



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

Transparency of teaching and learning must be supported systemically if we hope to reflect on teacher practice to maximise student outcomes. The current VCE system does not currently demand this transparency. All stakeholders must take ownership for student outcomes and withdrawing students from scored VCE is blatant avoidance of this accountability.

We can and must do better for our students. If students are arriving at Unit 1 and 2 without the ability to satisfactorily complete the year then school leaders must review their schools practice and implement strategies to reduce the number of students that are unprepared. Withdrawing students should not be the solution. It undermines the FISO priority of building positive climates for learning; empowering students and setting expectations and promoting inclusion to name a few.

I am aware that political profit plays a part in this current practice as schools are often vying for enrollments and see the advertising of VCE study scores as valuable publicity. I do not think schools placing pressure on students to withdraw from scored VCE should be an option. Not only does it avoid addressing the crux of the problem it sends a dangerous message to already vulnerable students about resilience and resolution.

I urge this review committee to place student learning at the forefront of all educational systemic and government decisions and in turn support our current principals who are taking courageous ownership of student results under their leadership.

Main submission

I am writing this submission with high hopes that this review will address an educational issue that concerns me greatly. I have taught for 7 years in New Zealand and for 8 years here in Victoria so am writing this with a keen awareness of the differing systems concerning national/state examinations.

I am writing this submission having recently attended a meeting consisting of principals who often quote the research of Professor John Hattie claiming that, 'Know thy impact' is their mantra. As such, I believe that the practice that many schools currently engage in actually denies the opportunity to garner some of the most important data possible for principals to reflect on their school's teaching practice and their effect as leaders.

The issue which has been published by the media with little response by either institution or government is the increasing number of VCE students who are withdrawn from end of year examinations or are encouraged to complete the unscored VCE certificate commonly called the 'S' program. This program is awarded based on teacher judgement and is not moderated by any external source. The variability between schools concerning an 'S' for a unit of work is vast.

While I am aware that there are often extenuating circumstances where an unscored program is appropriate for students, I believe the practice of withdrawing students from the possibility of receiving an examination grade is becoming far too common and not in the best interests of the students. Unfortunately the underlying rationale for these withdrawals is political and distracts from our core business of optimising learning growth.

Withdrawing students who the school feels may impact their published study score average I believe is unethical and an inaccurate reflection of a the success of a school's teaching and learning practices. To create capable and resilient learners we must first offer our students the encouragement needed to demonstrate their disciplinary capabilities; not destroy their confidence by suggesting their participation in such an endeavour will negatively impact their schools academic reputation. These students are often the most vulnerable and in the greatest need of quality teaching. Unfortunately, these are also often the students whose learning growth is most notable.

During my time teaching here in Victoria I have spoken to many students who have felt intimidated by school leaders to withdraw their graded assessment scores from VCAA. These are the very people charged with ensuring they reach their full academic potential. I myself have been disciplined for encouraging students to complete the examination against the advice of school leaders. I have also felt professional guilt over prioritising the scored program students over the non-scored. Also, teachers who have achieved significant learning growth with students who still fall under the desired study score are not recognised for these significant and valuable achievements.

This means that students who may have completed Units 3 and 4, but have produced results below the desired average, will have their numerical scores amended and changed to an NA (not assessed). This practice means that a study

score will not be generated for these students therefore not impacting the schools average.

I addressed this concern with a number of school principals who engage in this practice but am met with responses such as 'everyone does it,...you have to play the game to keep school gates open.... and I know it's wrong but if I don't do it we will be at the bottom of the rankings and will risk future enrollments'.

VCAA states in their administrative handbook that 'all students should be encouraged to participate in graded assessment' but there is no accountability measures or auditing of withdrawals to ensure this is happening. I am not claiming that VCE examinations are the only way to demonstrate academic achievement and growth - but for many schools with a lack of valid and reliable assessment tools it often is the only way to gauge this achievement. I am also aware that VCE is not a pathway for every student and that effective VCAL programs are also a viable alternative. However these alternative pathways are not presented to students until they have indicated they are not going to achieve the desired score and often by then it is too late.

Someone with authority needs to speak out about this issue and urge school leaders to refrain from such a damaging practice. The answer is not to withdraw students that will not achieve a desired study score but to prepare them to achieve beyond it the moment they step into their school. I have always thought the number of students that were withdrawn from graded assessment and examinations should impact how the study scores are presented to the public.

My response to the questions above is quite simple. Please make teaching and learning transparent. Year 11 and 12 is the final yard mark for which to measure the success of our schools and it is currently becoming seriously tampered with. Institutional and governance arrangements can be put in place by auditing the number of withdrawals from scored VCE and ensuring that the non-scored program is delivered with rigor and reliability. I believe that if school leaders no longer have the option to withdraw under-performing students from scored VCE a far more accountable system will ensue that will benefit our key stakeholders - the students. When did our priorities shift from maximising student outcomes to 'damage control' for poor results?

I urge you to take action and support teachers who feel pressured into submitting names of students who might not receive the schools desired study score and principals who are doing the right thing to be rewarded for taking accountability and not punished for manipulating their outcome data.