that other limits may complicate examinations and marking.

2.5 Making the duration of each examination consistent with the Board's principles

This proposal was addressed by only about 20% of those responding to the general proposals in the Background Paper (although it was more frequently an issue in comments on specific subjects). However, those that did have a view expressed it strongly. Two divergent camps emerged: those strongly in favour and those, even more strongly, against.

Arguments in favour of the proposal typically cited the lessening of stress for students and the desirability for parity between subjects. Respondents in favour came from a wide range of subject backgrounds.

Arguments against were most often from English teachers who felt that English would be diminished and devalued by the proposal's adoption. Most questioned the need and desirability for parity between subjects and argued passionately that as English is the only compulsory subject it should be treated differently from other subjects.

Other respondents with concerns were mainly teachers of Extension courses who generally felt that the level of sophistication required in their examinations necessitated a longer period of time for students to craft their answers.

2.6 Reduce the complexity of certain examinations

Few respondents responded to this proposal in their general comments, although it was addressed more directly in some specific subjects. Those who did respond were generally in favour of the proposal, seeing simplification of structures as assisting students and providing more clarity and consistency. Those opposed were concerned by issues such as potential limitations on choice.

3 Issues Relating to the School Assessment Component

3.1 Require four tasks only for the school assessment program in any 2 Unit course

Most respondents who made general comments addressed this issue, with those who agreed outnumbering those who disagreed by two to one, although this agreement was qualified on occasion.

The proposal was seen as leading to greater consistency across schools and faculties and reduced workload and stress for students and teachers. There would be more time available for teaching and learning and for diagnostic work and general homework. Possibilities for rich assessment tasks would be enhanced.

There were requests, however, that the Board provide specific instructions to prevent excessively time consuming or multi-part tasks, together with sample schedules and tasks to show how existing syllabuses can be assessed in a reduced number of tasks. There were also concerns that fitting in both half-yearly and trial exams within four tasks would be problematic. In some cases, respondents were satisfied with four tasks for 2 Unit courses but felt that 3 tasks for 1 Unit courses was problematic or disproportional.

Many of those opposed to the proposal stated that fewer tasks would each be worth more and therefore more stressful for students, particularly if they did badly in earlier tasks (and had

less chance to ‘make up ground’). There were also concerns that some teachers will give bigger or multi-part tasks, simply compressing the existing assessment material into fewer tasks. Some respondents felt that in combination with loss of restrictions on task types, reduction in the number of tasks will lead to a predominance of test-type tasks. There were also concerns that it is not possible to assess some courses with a reduced number of tasks and that the differences between subjects should be recognised. The flexibility offered by the current 3–5 tasks was seen as desirable.

3.2 Change the assessment components for courses, where necessary to base them on groups of syllabus objectives

Most submissions did not directly respond to this proposal but of the relatively small minority of submissions that did provide a discernable response to the proposal, a clear majority (over 70%) were supportive.

A significant number of respondents did not address the proposition but instead directly addressed the ‘reduction to four assessment tasks’ proposition, often with concerns about their capacity to adequately assess their course with only four tasks, particularly where syllabus components were seen as disparate (Visual Arts and English, for example). In expressing these concerns, a number of these respondents did not seem to move beyond the current assessment component requirements and recognise the greater flexibility that basing the components on manageable groupings of objectives or outcomes would potentially bring in combination with four tasks.

A number of respondents who offered qualified responses to the proposal requested further clarification of how it would work in their subject area and/or requested exemplar assessment schemes and tasks that illustrate what the Board is envisaging. A number of others, however, expressed a preference to continue assessing by topics or modes under the principle that each syllabus was designed to reflect such differences and that the needs of individual subjects should continue to be respected. English, for example, was singled out as a subject requiring a separate approach.

Comments were also often linked to a specific course and a reference to needing to assess all components or sections of the syllabus. This was usually from teachers of those subjects where the assessment components currently are the syllabus topics or ‘modes’ such as with the English Standard and Advanced syllabus, and who have traditionally used these current ‘components’ as organisers for assessment programs and tasks.

3.3 Removing the limits on certain types of tasks for assessment

About one third of those responding to the general section of the survey expressed an opinion on this proposal, with about 60% in agreement and 40% disagreeing.

Those in agreement most commonly cited the improvement in authentication from particular types of tasks and professional freedom to set appropriate tasks.

Of the responses in disagreement, the most frequent concern was that all assessment tasks would become exam style. Other concerns related to increased stress on students and/or pedagogical unsoundness.

Suggestions and comments from the respondents included retaining some cap on exam style tasks (typically 50%) and requesting exemplars of non-test type assessments that could be delivered in class.