SECONDARY SCHOOL YEARS

“... teach them how to learn and love learning.”

(Personal submission)

Responses to the Secondary Years section of Excellence and Innovation cover a wide range of issues across the full breadth of secondary schooling. In order to better understand these issues it is necessary to provide some background information and place the issues into the appropriate context.

INTRODUCTION

Secondary education in NSW is divided into three stages: Stage 4 (Years 7&8), Stage 5 (Years 9&10) and Stage 6 (Years 11&12). The NSW Board of Studies, (BOS) develops and endorses syllabuses in accordance with the curriculum requirements of the Education Act (1990). The BOS also administers the School Certificate (SC) and Higher School Certificate (HSC). The two credentials, the School Certificate at the end of Year 10 and the Higher School Certificate at the end of Year 12, are issued by the BOS to students from government and non-government schools.

Following a review in the late 1990s changes to the HSC were made to increase rigour and meet the needs of a greater range of students. K-10 syllabuses have also been revised and these new syllabuses are being progressively implemented to provide a continuum of learning throughout the junior secondary years.

Information provided by the BOS indicates that the numbers of students undertaking more demanding courses continues to increase as does the number of students undertaking Vocational Education subjects.

Between 2000 and 2003 the percentage of students in NSW staying to complete Year 12 has increased by approximately 3% to 70.5%. This figure remains below Victoria, Queensland and the national average. In NSW the percentages of students staying on to complete Year 12 varies according to socio-economic circumstances, ethnicity and location. Only 29% of Aboriginal students, 48% of students in Country Area Program (CAP) schools and 56% of students in Priority School Funding Program (PSFP) schools stayed on to complete Year 12 in 2003.

Figure 2

![Year 7/8 to Year 12 Apparent Retention Rates](chart)

Source: ABS Schools and DEET

Views on the Higher School Certificate

Reports indicate that the HSC is increasingly seen as a pre-requisite for employment as well as university entrance. The retention of more non-academic students places pressure on schools to develop programs to better cater for their needs.
Submissions show there is strong support for a rigorous HSC for students with tertiary aspirations. However, many respondents questioned whether the HSC, or the way it is offered in some schools, provides adequately for all students, particularly those following a more vocational pathway:

While teachers value the rigour of the new senior courses, they are becoming increasingly disheartened at the number of students leaving before the completion of their HSC. (School staff meeting)

**Student Choice**

The dominant theme from responses is the need to focus on each student as an individual. This theme is also common to responses on the Middle Years and Students 15 to 19 Years Old.

Respondents emphasised, in particular, the need for students to have greater choice in the subjects they study, both in junior and senior secondary years and for schools to be structured to better support student needs.

There is no doubt that the rising generation think that they are going to be more in control and more determined to keep their options open than their parents ever were. Choice – like change – is an inherent part of their world view. (Hugh McKay, ‘Turning Point’ cited in DET State office staff meeting)

One student commented:

At the moment, there are students compromising their aspirations because a desired subject cannot fit onto their available lines. As a result students can become disinterested etc. in school and leave. (School student).

In addition to student choice and opportunity, other consistent themes identified by respondents to Secondary School Years included:

- curriculum organisation
- choice and flexibility
- the art and science of teaching
- meeting the diverse needs of students
- assessment and reporting
- reporting and communication.

**CURRICULUM ORGANISATION**

A number of respondents indicated satisfaction with current curriculum provision, valuing a good grounding in the basics followed by increasing choice and flexible delivery including TAFE and university options.

A number of respondents raised issues unique to either junior or senior secondary education. These issues have been grouped under Stages 4 and 5 and Stage 6 for ease of clarity.

**Junior years**

During the four years students spend in Years 7-10, government schools have mandatory requirements totalling over 700 hours (between 3 and 4 hours a week), for non-elective subjects additional to the indicative (but not mandatory) hours that apply for non-government schools. These cover an additional 100 hours in English, Mathematics and Science as well as requirements for sport and special religious education. (Memorandum to Principals 00/377 [S.294] Curriculum Requirements in Government Schools, August 2000).

Curriculum is fine, there are enough choices within subjects to satisfy even the hungriest learner. (Regional student meeting)

The only problem with school is that it’s very curriculum based. I reckon they should have more flexible teachers. History … English … Maths all have interesting stuff. But because it’s so curriculum based it’s really dry. It doesn’t grab you. (School student quoted by NSW Commission for Children and Young People)
Many respondents stated that for these years the curriculum is too prescriptive because of these requirements:

Government schools have less flexibility compared to non-Government schools when it comes to curriculum. The DET imposes additional hours of English, Mathematics and Science, leaving less time to conduct other learning activities that might be more relevant to students. (TAFE staff member) and:

… an overloaded curriculum in years 7 and 8 with little flexibility to respond to local needs and contexts, including the needs of adolescent students. Even in years 9 and 10, curriculum choice and flexibility is reduced by the time required for the mandated curriculum. Years 7 and 8 need to have flexibility in curriculum, especially outside of the core subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. (NSW Secondary Principals’ Council).

Many felt that DET curriculum requirements leave insufficient time for elective courses. These are often regarded as having a lower status than core subjects in terms of fewer hours of teaching and non-inclusion in the current School Certificate examinations.

Many schools and communities would like to offer courses relevant to local issues, conditions and student needs but feel constrained by centrally determined, mandatory requirements:

Give the students the choice and especially more time … to do more elective subjects of their own choosing. (Personal submission) and:

There is very little room for students to negotiate any part of the overcrowded curriculum, especially in years 7-10. Students who simply do not fit mainstream schooling have nowhere else to go. (School staff meeting)

There was also a strong view that continuing to mandate hours of study at all is unnecessary and inconsistent with a modern outcomes approach and standards referenced curriculum:

It is likely that a curriculum that is outcomes based and standards referenced for assessment purposes would be more accessible if it were not constrained by the current mandatory Departmental time requirements. (State office staff meeting)

There was a strong argument for flexibility in Years 7 and 8 study of Language other than English (LOTE), especially in hard-to-staff schools, where many students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) are already fluent in two or more languages and have other curriculum needs and priorities.

Parents and students indicated that the current curriculum structure forced teachers to rush through work with little time for exploration or variety in activities. This, combined with lack of choice in 7-10, contributed to student boredom and disengagement.

The increasing rate of enrolment drift away from government secondary schools into private schools is indisputable. Some
respondents argued that this drift is partly due to the greater curriculum freedom and flexibility available to private schools.

*Increasing numbers of non-government schools are responding to the needs of students and their teachers by focusing on middle year programs that promise academic rigour, attention to welfare and flexible school organization.* (DET State office staff meeting)

Respondents also felt that the mandatory inclusion of Australian History and Geography, Civics and Citizenship in Stage 5 (Years 9 and 10) has further restricted elective choice. A suggested solution was to let schools decide whether these could be taught in either Stage 4 or Stage 5.

There was strong support for greater flexibility in the junior secondary curriculum:

*Years 7 & 8 should have the flexibility to add electives to the school structure to meet the diverse needs of students and more closely engage them in subjects that they have an interest in.* (School staff member)

*What we need is more flexibility to offer courses to students that meet their needs rather than continually increases ‘mandated’ aspects of the curriculum.* (School community meeting)

**Senior Years**

The senior school curriculum was seen by some as too focused on university entrance and not meeting the needs of those students planning to enter employment, TAFE or other pathways:

*Many students are not able to have their needs met by the HSC focused, UAI driven senior curriculum* (Parent)

*Re-vamp curriculum to have Yrs 10 & 11 as senior years and then choice of leaving with HSC and then those that stay on for Yr 12 study for UAI.* (School/TAFE community meeting)

While some respondents saw this tertiary focus as indicating a need for curriculum revision, others saw it as indicating a need for improved professional learning for teachers to develop teaching approaches more suitable for the wider range of student abilities and interests now in their classrooms.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses were strongly supported with many respondents indicating the real value of VET courses was greater than the recognition given to them.

Many respondents argued for the inclusion of all VET courses in the University Admissions Index (UAI):

*The enhanced value of VET courses in gaining a UAI would facilitate an improved perception of VET courses.* (School staff meeting)

*They should be given the same recognition as traditional subject areas – employment areas are so diverse now that...* (Parent)

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Suggested solutions:

- Let schools decide whether Australian History and Geography, Civics and Citizenship can be taught in Stage 4 or Stage 5.
- Allow flexibility in the junior secondary curriculum, especially in Years 7 & 8.
- Revamp the senior curriculum to give students more flexibility in choosing courses.
- Include all VET courses in the University Admissions Index (UAI).

Students' needs and future choices:

- Many students are not able to have their needs met by the current senior curriculum.
- Students should be allowed to choose their subjects and the difficulty of some of these subjects.
- Conflicts of interest in subject line selection are everywhere in schools. Flexibility is a must.
- How are we meeting student needs when to complete the later years of school is made so difficult?
traditional subjects no longer carry the same relevance they once carried. (Parent)

Some argued for the universities to reduce the number of units used in the UAI from 10 to 8 so that more choices could be made without loss of rigour while others argued that the UAI should be abolished altogether.

To remove the labels of ‘smart’ & ‘dumb’ we must value all achievement & stop the climb to the UAI heights as the only road to perceived success. (TAFE staff member)

**CHOICE AND FLEXIBILITY**

The dominant, recurrent theme from respondents was the need for more choice and flexibility in the secondary years to enable schools to provide a broader and deeper curriculum in tune with the needs and expectations of students and local communities.

The ‘one size fits all’ philosophy may have suited the 19th and 20th centuries’ demands but it does not suit 21st century demands for quality education. It is essential that schools have the opportunity to argue ‘local needs – local priorities’ on key issues and the system needs to respond accordingly … Other public education systems which have embraced some flexibility and creative thinking have not collapsed. (School staff meeting)

The above comments are further supported in relation to the needs of rural and remote NSW.

Each rural place is unique – the school, the community – each having specific needs and priorities. While it is necessary to a degree to generalise ‘rural’ for the purpose of policy and reform, the uniqueness of place needs to be acknowledged. The ‘one size fits all’ approach is inadequate and insufficient for addressing the educational issues in rural and remote NSW. (Charles Sturt University, 2005)

A number of respondents, however, opposed the use of ‘flexibility’ to rationalise or reduce resource provision to schools.

Flexibility must not be used to cut resources to schools. (School staff member)

Schools were often seen as bound by organisational and industrial constraints limiting their capacity to meet either student or professional needs:

Curriculum does need to be more flexible but schools are pretty inflexible places in terms of staff allocation, timetables, resourcing, hours of attendance and all the extras (like welfare/sporting/literacy - numeracy) that have to be fitted together. (School staff member) and:

Have a more flexible staffing and organisational structure around engaging students rather than around award conditions. (Regional staff member)
Easing mandatory requirements for government schools was linked to strong support for greater curriculum flexibility to meet the needs of students and local communities:

**School hours which dovetail with student employment.** (Regional student meeting)

**Greater flexibility in secondary schools including timetabling, staffing and working outside hours.** (Regional DET staff meeting)

**School timetable – greater flexibility / making the school available to community during holidays and ‘after’ hours.** (School student meeting)

Other barriers include some staffing practices and aspects of secondary school culture and organisation little changed since the first half of the previous century. As one principal wrote:

*What other industry with a budget of $9.7 billion, given the complexities and challenges of the task, would put up with appointments of key staff by a system of central casting?* (School principal)

There was strong support for comprehensive 7-12 schools to remain viable and some argued for a return to zoning and the closure of selective schools. Responses were varied, even polarised on whether selective schools should continue to exist:

**The fact that selective schools operate in NSW is providing a doorway for students to excel …** (Personal submission)

**Current selective and specialist schools bleed the comprehensive system …** (School staff member)

There was also support for selective high schools, multi-campus colleges, single-sex schools and central schools.

**We need a variety of secondary schools to provide the best opportunity for all students.** We already have single sex schools, academic selective schools, specialist sports/performing arts schools, multi-campus colleges, community and central schools, schools for specific purposes and comprehensive schools. Maybe the establishment of some middle school years would be appropriate as we learn more about student development and needs. (School P&C meeting)

*If a school is comprehensive, then by definition it needs to provide a range of curriculum offerings. The multi-campus colleges in the NSW system have gone a long way to addressing this issue.* (School staff meeting)

Rather than argue for or against the type of school, many respondents focused on suggestions to make their school more outwardly focused and community involved including cooperative arrangements with other schools.
a place where you can receive a great HSC result but also a place where students can go on to a trade or other employment. (School staff member)

We need schools that are flexible, with strong relationships with tertiary institutions, employers and the community to ensure that every student is treated as an individual, nurtured and developed to their highest level. (Parent)

A number of respondents support schools working cooperatively to support students and to provide greater curriculum opportunity:

… students should commute between their own schools and those offering speciality subjects, and there should be online connection between speciality teachers in any one school, and speciality students in other nearby schools. (Personal submission)

**THE ART AND SCIENCE OF TEACHING**

Respondents from all school environments referred to the importance of the middle years of schooling and the need to take positive steps to counter potential student disengagement and alienation in stages 3 and 4 (Years 5 to 8). This issue is addressed in the Middle Years section of this chapter.

It was recognised that the transition from a holistic one-teacher based primary education to a more fragmented multi-teacher based secondary education is difficult, both for students and teachers.

To this end, primary and secondary school teachers need to become partners in a long-term process. There is a need to examine how primary school learning activities can influence secondary school decisions. (Regional staff meeting)

There was support for the DET to develop and implement a coordinated approach to the middle years of schooling that encompasses teaching and learning, curriculum, student welfare, professional learning, school organisation, family partnerships and system issues.

A strategic and coordinated approach to the initiation, implementation and incorporation of a middle years of schooling strategy is critical to ensuring success for students, teachers, schools and the system. (State office staff meeting)

Respondents wanted the secondary years to include more opportunities to explore topics of interest and to use more excursions, self-paced study modules and community participation in programs. There was a desire for more cross-faculty and inter-school cooperation using available technology as well as more on-line learning and learning external to the school. Initiatives such as *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools* were welcomed by parents, teachers and community. Many sought a school-based shift in emphasis from what is to be taught to how it can be better taught so that students learn how to learn and are engaged, challenged and extended in the context of their local school and community.
More emphasis on meeting the needs of non-academic students was requested. This was often seen as a quality of teaching issue rather than of school structures:

*Secondary schools are unfriendly places for the non-academic student. We need a paradigm shift in teaching to reach the majority of students to help them enjoy learning and become more effective citizens and job-seekers.* (TAFE Staff member)

**MEETING THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF STUDENTS**

**Behaviour**

Student behaviour was seen as a growing challenge for teachers.

Some respondents wanted poorly behaved students to be removed to special classes or schools:

*More specialist places for disruptive students so their behaviour can be modified.* (Personal submission)

Others saw the solution as quality professional learning focused on behaviour issues (including bullying) and improving student engagement in learning by allocating teacher time to suspended or disengaged students. Other respondents wanted to be better supported by their school and the Department:

*Often teachers do not feel adequately supported in their efforts to contain the poor behaviour of difficult students.* (TAFE student)

The response from UnitingCare Burnside argues strongly against suspension of students from school:

*The current procedure, where the parents are responsible with arranging for care/supervision of the young person whilst at home, creates animosity between the school who are trying to follow procedures, and the parents who have financial/work commitments. For young people who are experiencing chronic behavioural issues, the long-term suspension can add to the conflict at home (which often is the cause of the school behaviour in the first place).* (Uniting Care Burnside)

Other respondents took a different view, suggesting:

*Remove disruptive students – it should be easier to expel students. Constant suspensions just give them a holiday and ready them to come back and make more trouble.* (Personal submission)

**Individual Learning Needs**

Respondents argued for initiatives to support teachers in all school environments develop skills to identify and cater for individual learning needs.

*To achieve a match between the student’s personal needs, goals and aspirations, it is important to identify, plan and document a program based on the child’s individual needs and to involve all those concerned, including the child.* (The Spastic Centre)
This included assistance to help disadvantaged and special needs students as well as to extend or enrich the learning of gifted and talented students:

- Of course, not all students show an aptitude for particular talents early in life. Provision must be flexible to enable late bloomers to be included in talented/gifted groups when the talent/gift becomes evident. (School P&C meeting)

- Any possible path that could cater to these gifted students should be explored. Perhaps the students themselves should assess what would best suit their needs etc. (School student)

There was support for consultancy in regions, extension work, community and industry mentors and the sharing of successful teaching ideas:

- [There should be] … sharing of programs in a state or national learning circle. While students are individuals there is an element of re-invention in every school. This can be rectified by networks and computers to gain access to the resources of the web. (School staff meeting)

The individual learning needs of Aboriginal students and students from non-English speaking backgrounds were raised particularly in connection with issues related to Students 15 to 19 Years Old and are addressed in that section of this chapter.

**Students with Language Backgrounds Other Than English**

A number of submissions was received to the effect that there was insufficient support for students of non-English speaking background. The NSW Teachers Federation was particularly concerned about this issue:

- It is estimated that over 40,000 students in need are not receiving ESL support. Over the last 20 years, there has been a doubling of the student / teacher contact ratio. Additional ESL teaching positions must be provided to address this inequity. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Respondents wanted to see changes to the way in which the programs operate, to provide more support and remove barriers. They also mentioned the language demands of the school curriculum, particularly in the context of recent immigrant arrivals. One teacher from an Intensive English Centre said:

- There are a lot of unmet needs. Our former students drop out of high school unable to cope with the language demands of the KLAs … The type of students being taught in Intensive English Centres is changing … we are (now) seeing people especially from Africa who are illiterate in their first and second languages, who have had no schooling. (School staff member)
ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING

Assessment and Examinations

A number of respondents challenged the validity of marks and scores:

At a time when we are faced with a rich (full) knowledge society, success, or ‘failure’ is being reduced to simple marks and scores. Teachers, as professionals understand the conflicts that such ideology and Government ‘imperative’ places on teacher professionalism. (School community meeting).

While other respondents wanted:

Less focus on external examinations and more focus on formative, improvement focused assessment. (School principal)

Respondents commenting on the School Certificate credential and examination argued for urgent change:

The School Certificate has little value any more – get rid of it. (School community meeting) and:

The School Certificate does not measure what has been taught … a disconnection between syllabus and test. (Regional principals’ meeting)

Many saw it as an anachronism as it survives only in NSW. They stated it fails to articulate what students can actually do.

Principals were quite specific in stating:

Its standards are not explicit, it is seen as content driven and does not adequately reflect or support the principles espoused in the DET’s ‘Quality Teaching’ discussion paper, and external testing of only four subject areas signals the relative value of subjects. (NSW Secondary Principals Council)

Alternatives in other states focus on stronger school-based assessment, rigorous assessment in all subjects and providing a rich variety of alternatives to multiple-choice/first draft tests.

The School Certificate exam is also seen as unnecessarily dominating teaching and learning in the second half of Year 10. Principals say its timing encourages time-wasting and student absenteeism during November and December. Making changes to the nature and timing of the School Certificate exam (making it later in the year) could partly address concerns raised about curriculum and student engagement but there was a stronger desire for the examination to be discontinued.

Get rid of the School Certificate. (School community meeting)

Respondents argued that many schools need further assistance with outcomes based assessment and negotiated, authentic assessment based on portfolios, project work, practical tasks and team-work.

In Years 11 and 12 there were concerns that assessment dominates the curriculum. Many felt the UAI dominates stage 6, influencing subject choices for Years 11 and 12 usually made half way through Year 10. This dominance is perceived as a barrier to a greater choice
of VET courses, seen as relevant and challenging but below the status of traditional academic subjects despite having rigorous assessment procedures in place.

**Reporting and Communication**

Many respondents strongly supported enhanced communication between schools, parents and communities as part of the overall wish for schools to be more flexible and responsive to local issues and needs:

> The reality is that (school) structures do not allow teachers to be free to discuss issues or plan with parents. (School staff member)

The need for consistent, plain-language reporting of student progress was stressed, especially when dealing with outcomes. Portfolios of work to supplement reports were welcome. Many asked for greater use of SMS, email and telephone in two-way communication with parents and for the adoption of less teacher-centred, structured approaches to student-parent-teacher dialogue.

Parents wanted more engagement with schools especially when an issue had direct and practical impact on their children or there was a substantive policy matter where their ideas would be listened to and acted on:

> A number of parents commented on the means by which engagement could occur (web and email interaction, paper or telephone surveys) as well as the need for the right environment (childcare, weekend or evening meetings). (Report on parent consultation, Western Sydney)

**IN SUMMARY**

For both the junior and senior secondary years the consistent theme was the need to personalise learning making it more relevant to the individual and the community where the school is located.

Providing choices was seen as a key to personalised learning. Allowing students and their teachers to make more decisions about what they learn, how they learn and where they learn should build motivation, engagement and satisfaction in learning.

There was a desire for the Higher School Certificate to be more inclusive of different study patterns and more in tune with the range of academic and vocational pathways preferred by the increasing number of students unlikely to enter university from school. Examples include the incorporation of TAFE delivered Certificate courses and courses that address local training needs.

Respondents identified the need to:

- provide choice and flexibility to schools, teachers and students to maximize learning opportunities and outcomes
- relax the DET mandated hours constraining delivery of the junior secondary curriculum
- remove or make significant changes to the school certificate
- expand the scope of the HSC especially for students unlikely to enter university from school
- assist schools to better cater for the particular needs of young adolescents
- increase the engagement of parents and carers based on the provision of clear, concise and timely information.