



COMMON ASSESSMENT TASKS (CATs)

A Delicate Balancing Act in Reforming
Assessment Practices at the
Senior Secondary Level



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COMMON ASSESSMENT TASKS

Victoria is not alone in seeking changes to curriculum, assessment and certification at the Years 11 and 12 level. Across Australia attempts are being made to ensure that a much wider group of students can benefit from a full secondary education. In curriculum terms, however, no state system has attempted anything quite so ambitious or fundamental as the VCE reforms. Unlike other systems, Victoria has opted to start afresh and to plan the post-compulsory years as a distinct and coherent phase of education based on new notions of what constitutes good curriculum.

Of course, there are good reasons why in Victoria we should choose to take this particular course of action. (Reasons, moreover, which go beyond what some might suspect to be a perverse preoccupation with change at all costs!) Chief among these have been the vision provided by the Blackburn Report, the political will to initiate major changes, and the imperative to come to grips with the proliferation of courses and certificates at the Year 12 level.

At this very moment, drafts of the new VCE studies are arriving in the mail at schools and colleges, allowing teachers to begin to judge for themselves the extent to which the VCAB study writers have been able to design practical studies out of general policy statements about the new VCE curriculum. The final verdict, however, must await decisions on the final shape of assessment policies for the new VCE and the outcomes of the trials of VCAB's common assessment tasks (CATs) approach. One thing is certain: the methods used to assess and report student achievement will play a crucial role in the success or otherwise of the VCE curriculum reforms.

The curriculum at Years 11 and 12 is being required to serve broader purposes and a wider clientele, as are assessment and reporting procedures, which are now called upon to

- accommodate the full range of student backgrounds and aptitudes, providing access and intrinsic motivation to low-achieving students while continuing to challenge the high achievers
- place less emphasis on ranking and comparing students and yet provide for fair and efficient selection in a context of declining work and further study opportunities
- place greater value on the involvement of students and on the professional judgment of teachers in making assessment decisions while maintaining statewide standards and ensuring comparability of assessments across schools and providers
- provide more detailed information about student achievement but in ways which reduce or at least hold constant administrative costs and teacher workloads
- relieve students of some of the more acute pressures engendered by the current end-of-year examinations and yet avoid placing students under constant pressure throughout the year
- accommodate a wider range of studies and learning goals but within a common assessment and reporting framework.

Needless to say, this is a tall order and it is unlikely that the CATs approach, or indeed any other approach, can fully satisfy everyone's expectations. There are no miracle cures in the offing; some compromise is inevitable in a situation in which parties for quite legitimate reasons want different things from an assessment system. It is therefore a question as to the extent to which the CATs approach can satisfy various and often competing demands.

So in what ways can the CATs approach reasonably be expected to result in improvements of existing arrangements?

First, by assessing performance in various studies through a set of well-structured tasks it will be possible to give recognition to a wider range of learning goals including knowledge of facts and procedures, understanding of concepts, creative and artistic skills, practical skills, written and oral communication, the ability to design and carry out independent investigations; the ability to collect and analyse relevant data, report writing, creative problem solving, critical analysis, and the ability to function as a member of a team. There is little debate about the importance of this range of outcomes. At present, however, emphasis tends to be placed on those amenable to written testing, while other important learning outcomes are undervalued and underemphasised. Under the CATs approach it should be possible to give greater formal recognition of the full range of outcomes associated with a given study.

Second, through the CATs approach, more meaningful descriptions of the achievement of individuals will be possible. This is because assessment will be related to performance on defined tasks for which there will be shared standards or criteria for the award of grades. Therefore for each task it will be possible to interpret a student's level of achievement both in relation to the performances of other students and in terms of the levels of knowledge, understanding and skill that the student has demonstrated on that particular task.

The implications of this are quite enormous. The construction of a set of ordered grades for each CAT with accompanying grade descriptions represents a move away from the single index of achievement to a profile of student competencies. No longer will grades be simply a system for ranking students, arrived at after complex statistical manipulation of scores. Rather, each grade will represent a level of performance on a given task which can be interpreted in terms of the kinds of abilities typically displayed by students who receive that grade. Not only will this result in more meaningful and informative student reports, it will also have implications for teaching and learning as teachers and students set goals for learning and monitor progress towards those goals.

Third, the CATs approach provides the opportunity to review the time spent by teachers and schools on student assessment and to devise more satisfactory administrative procedures, and procedures for verifying the award of grades. Current procedures have developed in a piecemeal, incremental way. They have often been developed as a *post hoc* response to policy decisions rather than as part of a total package in which the practical consequences of alternative policy directions have been evaluated in advance.

VCAB has already undertaken detailed work in reviewing current administrative arrangements and is at present undertaking extensive work on administrative systems for assessment and reporting to complement developmental work on CATs. As a consequence, developmental work is proceeding with operational considerations to the fore, and final decisions on assessment policy for the VCE will be made in the light of field trials of the new arrangements.

Finally, and on a less bureaucratic and more exciting note, the CATs approach provides the opportunity to rethink the links between curriculum and assessment, and where appropriate, to come up with new and more sophisticated ways of assessing various outcomes. In fact, unless we are creative and smart about the design of CATs we will very quickly slip back into the old ways and assessment will continue to exert its stranglehold over the curriculum.

To allow more time for the development of CATs and for schools and other interested parties to comment on proposals for assessment, a decision has been taken to bring forward the timeline for the design of assessment procedures and to integrate this work more closely with the development of study designs. For each study an initial proposal for the set of CATs will be prepared and circulated along with draft study designs as they are sent out for second round consultations. Alternative arrangements will be made for those studies which have already reached the stage of second round consultations. This means that during 1988 teachers will not only be provided with drafts of the new VCE studies, but also with proposals for assessment of semester 3 and semester 4 level units. They will also have plenty of opportunity to comment on the drafts and the assessment proposals and to come up with suggestions for improvements.

One final point: because assessment exerts such a profound influence over Years 11 and 12 and we have to put a lot of time and effort into making any new arrangements work in positive ways, there is a real danger of overemphasising the amount of time we need to spend on assessment in the classroom. Overall, it seems that we tend to spend too much time on formal assessment of students. At present, many VCE students are subject to constant assessment in Year 12. Particularly for VCE(HSC Group 1) students, the introduction of school assessments has done nothing to reduce the assessment burden; but rather has added to it. It would be better to spend less time on summative assessment and more on teaching and monitoring progress. Although it might sound initially counter-intuitive, the CATs approach can work to reduce the amount of time that must be devoted to assessment, but it can also improve the quality of assessment.

Like most things in education it is a delicate balancing act to reform assessment practices at the senior secondary level.



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