

To whom it may concern,

I have been a Science teacher for 28 years and currently hold the position of Head of Department (Science) at an independent girls' school. The opinions that I express below are my own and I am not writing on behalf of my employer. I do not support the current system of assessment.

1. Teachers

Like the majority of teachers, I frequently talk "school" with my family and friends. I do not know anyone who feels that our current system of assessment is "world's best practice". The workload is an enormous burden to teachers and of no benefit to the students. It is, in fact a hindrance. Please note, that IF the system was beneficial, I would have NO issue with the additional workload because most teachers will do whatever it takes to help their students. At present, I resent the extra work when I know it has a negative impact on students. It must also be noted that, although the current Inquiry is related to Maths, Chemistry and Physics, the Biology syllabus is also facing the same problems.

2. Expense and inequity

The cost of the programs is excessive.

For the school, When EEs are performed, students need a vast assortment of equipment and chemicals. This brings additional cost. It also creates an issue for the employment of laboratory technician/s.

For parents, the expense is related to employing tutors because few students possess the necessary skills to complete tasks without assistance. This obviously leads to issues with "ownership" of the task.

The system favours wealthy schools and families who are able to afford tutors.

3. Judgements

Whilst I firmly believe that teachers are trying to do their best with a deeply flawed system, I do not believe that criteria are interpreted the same way by all teachers. The language is not clear to interpret. When I hear a teacher say "I have been teaching for a long time and know what a VHA looks like." it just confirms my fears. I have been teaching for a long time and can no longer clearly explain the criteria to a student or parent because the interpretations seem to change every time a Review Panel meets. It also depends on which members of the Panel review the school's submission because every teacher seems to have a different opinion. I have, in fact, been told by a State Panellist to (and I paraphrase) "use your own marking system inside the school grounds, just don't let the panellists see what you have done". A Subject Advisory Officer (from the QSA many years ago) told me to "go with your gut feeling because you should already know what an "A" looks like". I have been a District Panellist for 25 years and resigned last year because I no longer believe that I have the ability to make fair judgements about the work from other schools.

4. Students

I believe that Science must be supported with experimental work. The current style of EEs has a negative effect on this because students no longer have the "basics", or the class time, to be able to interpret what they have discovered. Analysis becomes superficial or, for the more able students, far too detailed because of the open-ended nature of the tasks. In either case, they tend to have a reduced understanding of the actual science related to the topic because the fundamentals are lacking. ERs create the same issues because students are, somehow, expected to teach themselves abstract concepts. This takes a significant amount of time when a teacher could cover the same concepts in a matter of hours and allow the student to actually understand what they have done. In addition to all of these issues, students do not have time to study or complete homework because they are too busy completing burdensome assignments. QSA will say that students should not be completing such complex tasks but, in reality, it is what is happening in schools. For student work to be approved by Panels, complex tasks are the expectation. Again, this is due to the syllabi being interpreted differently by different teachers.

This system is not suitable for teenagers as it expects abstract concepts to be interpreted without the knowledge of fundamental scientific principles.

SOLUTIONS

- Write syllabi with clear guidelines that can be interpreted by all teachers in the same way and easily explained to both parents and students.
- Simplify assessment so that students have time to learn the basics and then apply the concepts in a practical context. I am not against EEs. I believe smaller tasks, with more scaffolding would give a more positive outcome.
- Allow for a flexible approach to marking and allow for the use of marks where appropriate. Whilst the QSA says that marks are currently allowed, it is not actually accurate. We ALL know it is not possible to make marks work with the current criteria. It even says so in the annual state panel reports (Quote from QSA Biology, 2012)

“Criteria sheets need to be instrument-specific and reflect the syllabus exit standards. They should not resemble a marking scheme nor should they contain descriptors that prescribe a “quantity” of some element.”

When I last checked a “quantity” was something to do with numbers!

- Bring back the basics. Without a good knowledge of the sciences, students should not be expected to analyse data. It is unfair and onerous.

In conclusion, teachers are stressed, students are stressed, parents are paying tutors and Queensland results still show that the system is a failure. What other evidence is needed? Change must occur quickly because the students are only given one chance. These are life changing issues!

Sincerely



Sue Contarini

