The QCE and the three Rs

Relevance, rigour and reputation

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A periodic review of the Queensland Certificate of Education

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Introduction

Undertaking this review has been an uplifting experience. It has highlighted the quality of the curriculum offered by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), and of the people who continue to work to enrich it.

The response from QSA staff has been exemplary. They have been open and honest during the consultations, and have shown a willingness to identify and work on aspects of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) that in their view are not working well, or that appear to be working well but need improvement. There has not been a hint of defensiveness, which suggests that there is a strong culture of professionalism and a high level of trust within the organisation: a credit to the leadership and management of the QSA, and to those who work in it.

I see strong symmetry between the spirit of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) — and therefore of the Australian Curriculum — and that of the QCE. The first goals of the Melbourne Declaration — "equity" and "excellence" — are fundamental to the aims of the QCE. Nevertheless, in this report I have avoided the terms "equity" and "excellence". I believe that they have both become clichés in the education agenda in Australia and that they mean different things to different people.

Having said that, the ways that equity and excellence are developed in the Melbourne Declaration marry strongly with the principles addressed in this report — especially **Principle 1: Inclusion and flexibility**, and **Principle 2: Integrity of standards**. When the second goal of the Melbourne Declaration is added — "successful learners", "creative individuals" and "active and informed citizens" — I believe that the spirit of the Melbourne Declaration (and therefore of the Australian Curriculum) and that of the QCE are very closely aligned, and that in this report they flow through all of the seven principles that constitute the framework of this review.

I have combined the results of the formal consultations with my own thoughts and ideas, and have tried to make clear which of these is being expressed at any given place in the report. Ultimately the recommendations are mine, and are geared at generating either short- or long-term action, depending on the context. If specific recommendations are not taken up by the QSA, it is my hope that the issues they attempt to address will be, in ways perhaps judged by the QSA to be more effective.

My thanks to QSA staff for their support and assistance, in particular Leanne Rolph and Michelle Moroney, who have assisted me throughout the review. Their contribution is much appreciated. Thanks also to Peter Luxton and Paul Herschell, who have consistently encouraged my approach to this review, and to the members of the QCE Review Reference Group for their advice and commitment to the success of the QCE (see **Appendix 3**).

I hope there is a combination of substance, support and challenge in the report, and I wish the QSA well in using it to continue this very worthwhile journey.

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Preamble

Demand for secondary education is soaring worldwide owing to the confluence of at least three factors. First, as more countries achieve universal primary schooling, demand for education is moving to higher levels of the education system, and the world is witnessing an explosion of individual and family aspirations for secondary education.

Second, the largest ever cohort of young people is clearly going to make a difference for the future of many countries, especially in the developing world. The way to turn what many perceive as the global risk into a global opportunity is by building and harnessing the values, attitudes, and skills of young people through quality secondary education, thus ensuring that they will become active and productive citizens of their communities.

Third, economies increasingly need a more sophisticated labour force equipped with competencies, knowledge, and workplace skills that cannot be developed only in primary school or in low-quality secondary school programs. In short, provision of secondary education of good quality is seen as a crucial tool for generating the opportunities and benefits of social and economic development.

For all these reasons, secondary education is the focus of increasing policy debate and analysis worldwide. This debate is framed by the need to respond to the twin challenges of increasing access to secondary education and, at the same time, improving its quality and relevance. For several decades now, most of the education reforms proposed and implemented throughout the world have focused on the compulsory and post-compulsory levels of secondary education. This centrality of secondary education will persist in the foreseeable future and will certainly be reinforced.

(World Bank 2005, p. xvi)

This statement by the World Bank in its report *Expanding Opportunities and Building Competencies for Young People: A new agenda for secondary education* could well be describing the rationale for introducing the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) to replace the Senior Certificate in 2008. In particular, the need to respond to the twin challenges of increasing access to secondary education and, at the same time, improving its quality and relevance.

Queensland is once again stepping into new and innovative territory — this time attempting to identify, encourage, and validate the kinds of learning that can enable more students to have viable pathways in the world of the 21st century: pathways that give them opportunities for personal, social and economic fulfilment, as well as a sense of responsibility to participate in, and contribute to, the future of the planet.

The Penguin Thesaurus lists as synonyms for the term "education": schooling, instruction, teaching, tuition, training, edification, enlightenment, development, civilisation, culture, learning, knowledge, scholarship, erudition (Fergussen 2005).

That collection of synonyms pretty much encompasses what the QSA is required to cover as it takes the QCE forward. It is attempting to recognise and validate a diverse and complex approach to learning on a single certificate, awarded to students on their successful completion of the senior phase of learning — which is actually the recognition of the completion of 12 years or more of education. What the QSA is attempting has very little precedence elsewhere in the world.

As schools work to prepare students for the complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty of the world of the early 21st century, the task has probably never been more challenging. At the same time, educators, industry and the wider community are increasingly in agreement that while academic learning is important, so too is a variety of other forms of learning, formal and informal, and the boundaries between them are becoming blurred. Further, consultations for this review suggest that they also agree that education in the senior phase of learning is still fundamentally about human development, and that "career pathways" are secondary to that.

All this is captured in the entry in *The Penguin Thesaurus*, and it is in this spirit that the QCE seeks to recognise, encourage and validate a wide variety of learning. It is a courageous attempt to confront the reality of the contemporary world, to recognise "real" learning, and to offer more young people the opportunity to achieve formal certification that can provide genuine pathways towards their future aspirations.

Three years along in that journey, the consultations for this review reveal that much has been achieved. They also reveal that there are now opportunities to firm up and improve on what has been achieved; and there are some issues that will need serious consideration and attention if the QCE is to achieve its aims and take its place as a nationally and internationally recognised and respected certificate.

Perhaps the four biggest differences between the Senior Certificate (in place up to 2007) and the QCE (in place from 2008) are:

- the QCE has a requirement for an *amount*, *standard* and *pattern* of learning

- the QCE is a qualification, and only learning that is at the standard of a qualification — a Sound Achievement, a Pass, or Competent — will be entered on it

- vocational education and training and other learning meeting the required criteria are eligible for inclusion on the QCE

- students can continue to work towards the QCE after they leave school or finish Year 12.

It is not surprising, then, that while consultations for this review suggest that all four of these are well supported in the community, at the same time they have presented problems that need to be addressed.

In the review consultations there has been strong support expressed for the principles that underpin the QCE: across the three education sectors, and from schools, parents/carers, industry and the wider community. At the same time, there is also a clear message that the certificate and its related processes are not well understood. Furthermore, there are practices developing in some schools, and by some providers, that are not in the interest of students, and have the potential to undermine the integrity and credibility of the certificate.

A further issue for the QSA is that the work on the QCE is occurring at the same time as the development of the Australian Curriculum by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Consultations for this review suggest that the QSA is well aware of this, and there is much symmetry between the two processes and with the Melbourne Declaration, on which the Australian Curriculum is grounded.

This report attempts to consider all these issues and offer ways to continue to build on the encouraging start that has been made in this, the latest stage in the evolution of education in Queensland.

Executive summary

This periodic review, three years into the life of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), views the QCE as the latest development in an evolving journey of innovation and relevance in Queensland education. The essential findings of the report are that the philosophy underpinning the QCE is the right one for the world of the early 21st century, that a great deal has been achieved in a short time, and that, at the same time, there are particular areas that need attention if the longer term aims of the certificate are to be realised and consolidated.

The recommendations are placed within the report, in the context from which they arise, and are best read in that context. They are also summarised at the end of the report, but will make less sense if they are viewed in isolation of their context.

The report begins by attempting to place the QCE in its historical and contemporary context. The case is then put that the model of assessment will always drive the learning experiences offered to students, and that externally moderated school-based assessment is the best model to achieve the aims of the QCE — far ahead of the external-exam model.

Research questions and responses

Responses to the research questions posed by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) Board have been woven throughout this report, with two extra questions being included by the consultant (research questions 6 and 7). They are discussed briefly below.

Research question 1	***Are the conditions and requirements appropriate for the award of the QCE?***
Brief response	Broadly the answer is yes, with around 76% of responses from schools answering in the affirmative. There are particular areas where conditions and/or requirements could be reworked to enhance the aims of the QCE. The literacy and numeracy requirements emerged as a case in point, as did the learning projects and the nine-year time allocation for completing a QCE. Also, difficulties have arisen with some schools that have opted for the curriculum of the International Baccalaureate now also wanting their students to receive "equivalence" for the QCE. Generally, though, the conditions and requirements are seen as conceptually appropriate.
Research question 2	***Are the business processes effective and are they conducive to students learning more?***
Brief response	While facing some difficulties, the business processes are effective and they are conducive to students learning more. It is important to note that this situation appears to be largely due to staff at the QSA and the Department of Education and Training making innovative use of what are essentially outdated and ageing systems. This will become more difficult to sustain the longer an integrated upgrade is delayed.

Research question 3	*How well has the QCE been taken up by learners?*
Brief response	The QCE is being taken up by learners, especially those wishing to include vocational education and training qualifications. At the same time, there are schools and districts where the take-up has been less than was hoped for, though it has improved over the three years. Continued thought and work are needed to maximise the take-up, especially in the broader learning areas that go beyond the academic and vocational education and training, but which are an important aspiration for the QCE.
Research question 4	*How well has the QCE been promoted to end users, including universities, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and other learning providers?*
Brief response	The communication materials and the online resources provided by the QSA to schools, industry and the community are clear and well presented. At the same time, the reality emerging from this review is that the QCE is not well understood, and though in most schools it is highly regarded, this is not the universally held view across the state. This poses a particular challenge for the QSA, as the *story* of the QCE needs to be told, and most importantly, it needs to be *bought* and *owned* by school leaders and promoted by them to teachers, students and parents/carers. Similarly, it needs to be further promoted in industry, universities, TAFE and private providers.
Research question 5	*What is the impact of the Australian Qualifications Framework Level III decision on the QCE?*
Brief response	No longer relevant.
Research question 6	*Is there confidence among the key stakeholders — schools, universities, employers, the community (including parents/carers) — that the QCE represents learning and standards that are recognised locally, nationally and internationally as preparing young people for the 21st century?*
Brief response	The consultations during this review suggested that the intent of the QCE is widely supported. It is valued especially in schools where significant numbers of students are involved in vocational education and training courses or a combination of vocational education and training and QSA courses.
	At the same time, in some schools it is struggling to gain recognition, relevance and status, as it appears to be overshadowed by the QSA's Tertiary Entrance Statement and tertiary entrance rank, and in some cases the International Baccalaureate.
	Nevertheless, the review consultations suggest that for the great majority of schools the QCE is genuinely important, and has opened pathways that the Senior Certificate could not. Ideally, this view will eventually be held universally across Queensland.

Research question 7	*How well is the QCE aligned with the Australian Curriculum?*
Brief response	This question relates to the philosophy and spirit of the two, rather than the content. The content will change as the world changes, but the philosophy and spirit are unlikely to.
	The Australian Curriculum is derived from the Melbourne Declaration, which sets out its philosophy, goals and aspirations for Australian students, and does so in the context of the world of the early 21st century. The QSA's work in developing the QCE is strongly attuned to this, and the case is put in this report that the QSA's model of externally moderated school-based assessment is the assessment model most likely to maximise student success in both the QCE and the Australian Curriculum.

Underlying principles of the QCE

Before the consultations began, a number of underlying principles were identified. At the first meeting of the QCE Review Reference Group these were refined and a number of new ones were added. As the consultations continued, it became clear that these principles underpin the philosophy and functioning of the QCE. They form the main framework for the deliberations and recommendations of this review.

Principle 1: Inclusion and flexibility

- For different pathways to the QCE.

- For a wide variety of ways of learning and of demonstrating that learning.

- For students across the spectrum of Queensland society (geographical, cultural, racial, socioeconomic).

Principle 2: Integrity of standards

- A standards- and qualifications-based certificate, with rigorous criteria.

- Setting challenging but achievable standards.

- Reflecting the goals of Queensland and national curriculums.

- Setting standards that hold national and international currency in education, industry and in the community.

Principle 3: Credibility and portability

- A passport to multiple future pathways, national and international.

- Recognition by (and entry to):
  - higher education (university)
  - further education (TAFE and private providers)
  - employment
  - schools
  - general public.

- A certificate that holds high status in the community.

Principle 4: Literacy and numeracy

- An approach to literacy and numeracy that is relevant to the 21st century, and expressly geared to the purpose of certification on the QCE.

- Literacy and numeracy levels that are recognised as adequate by the community and by industry.

Principle 5: Communication and coordination

- Opportunities for areas within the QSA to communicate with one another about what they do, and how what they do contributes to the final product.

- Communicating the key messages at the heart of the QCE to schools, tertiary institutions, vocational education and training providers, industry and the wider community.

- Coordination of systems and cooperation among the various bodies that contribute to the provision of the QCE.

Principle 6: Potential

- Of the QCE as a broad-based standards- and qualifications-based certificate.

- To nurture and develop preparation for life as well as for academic and vocational qualifications.

- To recognise "real" learning in a variety of forms, drawing on both hemispheres of the brain.

- To recognise learning by students who can most benefit from it.

- Of the Senior Education and Training (SET) Plan as a source of direction and motivation for students.

- For a clear and agreed statement of the purpose of the senior phase of learning which can lead to greater understanding and recognition of the QCE.

- For the QCE to signify the successful demonstration of learning achieved during the senior phase of learning: an important rite of passage in the lives of young people.

Principle 7: Advocacy

- Telling the *story* of the QCE.

- Of the opportunities for a variety of student pathways towards the QCE, and the options it provides students for their future learning and employment.

- Of the rigour and advantages of the QCE compared with other courses.

- Marketing the status of the QCE in Queensland, nationally and internationally (e.g. vis-a-vis the Tertiary Entrance Statement, the tertiary entrance rank, the International Baccalaureate, the High School Certificate, the Victorian Certificate of Education, and so on).

- Marketing the advantages of externally moderated school-based assessment (e.g. a wide variety of learning experiences that are relevant to the world beyond school, as are the ways of assessing them; the professionalisation of teachers).

- Ensuring that what is marketed is clear, real and true.

While all seven principles weave their way throughout this review, the first three are consistently in play. This was foreshadowed in the Queensland Government's 2002 white paper *Queensland the Smart State — Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (p. 11), which stated that the new legislation would:

- record a broader range of learning, including learning in school, vocational education and training, and *other learning, that will count* towards a Senior Certificate [sic] (from 2006) [consultant's emphasis]

- enhance learning options that provide *greater flexibility* to meet the needs of even more 15- to 17-year-olds [consultant's emphasis]

- establish the *quantity and quality* of education that students must achieve to receive a Senior Certificate [sic]from 2006 [consultant's emphasis].

The story

The notion of **inclusion and flexibility** (Principle 1) on the one hand, and **integrity of standards** (Principle 2) and **credibility and portability** (Principle 3) on the other, are proving to be an uneasy marriage. Taken separately they would be relatively easy to take forward. As core parts of a whole, the task is harder, with some tension between them. That is not to say that they are incompatible — indeed, consultations for this review suggest that the idea of a standards- and qualifications-based certificate that recognises a wide variety of learning is both rigorous and relevant to the world of the early 21st century — but it is also complex and difficult to explain, and its *story* is yet to be understood more widely.

The report concludes with a summary of the key messages of the report, together with a summary of the recommendations given throughout the report.

Part 1:   The context

The new mission of schools is to prepare students to work at jobs that do not yet exist, creating ideas and solutions for products and problems that have not yet been identified, using technologies that have not yet been invented.

(Linda Darling-Hammond 2010)

History

Although the past is over, it is indispensable to our understanding of what we experience today, and what lies ahead of us tomorrow and thereafter.

(Niall Ferguson 2011)

Looking back

The abolition by the Queensland Government of the Year 8 external Scholarship examination in 1960, on the initiative of then Education Minister JC Pizzey, was described by educator and historian Max Howell as "possibly the bravest act ever performed by a Minister for Education" (Howell 1997). In the 50 years that have followed, Queensland's education system has continued to be characterised by brave acts, moving in innovative and at times uncharted territory. This has included:

- the change from the external Junior and Senior Certificates to externally moderated school-based certificates: the Junior Certificate in 1971 and the Senior Certificate in 1973, under the *Radford Report* (Radford 1970)

- the move from norm-based assessment (7–1) to criteria-based assessment (Levels of Achievement), under the Review of School Based Assessment (ROSBA) in 1982

- the replacing of the off-the-shelf Australian Scholastic Aptitude Test (ASAT) as a scaling mechanism by the Queensland Core Skills Test, set by the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies based on "common curriculum elements" of the senior syllabuses in 1991, under the Viviani Report (Viviani 1990)

- the change from the Junior Certificate to a school-based Year 10 Certificate, and ultimately the removal of this certificate altogether.

Ground-breaking principles

The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) is a natural stage in this evolutionary process of innovation in Queensland education. As this process has evolved, two ground-breaking principles have taken root, and continue to underpin Queensland education:

- the assumption that teachers, not external "experts", are the best judges of student achievement

- the view that continuous assessment over the duration of a course of study is a more valid way to judge the quality of student learning than is an exam at the end of the (usually two-year) course.

Implicit in these two principles is the affirmation that education is a profession, and that teachers are professionals. Those assumptions are also implicit in the processes associated with the QCE.

Effect of school-based assessment

With the introduction of school-based assessment in Queensland came the powerful backwash effect that assessment always brings. Teachers were freed from having to prepare students to show what they have learnt in two years by undertaking a pen-and-paper externally set exam at the end of a course. This meant that a much wider variety of activities, such as oral presentations and group investigations, could be introduced during the course (using up-to-date information and communication technology) with the knowledge that the assessment of the students could be held in these modes. And that this assessment would "count".

These have been far-reaching initiatives: by the beginning of the 21st century Queensland students were using verbal, visual and collaborative modes, often incorporating the latest information and communication technology, in both their learning and most importantly in the formal summative assessment of that learning, reflecting the reality of the world beyond school. They were also being encouraged to discover the ways they naturally learn best, with the knowledge that they would be able to use this to show what they have learnt in their formal assessment. Apart from the small number who undertake the Senior External Examination, the only external exam students now face is the Queensland Core Skills Test, based on the *common curriculum elements* of the Queensland senior curriculum and used not for students' individual results, but as a group scaling mechanism for tertiary entrance.

Queensland as a leader

The journey that has evolved since 1960 suggests that in teaching, learning and assessment, Queensland has for many years been a leader in generating a variety of ways for students to learn and to show what they have learnt. This process has been led by the statutory authorities: the Board in its various iterations since its beginning in 1964, through to its current entity as the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA). It is a significant achievement, though more recognised overseas than in the rest of Australia, perhaps due to the enduring aura of external exams and the myth that they are fair and transparent.

It has not been an easy road. In his history of school-based assessment in Queensland, Max Howell details the journey (Howell 1997). He identifies a number of issues that emerged along the way, including:

- difficulty in communicating and gaining support from industry and the community
- superficial and at times cynical media coverage
- concern of the possible "dumbing down" of standards
- political contests for power among the educational bodies
- criticism from some influential academics
- doubts that teachers could rise to the required levels of professionalism
- enduring and unquestioning confidence in external exams.

Howell also identified significant achievements along the way, such as:

- the self-belief and tenacity of the Board(s) and school and tertiary educators who supported them
- the growth of teacher professionalism in curriculum development and assessment
- the ownership by teachers of the work of assessment through a form of distributed leadership that has brought genuine power to the school level

- the collegiality that has developed across the three school sectors — public, independent and Catholic — as teachers across the state come together to discuss and verify the standards of student work

- the ultimate success of the long public relations struggle to have school-based assessment widely accepted and respected in Queensland.

It is not surprising that many of these themes have presented themselves during this review. The QSA finds itself leading yet another innovative initiative into uncharted territory, with the accompanying challenges this brings. In doing so, it should draw confidence from its strong record of success in such enterprises. Indeed, a common theme has pervaded the journey just described, and it has been evident in the consultations during this review: a commitment to finding ways to conduct valid assessment that will induce genuine and relevant learning by all students, and to provide them with widely respected certification that offers them the opportunity for sustainable pathways to the future. The QCE is the latest stage in this journey.

Scope

The review brief

The brief of the review is as follows:

- Review and refine the conditions and requirements of the QCE, in particular:
    - rules for credit allocation of contributing studies, including contribution of vocational education and training towards the Queensland Certificate of Education
    - alignment to the Australian Curriculum.
- Examine the business processes agreed to by relevant stakeholders, including the literacy and numeracy requirements.
- Investigate the take-up of the QCE by learners.
- Investigate the promotion of the QCE to end users, specifically:
    - universities
    - TAFE
    - other training providers
    - industry, parents/carers, students (these three were added by the consultant).
- Investigate the implications of changes to the Australian Qualifications Framework to the QCE.
- Ensure any changes recommended comply with current legislation.

A periodic review conducted by an external consultant

It was made clear from the initial briefing that this review of the QCE — taking place three years after its introduction — was to be a review conducted by an external consultant with its main intended audience as the QSA.

The intention is that the review should have specific and limited scope. Nevertheless, from the first consultations with QSA staff, it became clear that a review of the QCE could only be possible if significant issues and aspirations were taken into consideration. Furthermore, it became clear that some of these issues and aspirations have an uneasy relationship with one another, meaning that this review, though periodic and essentially internal, has had to consider some complex big-picture issues along with the technical and procedural matters.

Whenever a technical or procedural matter was being dealt with, such is the nature of the QCE that invariably the deeper issues relating to learning, assessment and certification emerged. And these have to be taken into account when looking at the future of the QCE. What has emerged from the consultation process for this review suggests that the QCE is now at a checkpoint after its three-year journey. There are a number of ways it can move — indeed is already moving — and the QSA is not necessarily able to control all of them. There are important decisions to be made in 2011: not just to direct the QCE down the track the QSA desires, but to do so effectively.

Aspirations of the QCE

As one of the major outcomes of the Queensland Government's 2002 white paper: *Queensland the Smart State — Education and Training Reforms for the Future*, the QCE is an attempt to acknowledge the breadth and complexity of learning, to link that learning to the needs of Australia's 21st century society and economy, and in so doing to include learning and achievement that have not been recognised previously. The expectation is that more students will receive a certificate at the end of Year 12 that offers them a potential pathway to a viable future, and that the integrity and status of the new certificate will be at least as high as was that of the Senior Certificate.

This is captured in Action 6 of the white paper:

> We will record a broader range of learning, including learning in school, vocational education and training, and other learning, that will count towards a Senior Certificate [sic], from 2006. (Queensland Government, 2002, p.17).

This is followed by some quite specific statements:

> The government believes that all learning of an appropriate standard should count towards a Senior Certificate [sic]. This will give a better picture of the skills and abilities of each individual …

> From 2006, the Senior Certificate [sic] will be based on learning and achievement in:

- all school subjects

- skills for lifelong learning recognised by the Queensland Studies Authority

- recognised vocational education and training programs

- university subjects undertaken whilst students are at school.

This means learning undertaken with vocational education providers can count towards a Senior Certificate. The certificate will no longer be based solely on learning at school.

Some young people are learning outside of schools or vocational education providers, through re-employment or community activities. We want this learning, where it is of an appropriate standard, to be included on the Senior Certificate [sic].

Twelve key concepts

To have a clear distinction between the QCE and its predecessor the Senior Certificate, a number of key concepts are identified, all of which are woven throughout this review, and have specific meaning in relation to the QCE:

- an amount of learning
- standards of learning
- types of learning
- patterns of learning
- credit for learning
- Senior Education and Training (SET) Plan
- learning accounts
- banking of learning
- learning projects
- cultural perspectives
- tailored training programs
- certification (QCE, Senior Statement and Statement of Results).

The QCE and the power of assessment

> Those personal qualities that we hold dear — resilience and courage in the face of stress, a sense of craft in our work, a commitment to justice and caring in our social relationships, a dedication to advancing the public good in our communal life — are exceedingly difficult to assess. And so, unfortunately, we are apt to measure what we can, and eventually come to value what is measured over what is left unmeasured.
>
> (Robert Glaser 2010)

The power of assessment

Whatever the formal curriculum says, whatever teachers are taught to do in their training, whatever it is that students want to learn, the paramount determiner of what is taught, how it is taught, and what is learned is what is assessed, particularly on high-stakes exams. These summative, high-stakes assessments determine students' futures, establish rewards and punishments for schools and teachers, and shape classroom and instructional practices …
(CISCO, INTEL & Microsoft 2009, p. 6)

More often than not, accountability efforts have measured what is easiest to measure, rather than what is most important. Existing models of assessment typically fail to measure the skills, knowledge, attributes and characteristics of self-directed and collaborative learning that are increasingly important for our global economy and fast changing world … To measure these skills and provide the needed information, assessments should engage students in the use of technological tools and digital resources and the application of a deep understanding of subject knowledge to solve complex, real world tasks and create new ideas, content and knowledge.
(CISCO, INTEL & Microsoft 2009, p. 1)

The quotes are from a paper presented at the Learning and Technology World Forum in 2009. The three corporations that combined to produce the paper are among the most powerful organisations in the world and their message to educators is unequivocal: assessment drives the curriculum and this must be harnessed so that it drives learning experiences that prepare young people for the world of the 21st century.

Externally moderated school-based assessment

Most of the assessment for the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) comes through externally moderated school-based assessment, and this review is grounded in the view that this is the most likely mode of assessment to achieve the aims of the QCE through its combination of flexibility, teacher professional judgment and discretion, and quality assurance.

Empowering students to deploy multiple ways of showing what they have learnt is fundamental to the aims of the QCE, as set out in **Aspirations of the QCE** (p. **15**), and it further enables teachers to teach and assess in ways that reflect the world of the early 21st century, rather than confining assessment to pen and paper at the end of a two-year course, as do most high school external exams.

The national agenda

As the national curriculum comes into place across Australia, it would be surprising if at some time assessment did not become a focus. Given the faith that other states in Australia continue to have in external exams at the end of Year 12, it would be surprising if Queensland's model of assessment were to escape challenge. Indeed, as recently as 31 May 2011, the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Early Childhood and Youth, Peter Garrett, referred to *… essential ingredients such as a national assessment program for students* … (Australian, 31 May 2011).

This is further complicated by the national testing regime, National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and the status that is given to schools' standardised test results on the Commonwealth Government's MySchool website. The ways that schools and even sectors have been reacting to the media "league tables" drawn from this are a spectacular confirmation of the truth contained in the CISCO, INTEL and Microsoft paper, and it is apparent from review consultations that some schools and sectors are allowing the media league tables to dominate their approach to the senior phase of learning and the QCE in ways that are not appropriate for their students.

As these agendas continue, the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) and educational leaders in Queensland may need to be prepared to defend the fundamental principles of the QCE, including externally moderated school-based assessment, as it is at the heart of the aims of the certificate. No external exam or standardised test can drive the inclusive approach to learning that the QCE aspires to embrace, nor adequately test that learning.

It is important to note here that the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) sets out seven "general capabilities" to be addressed in the Australian Curriculum in its paper, *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* (ACARA 2010). These are:

- literacy
- numeracy
- information and communication technology competence
- critical and creative thinking
- personal and social competence
- ethical behaviour
- intercultural understanding.

It is the view of this consultant that a curriculum driven by school-based assessment is far more conducive to enabling students to develop these capabilities than is a curriculum limited to the requirements of an external exam.

This is not to say that the Senior External Examination has no place. For some students — young people and adults — the external exam option is the only satisfactory one. Ideally it too would be assessed through a similar process to school-based assessment, but if that is not achievable the external end-of-year option should remain in place.

A view from industry

During the consultations with industry representatives, an interesting and perhaps surprising issue emerged that relates indirectly to school-based assessment. When asked which documentation employers place greatest value on when interviewing young people, there was unanimity: the school's Exit Statement is seen as the most helpful guide to the young person's employability potential, well ahead of the QCE and the Tertiary Entrance Statement. (The second most helpful guide was again unanimously agreed: the personal interview with the young person.) On asking the industry representatives to elaborate on this, they spoke about the importance of things like leadership, community involvement, sporting activities, music and drama involvement, and how the student's values and attitudes are revealed through the school's report, both in students' approach to their studies and in the wider life of the school.

Indirectly, this relates to school-based assessment, because the importance given to the school's statements about the student suggests that employers are essentially agreeing that the best judges of a student's capabilities are those who teach that student at his or her school. It is further vindication of Queensland's confidence in the professionalism of teachers and something that should be communicated widely, not just in support of school-based assessment, but also as part of the advocacy initiative for the QCE as discussed in **Principle 7: Advocacy**.

Some caution is needed in extrapolating these views to the whole of industry in Australia, as they were expressed by a few representatives in a consultation of an hour and a half. Nevertheless, for close to a decade now, industry's peak body, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) has been promoting its Employability Skills Framework, flagging its hopes for students from the education system.

Table 1: ACCI Employability Skills Framework

Skills

- *Communication*
- *Teamwork*
- *Problem solving*
- *Self-management*

- *Planning and organising*
- *Technology*
- *Learning*
- *Initiative and enterprise*

Personal attributes

- *Loyalty*
- *Commitment*
- *Honesty and integrity*
- *Enthusiasm*
- *Reliability*

- *Personal presentation*
- *Common sense*
- *Positive self-esteem*
- *Sense of humour*

- *Balanced attitude to work and home life*
- *Ability to deal with pressure*
- *Motivation*
- *Adaptability*

(ACCI 2005)

Even a cursory read reveals how deeply human it all is: it is essentially asking schools to develop and nurture the human potential of their students, and to relate it to the world of the 21st century. It is in keeping with what was said during the industry consultation for this review, and it is eminently compatible with the aims of the QCE and of the Australian Curriculum. It suggests that school-based assessment offers the greatest opportunities to achieve the aspirations of this framework, and that a curriculum driven by high stakes pen-and-paper external exams simply cannot engage students in the variety of experiences that the ACCI is calling for.

Part 2: The seven key principles

Never a checklist, always complexity.

(Michael Fullan 2000)

Principle 1:   Inclusion and flexibility

> We find that when reforms seek to achieve parity in opportunity and achievement across diverse groups of students, reformers faced enormous challenges.
>
> (Jennifer Oakes 2005)

1.1 Inclusion of vocational education and training

The inclusion of vocational education and training courses as eligible to gain credit towards the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) has meant that significantly more learning is now recorded on Queensland's main education certificate. This is not just a statement about numbers: by conferring credit on learning that students undertake in vocational education and training, the QCE is recognising that learning alongside, rather than behind, academic learning.

The mix-and-match provision that enables students to combine Authority, Authority-registered and vocational education and training courses in their senior phase of learning is a further example of this: it is not just about flexibility and inclusion — it is about valuing "real" learning in a variety of forms.

Table 2 below shows the different ways students are approaching the QCE.

Table 2: Student pathways to the QCE, 2008–2010

No. of students	2008	2009	2010
In Year 12 cohort	41 482	43 545	44 997
Receiving QCE	31 326	34 064	36 433
With all Authority subjects	16 090	16 795	17 323
With all Authority-registered subjects	1 474	2 168	2 391
With a mix of Authority and Authority-registered subjects	13 781	15 090	16 706
Studying all vocational education and training	2 607	2 120	2 579
Studying a mix of Authority subjects and vocational education and training	14 427	16 895	20 134

It is clear that students are taking advantage of the broad range of possible pathways that lead to the QCE, and that their numbers have increased over the three years. QSA staff have confirmed that these increases are higher than the Year 12 population growth for those years.

The blending of academic and vocational learning is in keeping with the recent major report in the UK by Professor Alison Wolf, who states:

> Vocational education today includes, as it always has, courses and programs which teach important and valuable skills to a very high standard. It offers a direct route into higher education which has been followed by hundreds of thousands of young people; and prestigious apprenticeships which are massively over-subscribed. Conventional academic study encompasses only part of what the labour market values and demands; vocational education can offer different content, different skills, different forms of teaching. Good vocational programs are, therefore, respected, valuable and an important part of our, and any other country's educational provision.

Wolf follows this with a caveat:

> But many vocational students are not following courses of this type. Alongside the many young people for whom vocational education offers a successful pathway into employment or higher education, there are many for whom it does not (Wolf 2011, p. 7).

Consultations for this review indicate something similar may be developing in Queensland, and this is touched on in Section **1.2**: **The nine-year provision**, and more fully addressed in **Principle 3: Credibility and portability**.

In recognising and including vocational education and training on Queensland's main education certificate, the QSA is at variance from a number of other Australian states and territories, as well as most northern European countries, which continue to stream students at a young age into separate academic and trade courses, with accompanying differences in status of their certification.

The QSA is in step with the recommendations of the Wolf Report (or the Wolf Report is in step with the QSA) in recognising and valuing "real" learning, and in blurring the distinction between academic and vocational learning. This is cutting-edge conceptualising of learning, and a clear commitment to recognition of the kinds of learning that are relevant to the world of the early 21st century.

1.2 The nine-year provision

The QCE recognises an *amount* of learning, a *standard* of learning and a *set pattern* of learning, and students have nine years to achieve this: three years at high school if they earn some credits in Year 10, and the balance after completing Year 12. It is too early to gauge how effectively students are invoking this provision if they have not earned a QCE by the end of Year 12. QSA data shows that 1703 students from the 2008 Year 12 cohort received their QCE in the following year, as did 1408 students from the 2009 cohort.

In relation to the nine-year provision, the consultations revealed a paradoxical dilemma for the QCE:

- Some school representatives complained that due to priorities that are generated from the media league tables and the MySchool website, they are being subjected to significant pressure "from above" in their sector to have as many students as possible receive a QCE by the end of Year 12. This is resulting in some schools engaging in a "credit chase" in Semester 4, often pushing borderline students into "useless" qualifications that provide credit to the QCE. The option of those students to continue to complete useful qualifications that will earn them a QCE after Year 12 would appear to be subverted by the perceived need for the school to look impressive in the media league tables and on MySchool. As the consultations with schools continued, this view was quite widely expressed, and was causing consternation at the school level. It would appear to be a case of political imperatives overriding educational principles.

- At the same time, a significant number of school representatives stated during the consultation that the inclusion and flexibility created by the QCE has enabled them to use it as a motivating strategy with students who would have previously had no hope of achieving a satisfactory Senior Certificate. They are invoking the "You can do it" theme to motivate students while guiding them through their Senior Education and Training Plans, urging them to achieve it by the end of Year 12. They report students are responding to this, especially less academic students. They further offer that in some communities, once these students have left school the motivating forces of the school are left behind too, and many of the "almost there" students will remain "almost there" without the support of the school. (There appeared to be a trend that these schools are mainly in low socioeconomic and/or regional areas of Queensland).

Most school representatives who took part in the consultations rejected the "credit chase" syndrome, but it is not hard to see that the temptation may be there to bend the rules and act in the letter rather than the spirit of the QCE. At the same time, the way some schools are using the QCE as a way of motivating students to achieve the qualification by the end of Year 12 should be seen as a positive.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (vii):**
>
> That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to promoting the QCE as a qualification that can be attained over nine years, and that schools should make professional judgments about how they approach this option with students.

There is more to the "credit chase" issue, and it is pursued in some depth in **Principle 3: Credibility and portability**.

1.3 School-based assessment

It has been stated in **The QCE and the power of assessment** (p. **17**) that the flexibility and inclusion of learning experiences and the accompanying modes of assessment that Queensland's school-based assessment model enables is a major factor in the ability of the QCE to recognise and certificate a broad variety of student learning, and to achieve the aims of the Australian Curriculum. The QSA should make this link often, as part of the innovative and inclusive nature of the Queensland curriculum. Parent representatives conveyed that they value the ability of teachers to cater for the different ways their students learn, and to cater for these in summative assessment.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (ii), (iii) and (iv):**
>
> That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to:
>
> 1 (ii)   promoting the QCE as valuing a variety of learning through a variety of pathways; and the relevance of that learning, and those pathways, for students in the world of the early 21st century (See also Section **3.2**)
>
> 1 (iii)   promoting the powerful synergy of the variety of learning and pathways generated by the QCE on the one hand, and the inclusion and flexibility of school-based assessment on the other
>
> 1 (iv)   promoting the compatibility and resonance of the QCE with the developing Australian Curriculum.

1.4 Literacy and numeracy

There was widespread support from the review consultations for a more flexible and inclusive approach to the literacy and numeracy requirements of the QCE than those currently in place. While it is an "inclusion" issue, it is addressed in its own Section of this report, **Principle 4: Literacy and numeracy**.

1.5 Learning projects

Despite the admirable intent of inclusion and flexibility, the learning projects offered to students are still struggling to make a significant impact. A start has been made, the numbers have increased, but the uptake is disappointingly low.

Table 3: Self-directed learning projects

	2008	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
Number of self-directed learning projects	6 completed	1 completed	23 completed	10 received	11 received
% of self-directed learning projects submitted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	16%	–	65%	–	–

Table 3 above shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are beginning to engage in learning projects, and while the percentage increase is encouraging, the numbers remain low.

This is addressed fully in **Principle 6: Potential**. There is greater potential through the learning projects for the recognition of co-curricular learning, the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and of disengaged students. It is important to note that the last two mentioned are among those most in need of some flexibility to enable them to be included in the QCE's agenda.

1.6 The Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA)

The QCIA has been welcomed by schools as inclusive and "real" recognition of learning by special needs students who undertake an individualised learning program. At the same time, review consultations have revealed some special needs students are "falling through" the certification process, receiving neither a QCIA nor a QCE. Initial investigations suggest that some of the reasons are technical, with the relevant schools not understanding the requirements of the students to receive a QCIA. The QSA should ensure that these are clarified, as the students involved are among the most vulnerable in the cohort. Feedback from the QSA indicates that other issues also relate to the QCIA, particularly parent reluctance to have their child labelled as special needs, and the perception by schools that the QCIA requirements place a large administrative burden on the school.

This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (viii):

That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to providing clarity and assistance to schools regarding eligibility for students to receive a Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA).

The *QCIA Handbook* (QSA 2011, Section 3, p. 7) states: "Schools choose some or all of the following six curriculum organisers …". The sample eligibility form in Section 4.3 then shows all six categories filled out. It may be more helpful to show a couple of examples with only three or four of the categories filled out, presenting a less onerous picture for schools.

1.7 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

While there are some encouraging trends, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain under-represented in achieving a QCE or other qualifications. **Table 4 below** shows an encouraging trend that is in line with the trends in other student groups, though coming from a lower base.

Table 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students receiving a QCE

2008		2009		2010	
#	%	#	%	#	%
613	40	815	47.5	960	52.5

The percentage rise is very encouraging, and it is to be hoped that enough momentum has been generated to cause it to continue. Among the most vulnerable young people in the student cohort, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students still remain under-represented in achieving a QCE. This is a complex and difficult area, and because it is an area of significant potential, it is addressed in some detail in **Principle 6: Potential**.

QSA data show that the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attaining a vocational education and training (VET) certificate is rising and doing so at a rate higher than for the overall student population (see Graph 1 below).

Graph 1: Proportion of Year 12 students who complete a VET Certificate I–IV
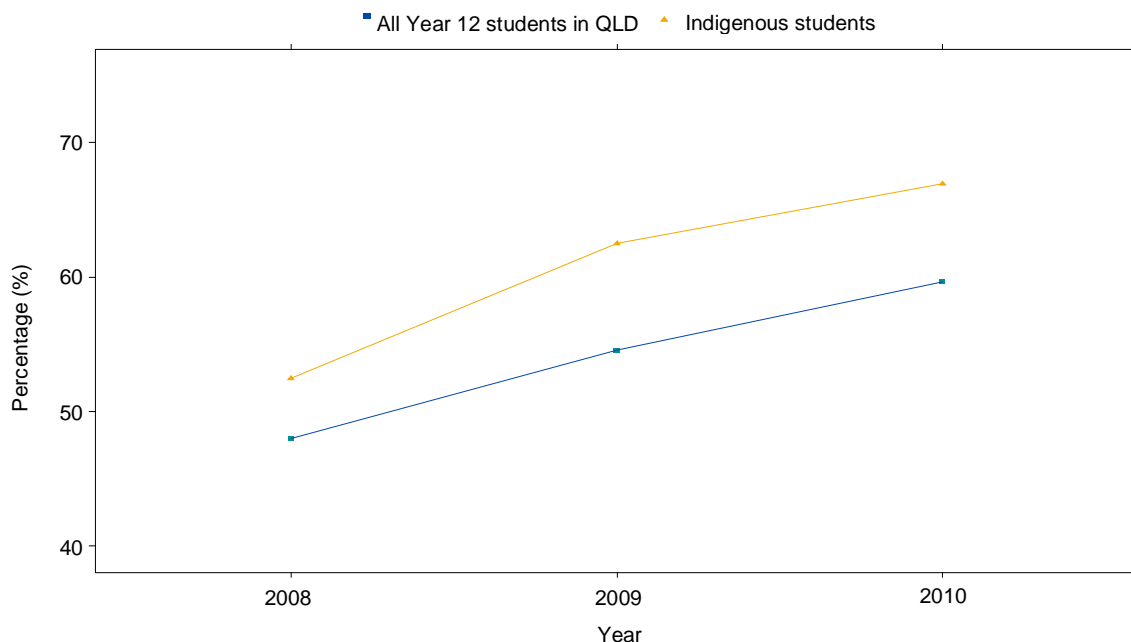
Encouraging as this trend is, the data also reveals that the percentage achieving VET Certificates III or IV has fallen, while for the overall student population it has risen (see Graph 2 below).

Graph 2: Proportion of Year 12 students who complete a VET Certificate III–IV
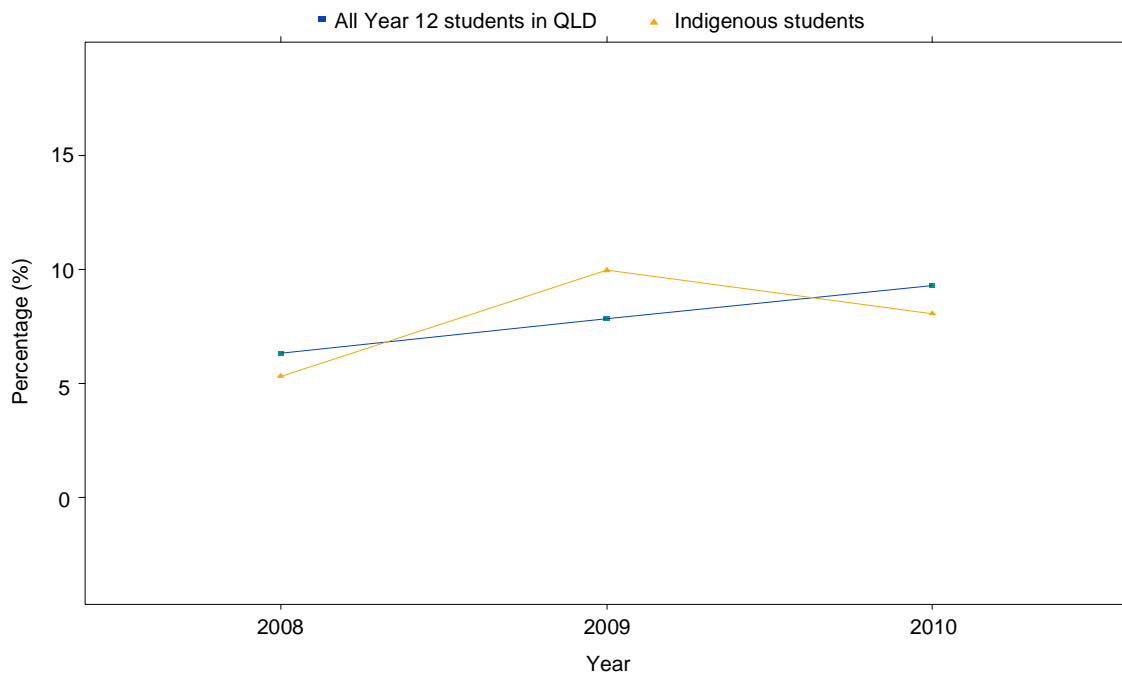
The implications of these two graphs need to be teased out, as their story cannot be interpreted without exploring the context. For example, Indigenous students may be taking longer to build up to achieving Certificates III and IV, which won't show up until several years down the track. Alternately, Indigenous students may be "dumbing down" to achieve the easier qualification, at the same time limiting their future options. And there may be other scenarios.

The QSA needs to track what is happening here and decide on what action, if any, is needed.

1.8 Regional distribution of the QCE

Graph 3 below shows an overview of achievement of the QCE across the regions of Queensland from 2008–2010.

Graph 3: Variation in the percentage of QCEs awarded, compared to the Queensland average
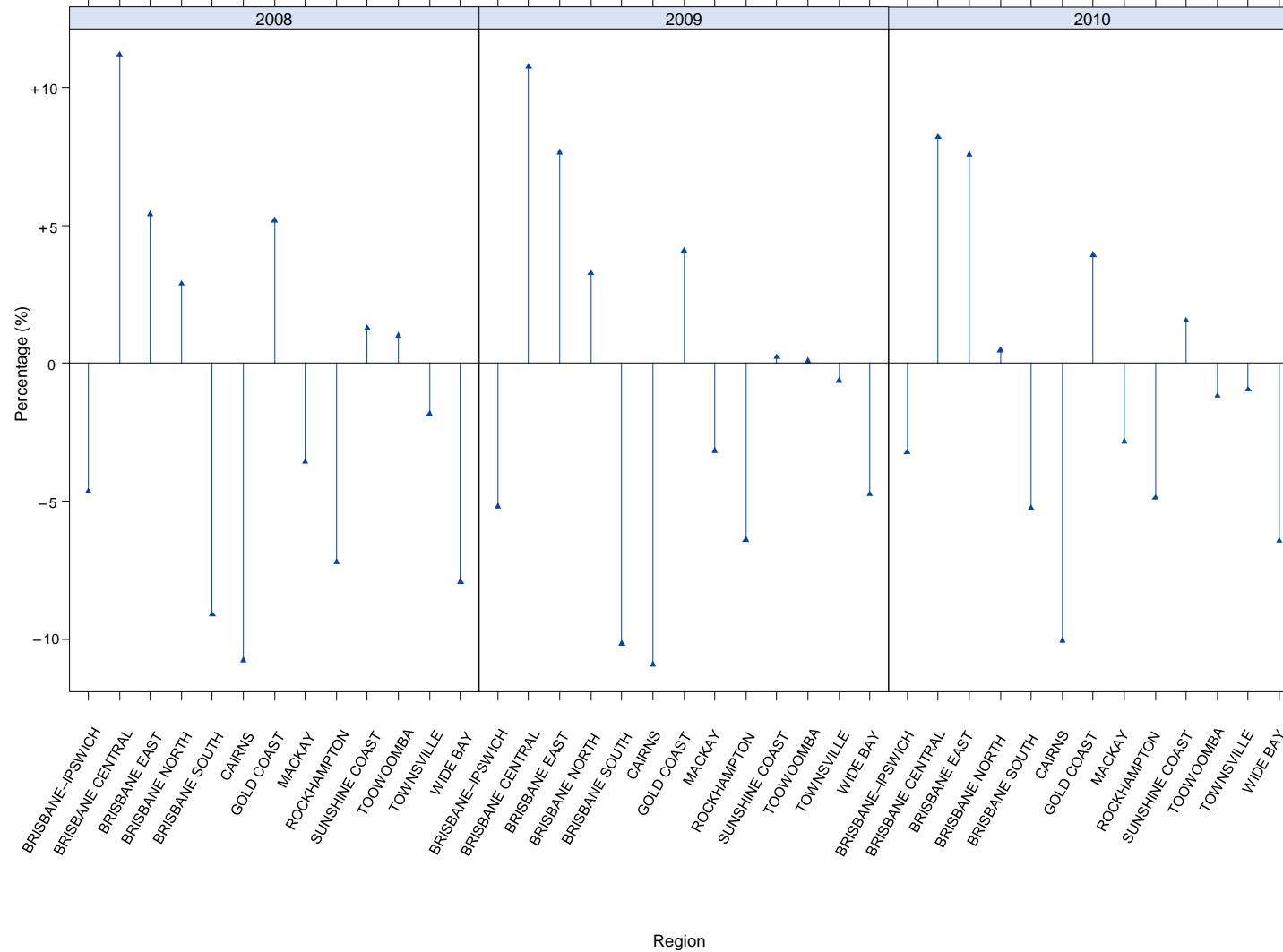
Again, there is a good deal that is encouraging, as while some came from lower bases, the great majority are increasing, with a small number flattening.

The QSA should continue to seek information from the relevant schools as to which strategies they believe are contributing to the increase in numbers, and how the QSA can support their continuation.

As part of this communication, with reference to the data in Sections **1.7** and **1.8**, it is important to acknowledge that increasing the numbers and percentages is not in itself the goal. The message should be that the quality and relevance of the educational achievements should continue to be the focus leading to genuine pathways for the students.

1.9 International students

The Australian and Queensland Governments actively encourage the recruitment of overseas students. AEI data (April 2011) list just under 3500 overseas students currently studying in Queensland, 70% of whom are in senior secondary courses. Consultations during this review have revealed problems which would appear to disadvantage these students. This is potentially a serious problem given the recruitment program and the expectations that students and their families can rightly hold for it.

Most overseas students come from the northern hemisphere, so their timelines are different from Australia's. Transition timelines into Year 11 in Queensland often cause delays before the students can start their courses, which can prevent them from completing the core requirements for a QCE. This is especially likely for those students who need to attend an ELICOS (English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students) program first to improve their English proficiency.

Most of the reasons that student entry to Queensland courses is delayed are out of the control of the students and their families:

- the availability of school results from their home country for inclusion in their visa application
- the length of time it takes to have a visa application processed
- the length of the ELICOS course.

QSA has taken action on these issues — as explained in Fact Sheets 14 and 18 on the QSA's website — but staff in the schools that responded in the review consultations claim that the documentation required to apply for credit transfer and recognition of core requirements for the QCE is complex and very demanding.

While the QSA has attempted to assist these students by granting concessional units that enable them to receive an Overall Position and Tertiary Entrance Statement which should satisfy universities in the students' home countries, some countries are still requiring the formal exit qualification — the QCE — for tertiary entrance. The concessional units currently are not able to be applied to the QCE due to the requirements of that certificate.

The QSA website makes clear that the Tertiary Entrance Statement is the relevant document for tertiary entrance, but this is not working for these students in their home countries. Staff who responded to this review from schools that educate overseas students see an ethical issue in the recruitment policy on the one hand, but an inability to deliver the qualification needed for tertiary study in the student's home country on the other. They point out further that this has the potential to deter overseas students from studying in Queensland.

This appears to be an example of the tension between Principle 1 (**Inclusion and flexibility**) and Principle 2 (**Integrity of standards**). The QCE is a standards- and qualifications-based certificate, and this requires a certain rigour. At the same time, some further flexibility will be needed if overseas students' needs are to be met.

The schools that have raised this issue have offered a number of suggestions:

- acknowledge that overseas students who satisfactorily demonstrate their achievements at the end of Year 12 need a qualification that enables them to be accepted into tertiary studies in their home countries

- recognise studies in High School Preparation Programs

- give due consideration to the transition timelines that cause such disruption to the overseas students in starting their courses in Queensland.

A communication and advocacy issue: perhaps the best resolution of this problem is acceptance by the relevant countries of the purpose of the Tertiary Entrance Statement. This may well be difficult, but it may be less difficult than the QSA finding procedural ways to certificate these students and still preserve the rigour of the QCE.


This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (ix):

That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to reviewing and clarifying its advice and assistance to schools and other providers regarding the eligibility of international students to receive the QCE.

1.10 The QCE and Year 12 retention

Data supplied by the QSA indicates that since the QCE was introduced in 2008, the number and percentage of students receiving it has also increased. What is less obvious but perhaps as important, is that the number and percentage of students completing Year 12 have also increased in that time, and at a larger rate than the general population increase for Year 12 (see Graph 4 below). It is likely that this represents a correlation: that the introduction of the QCE has facilitated a rise in real terms of the number and percentage of students who complete Year 12.

Graph 4: Number of Year 12 cohort in Queensland
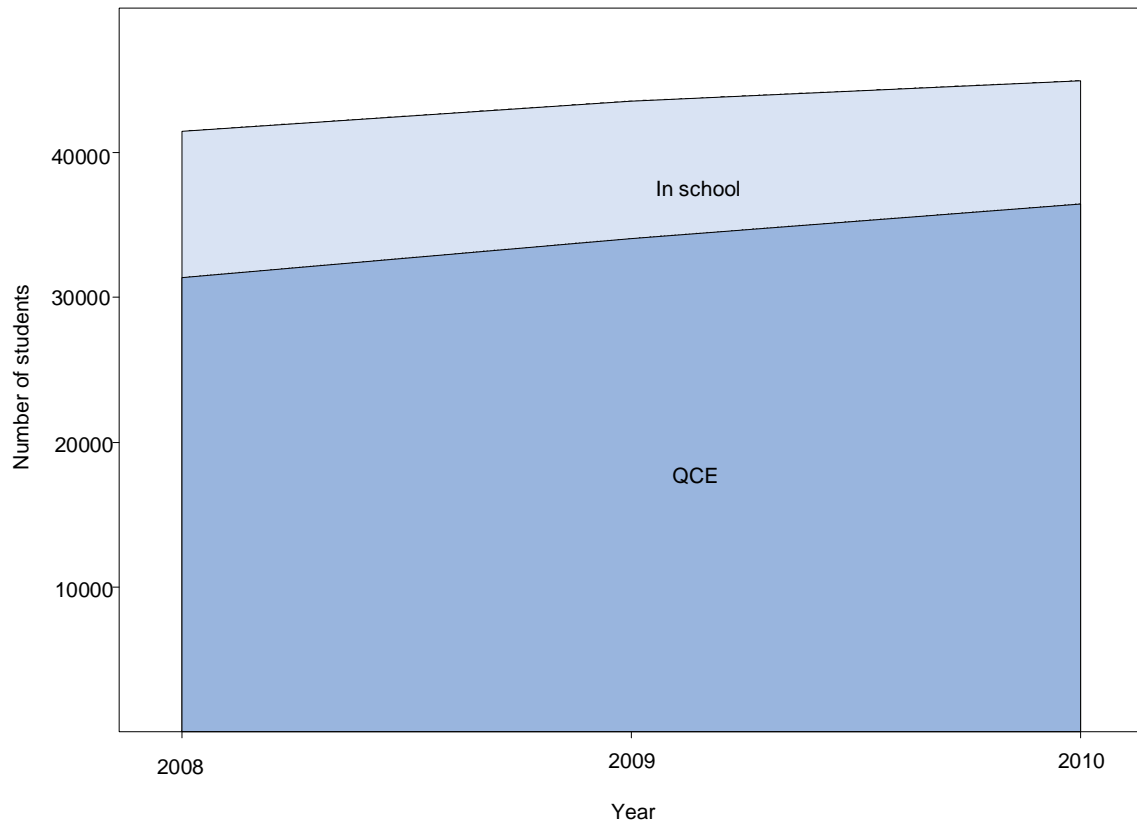
1.11 The QCE and gender

In terms of gender, the trend of more girls achieving a QCE than boys continues. Although both have risen over the three years 2008 to 2010, the gap has stayed consistent (see Graph 5 below).

Graph 5: Proportion of Year 12 cohort in Queensland by gender
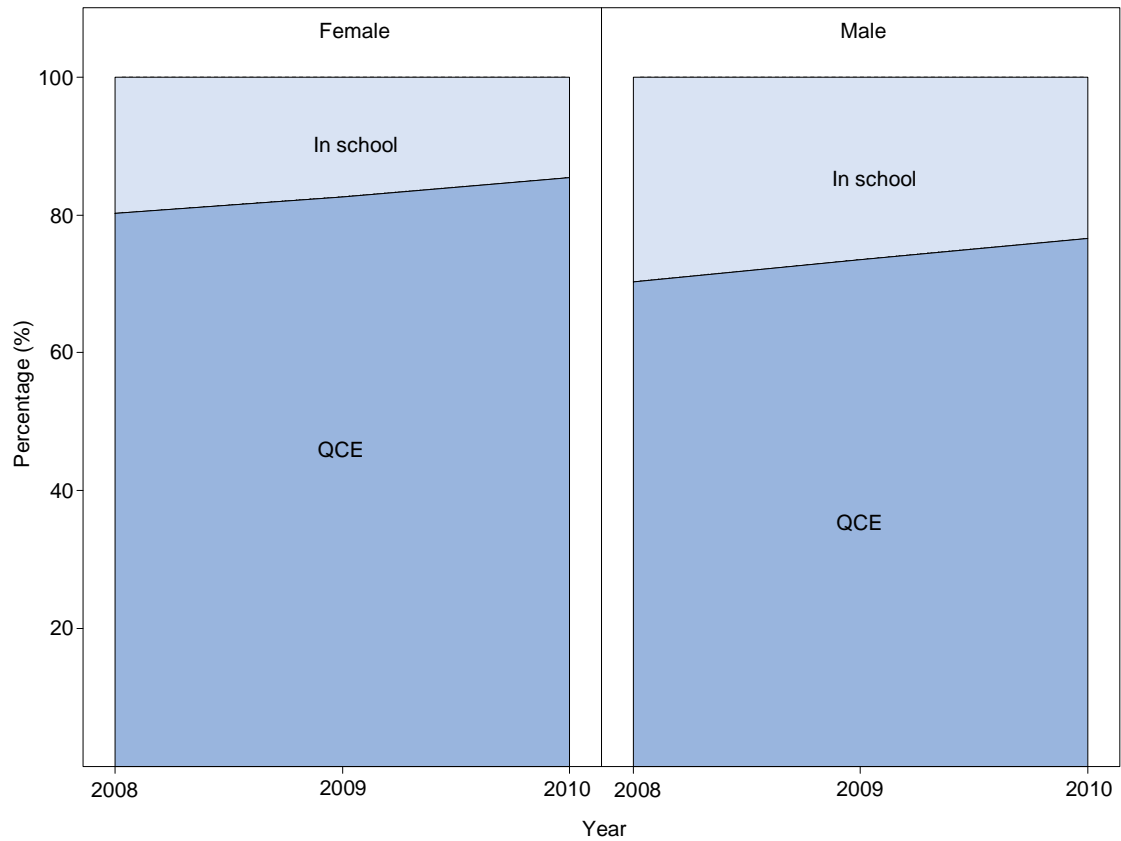
This issue of gender in education remains complex, and research suggests that there are no simple interpretations or successful actions based on data such as this. Perhaps the most encouraging statistic is the rise over the three years for both girls and boys, and it is comparable across both sexes.

Principle 2:   Integrity of standards

> There is little point in separating considerations of equity from the matter of quality in schooling. Equity is only meaningful where it confers access to an education of quality; and, in particular, access to high quality teaching.
> (Australian College of Educators 2011)
>
> The rigour that matters most for the twenty-first century is demonstrated mastery of the core competencies for work, citizenship and lifelong learning. Studying academic content is the means of developing competencies, instead of being the goal, as it has been traditionally. In today's world, it's no longer how much you know that matters; it's what you can do with what you know.
>
> (Tony Wagner 1998)

2.1 The integrity of standards

The integrity of the standards established for the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) — both real and perceived — is particularly important in these early years of its life. As the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) moves to recognise forms of learning that include and go beyond the academic, it is vital that it is "real" learning that is recognised on the QCE, and that high standards are set in the eyes of schools, students, parents/carers, tertiary institutions, industry and the wider community. If this is not established early in the QCE's life, it will be difficult to establish later. Judging from the review consultations, it is well on the way, but not yet firmly established.

New South Wales with its High School Certificate and the International Baccalaureate with its diploma, emphasise the rigour of their courses, equating this with high standards. (In the Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionary of 1971, *rigour* is defined as thoroughly logical and scientific; strict.)

During the review consultations, some doubt was expressed about the rigour of the QCE. This was not widespread, but the fact that it is there is concerning, and it is now important for the QSA to publicise the rigour of the certificate.

On balance, it is as rigorous as any of the courses it is compared with: to be awarded a QCE, students must complete an *amount* of learning, at a set *standard* in a defined *pattern*, and meet literacy and numeracy requirements, all of which must be based on qualifications. In keeping with the definition of rigour quoted above, this is logical and scientific, and it is also strict: it is a certificate based on qualifications and standards.

2.1.1 A qualifications-based certificate

The QCE is a qualifications-based certificate: indeed, it is a qualification that is based on qualifications. To record credit towards the certificate, students must achieve at least a Sound Achievement in QSA subjects, a rating of Competent in vocational education and training certificate courses, or a Pass in other courses. No unhelpful information, such as Limited Achievement or a 3 (or lower) in a course assessed on a 7–1 ratings scale, are eligible for credit. Also ineligible are collections of competencies or achievements that do not constitute a coherent course. There is strong rigour to this, and it ensures that every learning that is recorded on the QCE is a qualification that can take a student somewhere. This makes the certificate itself a high-level qualification: a passport to a student's future.

This position is supported in the recent Skills Australia report, *Skills for Prosperity*:

> Our vision for the VET sector has, at its core, lifting confidence in its quality … [Current approaches] raise serious questions about … issues related to learners' interests in taking only modules or skill sets as opposed to full qualifications. The increased public and private return on investment from the completion of full qualifications is in the national interest.
> (Skills Australia 2011, p. 6)

2.1.2 A standards-based certificate

As well as being qualifications-based, the QCE is standards-based. In all QSA subjects, the criteria necessary for a student to be awarded a particular Level of Achievement are explicit, clear and open to teachers, students, parents/carers and anyone else who wishes to know. Every syllabus contains a standards matrix which is the guide to awarding Levels of Achievement and these are the basis for professional conversations among teachers when assessing student work, as well as between teachers and students and parents/carers.

Furthermore, the externally moderated dimension of QSA courses over the two years means that a high level of quality assurance and teacher professionalism pervades the QCE's processes.

In vocational education and training courses, the criteria necessary for a student to be judged competent are similarly explicit and open to scrutiny, with the Vocational Education and Training sector taking responsibility for quality assurance.

In essence, the minimum standard required for learning to be eligible for entry on the QCE is a Sound Achievement, a Pass, or Competent. The QCE is a record of what students have demonstrated they can do to reach a Sound Level of Achievement or to be judged Competent or to receive a Pass in a recognised course. If a student earns a Sound Achievement or better, or a Pass or Competent, that result is entered on the certificate as it meets the applicable standard of a qualification. It does not record what students have demonstrated they can't do, which is the fate of a student who receives, for example, a 3 or lower in a course that is assessed on a 7–1 ratings scale, a Limited Achievement, or Not Yet Competent.

2.2 Lack of understanding

Drawing together the QSA's materials for schools explaining the QCE, and the input from the internal and external consultations, there is a clear picture of a rigorous and relevant philosophy and process underpinning the QCE. The review consultations suggest, though, that this is not widely understood, and the QSA needs to act strongly and intelligently to ensure that it is.

This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (i):

That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to promoting the credibility and portability of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE): in particular affirming that it is rigorous, standards- and qualifications-based, and internationally recognised.

As a general principle, this affirmation should be the first statement made on every document and communication that offers information and advice about the QCE.
(See also Sections 3.3 and 7.4)

2.3 Questionable practices

During the review consultations, a number of questionable practices by some schools and providers came to light. It appears that these practices have already done damage to the integrity of standards — and therefore to the rigour and credibility — that the QCE aspires to. Though not apparently widespread, review consultations suggest that they are increasing, and in some cases being encouraged. This needs urgent attention, and is addressed in **Principle 3: Credibility and portability**, because that is the area where the potential damage is greatest.

2.4 Equivalence and qualifications

A number of respondents expressed concern about the way a Pass in a lower level qualification such as Vocational Literacy 3 and Vocational Numeracy 3 meets the QCE's literacy and numeracy requirements, but a Limited Achievement in (for example) Mathematics C doesn't. This has drawn criticism from some quarters: firstly suggesting that the standard is too low, and secondly requesting "equivalence" for achievement in some QSA subjects, and for the International Baccalaureate.

The QSA firstly needs to make clear the difference between the notion of a qualification and the notion of equivalence as they apply to the QCE; and secondly the QSA needs to be confident that the bar is set high enough in deciding which qualifications are judged to be appropriate for the requirements of a certificate that represents the culmination of the senior phase of learning. This is an important issue for the perceived integrity of the certificate. This theme has woven itself through the review consultations, and it has not been possible to confine it to one section of this report. It is addressed in further depth in **Principle 3: Credibility and portability**, **Principle 4: Literacy and numeracy**, and **Principle 5: Communication and coordination**.

2.5 Selecting appropriate courses

A further issue related to integrity of standards was raised by a small number of respondents. Previously, under the Senior Certificate, if a student had struggled with Mathematics or Science, for example, in the early or middle years of schooling, the school was likely to counsel the student not to select Mathematics B or Physics for the senior course. At times the student expressed a desire to "have a go" at the subject, or the student's parents/carers pushed for it. In those cases the school usually put a safety net in place, such as reviewing the student's progress in those subjects at the end of Semester 1. If the student was not coping, the student would change to subjects in which greater success could be had.

A small number of respondents suggested that with the need to earn 20 credits to attain a QCE, they were now pressing students in cases such as that mentioned above not to take the risk, as they may *waste* a semester and not earn a credit for the harder subject. They pointed out that in the past some students have worked hard and achieved a Sound Achievement in the more difficult subject, which is a proud achievement for them. Now that the 20 credits are needed, they say they are "dumbing down" by not allowing those students to try the more difficult subject.

It is not easy to make a recommendation on this issue but it is raised here to alert the QSA of an unintended consequence of the introduction of the QCE.

Principle 3:   Credibility and portability

> The Queensland Certificate of Education is a passport for young Queenslanders to move confidently from school to work, training and further education. In turn, employers, educational institutions and training providers will be guaranteed that people awarded a Queensland Certificate of Education have achieved a high standard of education and training.
>
> (Queensland Studies Authority 2006)

3.1 Credibility and portability

There is a strong link between this principle, Principle 2 (Integrity of standards) and Principle 5 (Communication and coordination). It is important that the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) be viewed by schools, industry and the wider community as being credible in what it claims to be certificating. The QCE should also be viewed as being portable in that it leads to further learning or employment, and can guarantee that it fosters the kinds of employability skills and attitudes that industry requires.

3.2 Viewed in different contexts

The review consultations suggest that the QCE is seen differently in different contexts. The majority see it favourably, and a high degree of satisfaction (76%) was expressed by respondents regarding conditions and requirements for awarding a QCE, including the literacy and numeracy requirements.

For many schools, the increased flexibility and the inclusion of more kinds of learning — especially vocational education and training — have enabled more students to now aspire to being awarded a useful qualification, which is also Queensland's main education certificate. These schools report that the QCE is valued and holds high credibility, especially as a source of motivation for students who would not have been eligible for such a certificate under the previous Senior Certificate system.

Some comments from schools:

- I think it has been a positive implementation, as it has given students validation for whatever pathway they have chosen.

- It has added significant "clout" to senior studies.

- The implementation of the QCE gives the students focus and a goal. I would hope that one day it will become more recognised in the wider community as a tool to seek employment.

- This has proved to be a very positive and successful step for our students, especially for all those for whom the pressure and stress of an Overall Position (OP) is too difficult to deal with. The QCE (and rank) has provided these students the opportunity to go to university without the stress of the OP.

- Setting a minimum standard of achievement has raised the status of the certificate compared with the Senior Certificate.

- The QCE has changed the nature of senior studies positively. It has reduced the number of students getting Ds and Es. The QCE has been used as an incentive to get students to work harder.

These statements are strong indicators of credibility, and they also suggest that the aim of greater inclusion is being achieved. They are typical of the majority of comments received.

While the comments above are typical of the majority of responses received, there was still a significant number that are less positive. In relation to the credibility of the certificate, these tended to focus on two issues: the perceived superior status of the Tertiary Entrance Statement (and its OP) or the International Baccalaureate, and the perception that some employers do not give the QCE much importance. These responses tended to come from International Baccalaureate schools, or schools where the majority of students are doing full QSA courses with the OP as their main focus. They will receive the QCE by default, due to their chosen courses.

The schools that questioned the credibility employers place on the QCE were less easy to categorise, but they tend to be more regional than urban. The industry representatives who spoke to the reviewers also expressed some concerns, as explained in Section **3.4: Accountability**Requirements of overseas countries . In the main, though, they were supportive of the concept of a certificate that values academic, vocational and other "real" learning, as opposed to just academic, or just vocational.

The QSA has taken the important step to give vocational learning and other learning similar recognition to academic learning on the QCE. There are strong reasons to support this, with the UK preparing to do similar based on the Wolf Report. These reasons need clear explanation and advocacy to give credibility and portability to the certificate, and present it as "cutting edge" and highly relevant for young people completing their education in the early 21st century.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (ii):**
>
> That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to promoting the QCE as valuing a variety of learning through a variety of pathways; and the relevance of that learning, and those pathways, for students in the world of the early 21st century. (See also Section **1.3**)

3.3 Requirements of overseas countries

It was stated by QSA staff during the review consultations that for students who have studied in Queensland, some overseas countries require the QCE as well as the Tertiary Entrance Statement for entry to tertiary courses. The representative of Education Queensland International, when asked about this, indicated that it was not their understanding that this was the case, but it was confirmed by the Independent Schools Queensland representative as happening in a small number of Asian countries.

Queensland schools that have chosen to offer the International Baccalaureate have also met with demand from students and parents/carers for the QCE, which has led to requests from these schools for "equivalence" for their courses. While this bodes well for the credibility and portability of the QCE, it has created some problems. These are discussed further in **Principle 4: Literacy and numeracy**, **Principle 5: Communication and coordination**, and **Principle 7: Advocacy**, as they have specific relevance to those principles.

In relation to the International Baccalaureate, the QSA needs to ensure that clear and strong messages about the rigour, relevance, and international recognition of the QCE are widely disseminated and understood. The credibility and portability of the certificate will be significantly strengthened if these messages can "bite" in the community.

If anything, the competitive environment that the QCE finds itself in looks likely to increase. Recently the Australian Council for Educational Research launched a National Diploma of Education, which it describes as follows:

> ACER has recently developed the National Diploma of Education for students in the final years of secondary school. It has been designed to provide learning experiences that integrate personal development and academic skills with an extended practical workplace experience in order to develop the attributes necessary for effective workforce participation. (ACER 2011)

The blurring of academic, vocational and personal learning mirrors the aims of the QCE, and is strongly in the spirit of the Wolf Report in the UK, referred to earlier.

Further to this, the 2011 Federal Budget allocated funding for an Australian Baccalaureate which, it is stated, will be presented as an alternative to current offerings. All this suggests that the QSA should be in no doubt that its major certificate faces serious competition.

The QSA's communications should constantly affirm the credibility and portability of the QCE: in particular that it is rigorous, standards- and qualifications-based, relevant and internationally recognised. At the same time it needs to act to ensure that this is indeed the case, and is not undermined by poor practices by schools and providers, or setting the bar too low when determining which qualifications earn credit.

This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (i):

That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to promoting the credibility and portability of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE): in particular affirming that it is rigorous, standards- and qualifications-based, and internationally recognised.

As a general principle, this affirmation should be the first statement made on every document and communication that offers information and advice about the QCE. (See also Sections 2.2 and 7.4)

3.4 Accountability

Notions of credibility and portability lead naturally to accountability. When the QCE is held accountable, to whom is it actually accountable? The consultations for this review suggest that its main accountability rests in the way the qualifications awarded to students are deemed valid and relevant by schools, students, parents/carers, industry, and the wider community — which today means not just locally, but nationally and globally.

Despite the claims of *transparency* and *accountability* made by the Commonwealth Government, it appears that not much of this accountability takes place through the MySchool website with its focus on schools' comparative NAPLAN averages, and the implication that these are indicative of school effectiveness (Hunter 2010; ISQ 2011). The recent 2011 *What Parents Want* survey conducted by Independent Schools Queensland revealed that only 8.6% of parents/carers who had recently chosen a school for their children listed the MySchool website among the three sources of information most likely to influence them in their decision. The top three were friends and colleagues (74%), other parents/carers with children at school (67%), and the school's open day(48%) (ISQ 2011).

The Independent Schools Queensland survey also reports that in January 2011 millions of hits were generated by media organisations utilising data-stripping technology in order to build league tables from the MySchool data. That too needs to be treated with caution: of 14 options listed by parents/carers as influencing their choice of a school for their children, local suburban newspapers rated 12th, and major newspapers not at all. It is reasonable to assume a similar pattern for parents/carers in government and Catholic schools.

Because the QCE has its own column as a contributor to how schools fare on the media league tables, there has been a good deal of attention given to the assumed importance that parents/carers place on MySchool and the media league tables. The Independent Schools Queensland survey suggests that this "assumed importance" may be over-estimated: that the simplistic agendas of the media outlets that construct the league tables may well be seen by the great majority in the community for the superficial and misleading exercises that they are. This is an important factor for the QSA — and perhaps school employing authorities — to take into account when addressing the credibility of the QCE and advocating for it. The goal is not numbers per year, but quality pathways that are relevant to young people's lives.

3.5 More on accountability

Although consultations for this review suggested that MySchool and the media league tables constructed from it have caused anxiety in schools and their systems, industry and private providers saw the main accountability for the QCE coming through the perceived quality and relevance of the qualifications awarded to students, not through media league tables.

While industry representatives were largely satisfied with the philosophy and intent of the QCE, there were questions about the quality and relevance of the qualifications recorded for students on the certificate. The industry and private provider representatives singled out several issues that they say are damaging the credibility and status of the certificate.

3.5.1 Institution-based vocational education and training (VET)

During the consultations with industry representatives and private providers, one particular issue was given significant attention: that of school- and provider-based vocational education and training. Representatives from the construction- and engineering-related industries, as well as providers, explained that some schools and providers were issuing Certificate IIs to students who, in their words, "have never set foot in a workplace". They were unanimous in saying that these students were not only untrained, they were unemployable: they cannot do what the Certificate II claims they can do, so they are untrained; because they have a Certificate II they must be paid at an advanced skills rate; employers aren't prepared to hire them at these rates when the young people can't do what is expected of them at that level, so they are also unemployable.

In his introduction to the recent report by Professor Alison Wolf on vocational education and training in the UK, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, refers to students who are "… pursuing courses which offer no route to higher education or the prospect of meaningful employment." He goes on to say that "… these young people are being deceived, and this is not just unacceptable but morally wrong" (Gove in Wolf 2011, p. 4).

Gove is in no doubt about why these practices are occurring in schools: "Far too many 14 to 16 year olds are doing courses with little or no value because performance tables incentivise schools to offer these inadequate qualifications."

John Hayes, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning (UK), states in his introduction to the Wolf Report:

> To extend individual opportunity and rebalance our economy, we must raise expectations and unleash talent. For those young people who choose the vocational route it must be a highway, not a cul-de-sac.
>
> (Hayes in Wolf 2011, p. 6).

These statements resonate with the concerns expressed in the consultations for this review, and the strong message is that schools and institutions that engage in unprofessional practices are not only seriously disadvantaging the students they are purporting to help, they are also undermining the credibility and portability of the QCE.

3.5.2 Double-dipping of credits

Two major principles of the QCE are that a student needs to undertake an amount of learning in a coherent pattern. The following is an extract from a Brisbane high school's communication to parents/carers and students, giving Year 10 students advice on choosing their course for Years 11 and 12.

> Students who study Legal Studies have the opportunity to gain up to 16 points [sic] towards the Queensland Certificate of Education. This will be made up of:
>
> - 4 points: by passing Legal Studies (Queensland Studies Authority subject)
> - 8 points: by gaining credit transfer for Certificate 3 Business Administration (Legal)
> - 2 points: by completing a university subject, Semester 3, Year 12
> - 2 points: by completing a second university unit in Semester 4, Year 12 (this would then give students automatic entry into the university via their "Start" program).

And from another Brisbane high school:

> Students who study Accounting have the opportunity to gain up to 16 points [sic] towards their Queensland Certificate of Education. This will be made up of:
>
> - 4 points: by passing Accounting (Queensland Studies Authority subject)
> - 8 points: by gaining credit transfer for Certificate 3 Financial Services (Accounts Clerical)
> - 2 points: by completing the Queensland University of Technology subject BSB110 Accounting
> - 2 points: by completing a Queensland University of Technology unit in Semester 2, Year 12 (this would then give students automatic entry into QUT as per the "Start QUT" program).

Two things stand out in these communications: the identical wording, which suggests these two schools — quite some distance apart — are not acting in isolation on this issue — and in the first two dot points of each, students are told that by taking a particular subject they can earn 12 "points" towards the QCE from one amount of learning which, in most other QSA subjects would earn them 4 credits. The other 8 are by *credit transfer* from a vocational education and training certificate course, which is adding 8 credits for the same amount of learning.

While in itself the credit transfer principle makes sense for a vocational education and training qualification, to use it to triple the number of credits one amount of learning earns for the QCE is against one of the fundamental principles of the certificate, and review consultations made clear that this practice is undermining the credibility of the QCE as a rigorous qualification. Furthermore, the fact that the wording of the two schools' communications is identical suggests that if not checked this practice could become widespread.

3.5.3 Nested competencies

In the vocational education and training (VET) sector, a Certificate I can be a substantial contribution to a Certificate II: the successful completion of a Certificate II may in reality mean completing a small number of extra units of competency, over and above those that have already been completed for Certificate I.

During the review consultations, it was revealed that some schools are using "nested competencies" as a form of *double-dipping* in claiming credits for the QCE, by encouraging students to complete a Certificate I, and then, with a small amount of extra learning, to go on and complete a Certificate II, aggregating credits for both as if they were two separate amounts of learning. This is double-dipping in the same vein as misusing credit transfer. It is against the principle of an amount of learning contributing to the QCE: it may meet the letter of the law, but it is in contradiction of the spirit.

These practices can only have one result: an undermining of the credibility and status of the QCE at a time when it is still establishing its credentials in the community. Perhaps these schools are simply misguided and well-meaning in attempting to promote these subjects and help students, but consultations for this review indicate that it is already damaging the credibility of the QCE, and this will increase if it continues, ultimately disadvantaging rather than helping students. It is a short-term political approach which will almost certainly cause long-term damage.

This view is supported in the recent Skills Australia report, *Skills for Prosperity*, where similar concerns are expressed:

> There was strong support in submissions for the value of the VET in Schools programs in broadening opportunities for school students and providing links to the world of work. However there is considerable disquiet among stakeholders and evidence of uneven quality, confused purpose and lack of confidence in the program's outcomes.
> (Skills Australia 2011, p. 7)

This suggests that these issues are not just a concern for the QSA. Industry groups have raised the issue of future credibility of VET in schools as a major concern. It is now on the table as a major concern from industry about the future credibility of vocational education and training in schools, though the practice is not confined to schools. It is an ethical, educational and political issue, and needs urgent addressing.

QSA needs to ensure that the fundamental principles of the QCE are met by schools and providers. This means making a clear and strong statement that an amount of learning can only earn credit once for the QCE. Double-dipping by manipulating the principle of credit transfer or nested competencies is not an acceptable practice for the purpose of the QCE and is undermining its integrity and credibility. For the purpose of the QCE, an amount of learning can only count once, irrespective of credit transferability or nested competencies in the vocational education and training sector. Schools should be informed that if they aggregate students' credits in these ways, the students' credits will be adjusted accordingly by the QSA.

This is addressed in Recommendation 5:

5 (i)   That the QSA make clear that each discrete amount of learning can only earn credit once towards the QCE.

5 (ii)   That the QSA devise a policy to address instances of schools breaching this requirement.

The QSA should seek formal support for this stance from the three education sectors —
Education Queensland, and the Catholic and Independent Schools Authorities — as well as
the vocational education and training sector, industry and private providers.

3.5.4 External pressure

An added dimension was reported during the review consultations: external pressure being
placed on schools to "perform" by increasing the number of students who complete the
QCE by the end of Year 12 so that they can be included in the school's positioning on the
media league tables, even though some of the credits are actually useless to the students'
future pathways.

> [There is sector] expectation that students achieve the QCE by the end of Year 12, rather
> than an ongoing learning account to be achieved after high school — it has become a
> measuring tool of the school's performance.
> (School respondent)

The setting of targets by government and/or employing authorities was seen as a
particularly damaging influence for students, and this view was shared by industry
representatives and school principals.

3.6 Customising VET

It was suggested by some industry representatives during the review consultations that
ideally vocational education and training competencies would be customised to particular
contexts, and need to include onsite training for qualifications above Certificate I. It was
claimed that the QCE was highly valued in regions where there are strong partnerships
between schools, training providers and industry. Gladstone, Blackwater and Cairns were
identified as places where this is the case.

QSA should continue to encourage and nurture partnerships among schools, providers and
industry for students who are pursuing senior courses comprising vocational education and
training work.

Principle 4: Literacy and numeracy

Fit no stereotypes … The situation dictates which approach best accomplishes the team's mission.
(Colin Powell in Harari 2002)

Literacy has been defined in many different, sometimes contradictory, ways … Industry Skills Councils understand language, literacy and numeracy as enabling, context-sensitive skills that can be demonstrated over a continuum from basic to advanced practices. However they also recognise that agreed definitions will not provide solutions …
Responsibility for the development of adequate language, literacy and numeracy skills for work or further study needs to be shared by all stakeholders — schools, employers and the tertiary sector. Effective collaborative approaches are essential at the local level, but they also need to be supported by collaboration and shared goals at the system level. Nothing less than a coordinated approach to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge will succeed.

(Industry Skills Councils 2011)

4.1 A portable qualification

The literacy and numeracy requirement of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) is one of the significant differences from its predecessor, the Senior Certificate. The QCE is essentially about students achieving portable qualifications which give them a "passport" for the next stage of their lives, and this includes completing the compulsory years of education with an acceptable command of literacy and numeracy. Currently the literacy and numeracy requirements must be met by a student satisfying set standards in dedicated English or Mathematics courses. The QSA document *Planning Your QCE Pathway* (2010) states:

The Queensland Certificate of Education offers students a range of options to satisfy the literacy and numeracy requirements, including:

- at least a Sound Achievement in one semester of a QSA-developed English and Mathematics subject

- at least a Sound Achievement in QSA-developed short courses in literacy and numeracy

- competence in vocational education and training Vocational Literacy 3 (39153 Qld) and Numeracy 3 (39163 Qld)

- a Pass grade in a literacy and numeracy course recognised by the QSA

- at least a C on the Queensland Core Skills Test

- at least a 4 for an International Baccalaureate examination in English and Mathematics.

4.2 Decline in numbers of students not meeting literacy and numeracy requirements

During the consultations for this review, it became clear that while the current requirements are not seen as widely problematic, a number of students are failing to be awarded a QCE each year because they do not meet the literacy and/or numeracy requirements, despite some of them achieving strong results, often in quite academic courses. **Table 5 below** indicates that these numbers are small, and they have declined over the three years from 2008 to 2010.

Table 5: Students not awarded a QCE due to not meeting literacy and/or numeracy requirements

Reason QCE was not awarded	Number of students		
	2008	**2009**	**2010**
Did not meet literacy requirements	66	59	50
Did not meet numeracy requirements	234	176	158
Did not meet literacy and numeracy requirements	4	4	11

There was widespread support within the QSA, as well as from schools, industry and providers, for a broader approach to meeting the requirements in literacy and numeracy. While the numbers revealed in **Table 5** are small, they reinforce the suggestion that it is time to move beyond the narrow stereotypes associated with these terms.

4.3 Defining literacy and numeracy

It is important to keep in mind that the literacy and numeracy requirements are those deemed appropriate for the award of the QCE: they are not necessarily subject to a precise and generic definitions of literacy or numeracy. Attempting to define *literacy* in the post-modern world of the early 21st century leads into extremely complex territory, and to a lesser extent so does defining *numeracy*. It is a contextual, highly contested area, and entering it is unlikely to be helpful in the context of the QCE. It is important to be mindful here that all assessment is based on human judgment. Despite the allure of numbers and the illusion that they are "hard" data while qualitative statements are "soft", human judgment is where those numbers came from (Darling-Hammond 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education 2010). The QSA should not be afraid to apply this to literacy and numeracy requirements of the QCE.

For the specific purpose of the QCE, rather than attempting to define literacy and numeracy, it may well be more helpful to act on Colin Powell's advice and ask, "Which approach can best accomplish the mission?" (Powell in Harari 2002). It is suggested that the QSA take an approach based on the notion that reasonable judgment should underpin how the literacy and numeracy requirements of the QCE are decided: both in content and at the acceptable standard.

4.4 Reasonable judgment

All QSA syllabuses contain generic literacy and numeracy statements — called respectively Language Education and Quantitative Concepts and Skills — which suggest that developing students' literacy and numeracy skills is not confined to specific English and Mathematics subjects. For example, if a student is awarded a Sound Achievement in QSA Modern or Ancient History, a reasonable judgment can be made that the student has

demonstrated a level of literacy that satisfies the requirements of the QCE. Similarly, a student who is awarded a Sound Achievement in QSA Accounting can be reasonably judged to have satisfied the numeracy requirements of the QCE.

The concept can be applied across other subjects and courses provided there are in-built intrinsic literacy and numeracy components, as there are in the QSA courses. It is a principle that can also be applied to the International Baccalaureate: a student who achieves the necessary qualification — a rating of 4 or higher in a course that has embedded literacy and/or numeracy components — may be judged to have demonstrated the literacy and/or numeracy requirements for the QCE. (In this process, the principle of a qualification overrides the principle of reasonable judgment. The latter only applies when the student has achieved Sound Achievement or higher, Competent or Pass.)

4.5 Relevance to the Australian Curriculum

An important concept of the Australian Curriculum is that of "general capabilities":

> Twenty-first century learning does not fit neatly into a curriculum solely organised by learning areas or subjects. That is why the Australian Curriculum has identified a comprehensive set of knowledge, skills and dispositions or general capabilities that will assist students to live and work successfully in the twenty-first century.
> (ACARA 2010)

There are seven designated general capabilities, the first two of which are literacy and numeracy. The statement quoted above clearly conceptualises literacy and numeracy broadly across the curriculum rather than narrowly in subject areas.

This is reinforced in the Literacy and Numeracy sections of the General Capabilities.

On literacy:

> Literacy is central to all learning in school and the ways that students demonstrate their learning …

> In the Australian Curriculum students become literate as they develop the skills to learn and communicate confidently at school and to become effective individuals, community members, workers and citizens. These skills include listening, reading, viewing, writing, speaking and creating print, visual and digital materials accurately and purposefully within and across all learning areas …

On numeracy:

> In the Australian Curriculum students become numerate as they develop the capacity to recognise and understand the role of mathematics in the world around them and the confidence, willingness and ability to apply mathematics to their lives in ways that are constructive and meaningful …

> The complexity of contemporary society requires young people to be increasingly numerate. They need to recognise the mathematical basis of authentic problems and engage constructively in their solution.

This broad, cross-curricular approach to literacy and numeracy resonates strongly with the concept of reasonable judgment, as discussed in Section 4.4 above. It presents a compelling case for change to the current literacy and numeracy requirements for the QCE.

The QSA should broaden the numeracy and literacy requirements for the QCE by adopting the principle of reasonable judgment in determining whether students' results meet the literacy and numeracy requirements of the QCE.

An example of possible refining of the language is offered with reference to the QSA document *Planning Your QCE Pathway*. The following suggestions are offered:

- p. 3, should be amended to read: "At least a Sound Achievement in one semester of a QSA course judged by the QSA to have sufficient embedded literacy and numeracy requirements for the purpose of the QCE."

- last dot-point, same section: "At least a 4 for an International Baccalaureate examination in a course judged by the QSA to have sufficient embedded literacy and numeracy requirements for the purpose of the QCE."

QSA would then need to identify those courses that meet the above criteria.

This is addressed in Recommendation 6:

6 (i)   That the QSA broaden the literacy and numeracy requirements for the QCE to include subjects beyond dedicated English and Mathematics.

6 (ii)   That the eligibility criteria for literacy and numeracy on the QCE continue to be set at the level of a "qualification": a Sound Achievement or higher, Competent, or a Pass. (See also Section 4.7)

4.6 The International Baccalaureate

A further issue regarding the International Baccalaureate and the recognition of literacy and numeracy requirements on the QCE came to light during the review consultations, due to agreements on prerequisites for entry to university courses that have been made outside of the QSA's jurisdiction.

For students who undertake the International Baccalaureate, which rates student achievement on a 7–1 scale, the University of Queensland and Griffith University recognise a 3 in High Level English and/or Mathematics on the International Baccalaureate as a prerequisite for entry to certain courses. International Baccalaureate schools have requested that this result should also earn recognition for the QCE's literacy and numeracy requirements.

This is problematic for the QSA, as the QCE is a standards- and qualifications-based certificate, requiring a Sound Achievement, a Pass, Competent, or a 4 in an International Baccalaureate or other course. While a 3 in High Level English or Mathematics on the International Baccalaureate may serve as a prerequisite for a university course, it is not viewed as a qualification for the purpose of the QCE, as it is not regarded as a "Pass" in those subjects. A 3 on the International Baccalaureate, a Limited Achievement on a QSA-developed subject or Not Yet Competent on a vocational education and training course is more an indicator of what students cannot do, not what they can do. In essence, the prerequisite gives a student entry to a course which, if successfully completed, is a qualification. The prerequisite itself is not a qualification.

4.7 Rigour

It was noted during the review consultations that those schools that opt to enter their students in the International Baccalaureate course for the senior phase of learning often promote its rigour. For inclusion on the QCE, rigour means a student gaining a recognisable and portable qualification. A rating of 3 in another course, whether the course is High Level or not, does not meet the required rigour for recognition on the QCE. It is not a qualification that will take a student anywhere. It needs to be emphasised that the concept of prerequisites used by universities for course entry is based on the principle of "equivalence", not "qualification", so it is more relevant to the Tertiary Entrance Statement than the QCE. It is a different agenda for a different purpose. It is not a qualification.

This is addressed in Recommendation 6:

6 (i)   That the QSA broaden the literacy and numeracy requirements for the QCE to include subjects beyond dedicated English and Mathematics.

6 (ii)   That the eligibility criteria for literacy and numeracy on the QCE continue to be set at the level of a "qualification": a Sound Achievement or higher, Competent, or a Pass. (See also Section 4.5)

The differentiation between a qualification on the one hand, and the concept of equivalence on the other, is not confined to the International Baccalaureate. This is discussed further in **Principle 5: Communication and coordination**, where it has broader relevance to the QCE.

Principle 5: Communication and coordination

> Everybody's talking at me
> I don't hear a word they're saying
>
> (Harry Nilsson 1967)

5.1 Communication channels

Communication from the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) about the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) occurs through the website and its links, printed documents, and through informal contact with schools, students and parents/carers, mainly by phone or email. Feedback during the review consultations suggests that these forms of communication are of good quality, and are widely used and appreciated. A number of QSA staff also stated that they were keen to encourage personal contact from schools, students and parents/carers, a practice they felt the Queensland Board of Secondary School Studies had established and nurtured in previous years.

It was noted during the consultations that QSA publications such as *Exit Lines* are continually upgraded in their visual layout and content in order to continue to be attractive to young people. Respondents indicated that they appreciate this.

5.2 Great diversity

Despite the agreed high quality of the QSA's website and information documents, some schools indicated that the documents were not suitable for their particular school's context. Given the size and diversity of Queensland's demographics, it is unlikely that the QSA can ever provide documents that all schools will be able to pass directly to their parents/carers and students. Some schools may need to make contextual judgments about how they communicate QSA information and advice to their communities.

5.3 Standards and qualifications

Perhaps the major communication issue that was highlighted throughout both the internal and external consultations is an extension of the criticisms of the literacy and numeracy requirements discussed in **Principle 4: Literacy and numeracy**. It is captured in this statement from a teacher:

> A recent case has highlighted a major inequity for some OP-oriented students, resulting in absurd outcomes on the Queensland Certificate of Education. We had a student who missed out on a Queensland Certificate of Education because he had a Low [sic] Achievement [on rung]10 in [Queensland Studies Authority] Physics, yet this indicates far more achievement than a Sound Achievement [on rung] 1 in an Authority-registered subject such as English Communication or Prevocational Mathematics. We need to consider a new category for "concessional credit" whereby an OP-eligible student with 16 or more points who has a Low [sic] Achievement [on rung] 5 or higher in an Authority subject is granted a concessional pass for Queensland Certificate of Education purposes.

And this also from a teacher:

> Some regulations are somewhat confusing — a student can gain an OP and university entrance but not get a Queensland Certificate of Education — crazy!

A similar argument was put by a principal of a school that has opted for the International Baccalaureate over the QCE (but has found that students and parents/carers still want a QCE):

> The ongoing requirement for students to achieve a 4 or better in the International Baccalaureate Higher Level Mathematics course in order to meet the numeracy requirements is highly inequitable when compared with students being successful in subjects such as Prevocational Mathematics or Mathematics A. Students who get a 3 or better in Higher Level Mathematics are awarded course credit at the University of Queensland for two first-year university mathematics subjects (MATH 1040 and MATH 1050) yet by the Queensland Certificate of Education standards would be considered innumerate. This is a highly inequitable situation and one that has resulted in the ridiculous situation of some of our students successfully attaining the rigorous and internationally-recognised International Baccalaureate Diploma qualification but not the Queensland Certificate of Education. There needs to be greater scope and flexibility in recognising the alternative curriculum programs students study when considering Queensland Certificate of Education attainment. The inability to recognise a notional sound equivalent for one semester International Baccalaureate subjects in order to meet literacy and numeracy is a major inequity. Universities now recognise a 3 rating in Higher Level International Baccalaureate subjects as meeting prerequisites for courses. A 3 in Higher Level subjects is considered the equivalent of a Sound Achievement in the calculation of tertiary ranks by Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre. This should be reflected in the Queensland Certificate of Education in a student's eligibility for core points.

A different angle on this same issue was expressed by another principal:

> I don't really see a great sense of significance in attaining the Queensland Certificate of Education as a qualification. It is a summary of learning achievements but because of its diversity in contributions from many learning paths it can't really make up its mind what it really is. There is a vast range in the levels of contributing learning based upon the relative difficulty of the learning path. I cannot see how a SAS [Authority-registered subject] can be considered equal to a Category A subject in the nature or depth of learning and yet it makes the same contribution. A Certificate 2 often is more complex and more difficult to achieve than a SAS. There is a large difference in the amount of learning that a student demonstrates if they have achieved Very High Achievements than if one achieves Sound Achievements and the Queensland Certificate of Education gives no recognition of this enhanced or higher level learning in its credit contribution.

These were not isolated comments, and though not a majority view, they highlighted the need for the QCE to now communicate "what it really is". At the establishment of the QCE three years ago, the decision was made that it be standards- and qualifications-based. This decision was both political and philosophical, and makes a clear distinction between the QCE on the one hand, and reporting on documents like the Tertiary Entrance Statement or an International Baccalaureate course on the other. They are grounded in different principles and their purposes are different, and this poses a major communication (and advocacy) issue for the QSA.

5.4 Qualification vs. equivalence

qualification: that which makes a person fit for a job, task, or office, etc.

equivalence: equality in value, force, significance, importance; equality in combining value to a (stated) quantity of another substance

(Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionary 1971)

The two notions — that of a "qualification", and that of "equivalence" — are separate and distinct concepts, but they are blurred in the eyes of some teachers and the wider community. They need to be clearly differentiated. **Table 6 below** lists key differences between the two concepts. The teacher quoted earlier who believes that a student who is awarded a Limited Achievement on rung 10 of a Form R6 for Physics should be given greater credit on the QCE than a student who achieves a Sound Achievement on rung 1 in an Authority-registered subject, is coming from the "equivalence" or recognition of prior learning position, as is the principal of the International Baccalaureate school who sees a 3 in Higher Level English or Mathematics as having far more "rigour" and "international recognition" than Prevocational Mathematics or Mathematics A.

It is now time for the QSA to make the point that the rigour and international recognition of the QCE are based on recording qualifications that students have achieved. A Limited Achievement on a QSA course is not a qualification, even if it is one rung away from a Sound Achievement on a Form R6. The school has decided that the student has not met the criteria for a Sound Achievement. It is not regarded as a Pass, so it is not a qualification, and nor is a 3 on an International Baccalaureate course for the same reason. The point needs to be made that a Limited Achievement 10 in Physics is a contributor to the Tertiary Entrance Statement and the student's Overall Position, not to the QCE. The same applies to a 3 on an International Baccalaureate course: that result may be used to give a student entry or credit to a university course — a course which when successfully completed gives the student a qualification. The Limited Achievement 10 and the Higher Level 3 are not qualifications: they are used to allow the student entry to a course that may lead to a qualification.

It is important to note that the QSA has used the "equivalence" principle in the contribution of vocational education and training qualifications to the QCE. For example, courses in Certificate I Construction have had different credits allocated to them based on the amount of learning — expressed in hours of time allocation — that they require. So too have Certificate III and IV courses. The key principle, though, is similar to that of the reasonable judgment principle proposed for literacy and numeracy in Section **4.4**: they only apply when the student has achieved a qualification — a Sound Achievement, Pass, or Competent. They do not enter the territory of equivalence or recognition of prior learning for entry to a tertiary (or other) course.

Table 6: differences between qualification and equivalence

Qualification	Equivalence
• Certifies completion of a coherent course of study at an accepted standard. • Accepted standard: Sound Achievement, Pass or Competent on an approved course. • A pathway to employment or further qualifications. • A demonstration of capabilities or competence against pre-stated criteria.	• A means of translating the value of something from one context to another. • Used to make judgments about eligibility for tertiary courses. • Used to make judgments about Recognition of Prior Learning. • Used to enable a student to enter a course that leads to a qualification. • A pathway to a qualification, but not necessarily a qualification in itself.

This differentiation has proven to be a very difficult one to communicate. For decades the various iterations of "the Board" tried to explain why it was possible that a student awarded six Very High Achievements on the Senior Certificate could receive a Tertiary Entrance Score or Overall Position lower than a student who was awarded (say) three Very High Achievements and three High Achievements. Different purposes for different certificates: that is essentially the key message now, as it was for the Senior Certificate and the Tertiary Entrance Statement.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 7:**
>
> That the QSA mount a concerted communication initiative to clearly differentiate between the principle of a "qualification" on the one hand, and the principle of "equivalence" for the purpose of tertiary or other course entry on the other.
>
> This will involve a review of current QSA materials that relate to the QCE.

An example of possible refining of the language is offered with reference to the QSA document *Planning Your QCE Pathway*. The following suggestions are offered:

- along the top of p. 2 — *To gain a QCE you need* — add the word "qualification" to the second box so it reads *Sound Level of Achievement, Pass, or equivalent **qualification***

- On p. 2 — *About the QCE* — insert a new dot point after the first one, to read: *a standards- **and qualifications**-based certificate*

- On p. 2 — *How the QCE works* — reword the third dot point to: *you must achieve a Sound, Pass, or equivalent **qualification** to receive QCE credits*

- On p. 3 — at the top right — reword the statement to read *literacy and numeracy **qualifications** that meet QCE requirements*.

This is a crucial message in "the story" of the QCE, and is important for its credibility and standing in schools, industry and the wider community.

5.5 Communicating with young people

The consultations with young people and their representatives provided further food for thought regarding communication. They indicated that they appreciated being able to phone or email the QSA for advice or information, but they pointed out that social media such as Facebook are now young people's main forms of communication, and that if this were available more young people would use it.

QSA clearly recognises this, and the recent *Student Connect* link on the website is impressive in its attempt to communicate with students in ways that are "friendly" to them. It will be interesting to gauge how well students are interacting with them. The QSA videos on YouTube are further evidence of "youth friendly" initiatives, and it is noted that the Director refers students to these in the June 2011 edition of *Exit Lines*.

In one consultation a school principal warned against using Facebook, as his school had had a bad experience from it. Nevertheless, it was a suggestion that was offered in a number of the consultations both by young people and adults, and is worth exploring.

Discussions with QSA staff made clear their understanding that social media has the potential to be used in trivial and superficial ways by young people, and they suggested that whatever the QSA does by way of social media needs to be carefully thought through and above all, to be meaningful and of substance.

The representatives of disengaged students conveyed that the young people they were working with were "a world away" from the way the QSA's information is presented. At the same time, they acknowledged that fairly specialised communications were needed to engage these young people, and that the QSA could not be expected to provide material specifically for the needs of all students.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (vi):**
>
> That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to promoting the compatibility and resonance of the QCE with the developing Australian Curriculum.

5.6 From communication to advocacy

To date, the role of the communication initiatives from the QSA about the QCE has been essentially information-giving. It is widely felt that this is of good quality and that schools find it helpful and use it regularly. At the same time, the review consultations suggest that the QCE is not properly understood even in schools, and that in some quarters it is not held in high esteem.

It is time now for the QSA to extend its outreach beyond communication, to advocacy. This involves telling "the story" of the QCE, identifying and publicising the key messages about it, and presenting them in an unashamedly positive light. This is further addressed in **Principle 7: Advocacy**.

5.7 The senior phase of learning

There are a number of statements about the senior phase of learning spread throughout QSA documents and communications, but they are largely technical: none appears to capture its deeper purpose. Current statements tend to refer to pathways towards qualifications, higher education or work, and could well be contributing to the "credit chase" behaviour that some schools and providers are engaging in. Indeed, some of the material coming from schools to students and parents/carers that was sighted during this review conveys the message that the purpose of the senior phase of learning is to gain 20 "points" for a QCE.

There was widespread agreement during the consultations — including from industry representatives — that the purpose of the senior phase of learning should continue to be education: personal and interpersonal. Identifying and nurturing talents, forming values, learning the value of commitment, teamwork, effective communication, planning and a work ethic, were all mentioned during consultations. There was general consensus that while students should by now be making decisions about pathways that may lead to possible futures, they should still be engaged in broad learning based on their human development. The prevailing view was that young people are not a finished product: they are a work in progress, and their education needs to continue to reflect that.

The QSA needs to communicate that the fundamental purpose of the senior phase of learning is to nurture and enrich the development of young people through the final years of their secondary education. The awarding of a QCE should represent a celebration of the successful completion of the student's formal education at the end of Year 12, or its equivalent.

Furthermore, students who finish Year 12 or its equivalent with fewer than 20 credits have seven years in which to gain those credits, so the issuing to these students of their Statement of Results to date can be their celebration of the completion of secondary education, even though they still have some work to do to receive a QCE.

These kinds of statements about the senior phase of learning can elevate the conversations staff in schools have when discussing a Senior Education and Training (SET) Plan with students and parents/carers, as well as the school's communications to its community. Whether a student is pursuing a QSA course, a vocational education and training course, or a mixture of both, it should always be grounded in the assumption that the students are still furthering their learning, and that whatever pathway a student chooses, education is fundamentally about human development.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 2:**
>
> That the QSA compose and publicise a statement on the purpose of the senior phase of learning, presenting it as a time of continuing human development: the third stage of a cumulative process of learning from P–12.

As an example of such a statement, the following is offered:

> While the senior phase of learning is about enabling students to select differing pathways towards their future learning and work, its fundamental purpose remains the human development of young people, in all its varieties and forms. It builds on the early and middle phases of learning, and is a time of forming values, nurturing and discovering talents, and continuing to build an understanding of the balance of rights and responsibilities that are at the heart of a democratic society.

5.8 Language

5.8.1 Appropriateness of key words

A further language-related issue that emerged during the consultations was the appropriateness of some key words that are used in the context of the student course options. One example: Given the still tentative nature of the way young people think about their future, along with the complex and uncertain nature of today's world, the terms "Plan", "career planning" and "Careers Adviser" seem dated and even misleading. Schools are not guiding students through a SET Plan towards a career: they are guiding them on a pathway towards their own human development, leading to possible futures, with the knowledge that the actual nature of those futures is fluid and vague. SET Pathways, pathways planning and pathways adviser, or futures planning, seem more fitting language. Indeed, the ultimate "career" a student enters may not yet even exist.

A further example: Some communications still refer to student "outcomes". While promoting the concept of lifelong learning through continuing pathways, and of education as a journey rather than a destination, the term "outcomes" suggests an end product. Furthermore in the past Queensland has flirted with the outcomes-based education movement in P–10, and has since moved on from it. The term has a formal meaning in educational literature, and in Queensland it is now inappropriate and dated. It should be replaced by a simple word such as "learnings" or "achievements".

QSA has generally made good decisions about the language it associates with the QCE, "credits", not "points", being one such example, and this needs to be continued now into the wider vocabulary that is used. Those schools referred to earlier that are encouraging students to "gain points" by manipulating the system should be counselling their students on how they can "earn credits" through genuine amounts of learning. Their attitude is reflected in their poor use of language.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (v):**
>
> That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to revising the language used in conjunction with the QCE, for example:
>
> - the SET Plan should become the SET Pathway
> - "futures planning" should replace "careers planning"
> - "achievements" and "learnings" should replace "outcomes"
> - students earn "credits", not "points"
> - acronyms should be used sparingly and selectively.

5.8.2 Acronyms

There was a strong message from the parent representatives during the review consultations that the use of acronyms by QSA staff and especially by schools is blocking communication processes about the QCE. It seems that educators and policymakers have developed so many acronyms that to non-educators it has become almost a foreign language.

> I recently attended a Year 10 parent information evening at my daughter's school, after a long day at work. Within a few minutes of the principal's presentation, she had referred to the QCE, QSA, QTAC, QCST, a SET Plan, VET (what does this have to do with animals?), AQF, EQ, UQ, QUT… I just wanted to go home.
> (A parent representative)

There is an important message here for the QSA, and especially for schools: acronyms are at best confusing, and at worst damaging. Some are well understood, such as the HSC in New South Wales, but most are not. It is suggested that the acronym QCE could be retained, along with a small number of others, with all other references given their full titles when communicating with parents/carers, schools and the wider public.

This is a message that should be strongly conveyed to schools in both the communication of information about the QCE, and advocacy for it.

5.9 Coordination

5.9.1 Internal coherence

During the consultations with QSA staff, a number of people suggested that as the QSA has grown so significantly in its responsibilities, and therefore in size and complexity, since the introduction of the QCE, internal coordination has become more difficult. It was suggested that some areas of the organisation are not fully familiar with what other areas do, and that not everyone has the "big picture" regarding the QCE. It was further suggested that this seems to have contributed to a lack of commitment to the QCE by some staff. Given the magnitude of the changes from the Senior Certificate to the QCE, the merging of the Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority, the Queensland Schools Curriculum Council and the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary Studies into one much larger body, and the short time that has elapsed since then, this is hardly surprising. Indeed, it is in keeping with the general research on organisations.

During staff consultations it was suggested that a restructure in 2010 had gone some way towards resolving these issues, but others saw the restructure as essentially cosmetic. Further, it should be noted that a purely structural approach to matters related to the culture of an organisation rarely resolves the problems: a culture issue needs a cultural approach that may or may not involve structural changes.

In relation to this, it is helpful to draw from Daniel Goleman's work on organisations and leadership. Goleman differentiates between "alignment" on the one hand and "attunement" on the other, when attempting to forge a collective vision:

> Leaders often talk about wanting to get their people "aligned" with their strategy. But that word suggests a mechanical image of getting all the pencils pointing in the same direction, like a magnetic field lining up the polarity of the molecules. It isn't that simple. Strategies, couched as they are in the dry language of corporate goals, speak mainly to the rational brain, the neocortex. Strategic visions (and the plans that follow from them) are typically linear and limited, bypassing the elements of heart and passion essential for building commitment.
>
> … Getting people to really embrace change requires **attunement** — alignment with the kind of resonance that moves people emotionally as well as intellectually … This attunement requires something more than simply making people aware of the strategy itself. It requires a direct connection with people's emotional centres.
>
> (Goleman 2002, p. 208)

Goleman points out further that attunement is especially important when organisations are undergoing significant change, such as a merger or the introduction of a major policy change: certainly relevant to the establishment of the QSA and the introduction of the QCE only three years ago.

It should be stated here that during the review process morale across the organisation seemed high, and that the staff consulted were committed to making a success of the QCE. The concerns about possible gaps in commitment to the QCE in the organisation were offered in a professional manner: neither personal nor laying blame. The openness from the people who raised it says much that is positive about the culture of the QSA.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 9:**
>
> That the QSA develop an organisation-wide understanding of and commitment to the QCE by involving all staff across all areas in investigating, discussing and resolving key issues that relate to the QCE.

5.9.2 Data gathering and processing

A number of issues were raised during the consultations that relate to the coordination of data gathering for the QCE.

The review consultations revealed that the greater flexibility and the inclusion of broader learning on the QCE have created significant difficulties in data gathering. The volume and diversity of the information now needing to be processed have increased greatly from what was required for the Senior Certificate. Of particular importance is the diminishing capacity of the current information and communication technology systems to record the necessary data, communicate it to the QSA, and for the QSA to then process the data. Personnel at the QSA and the Department of Education and Training made clear that they believe they are approaching the limits of the existing systems, and that urgent attention is needed if the QSA is going to be able to continue to process the QCE in a timely way.

Review consultations suggest that the extent of this problem is not being exaggerated, and if it is not addressed urgently, there is a danger that in the not too distant future the current systems will fail.

There is a documented history of such requests going back to 2006 and including a formal report by Ernst and Young in 2007. The situation presented during the review consultations is now one of urgency.

This is addressed in Recommendation 8:

That as a matter of urgency, an integrated information and communication technology system designed specifically for the purpose of the QCE be implemented.

Ideally the integrated system will enable all relevant information for students to be recorded in their learning accounts through the "banking" of their learnings during their studies. This will make a major difference to the ability of schools and registered training organisations to gather data, and the ability of the QSA to process the data in order to produce QCEs for all eligible students in a timely way each year.

QSA staff report continuing problems with receiving student data from some providers and registered training organisations by the required due dates. This causes some students to receive inaccurate or incomplete QCEs in December, and QSA staff have to chase up the relevant organisations and issue new certificates to the affected students. This is time-consuming for staff and disconcerting for students, and it results in some students receiving two QCEs: one accurate and one not. It is hoped that this is a "teething problem", and that when these organisations realise the problems they are causing, much of it will be rectified.

Some of the difficulties are caused by the timelines of the providers and registered training organisations: their courses do not finish, and the results are not processed, till quite late in the year, and the QSA will need to liaise with them to find a way to meet the time demands of the QCE.

This is addressed in Recommendation 11:

That the QSA explore the feasibility of issuing QCEs to students online, to provide additional time for learning providers to submit data in a timely way for the issuing of the QCEs, and for students to check the accuracy of the data and report any anomalies to the QSA before a final hard copy is issued.

5.9.3 Learning accounts

It was always intended that the "banking" of student results in their learning accounts would be an ongoing part of the progress towards a QCE. The reality is that there is usually nothing in the account until well into the Year 12 year.

Ideally there would be a build-up of credits over the years of study so that the learning account is seen to accrue credits for the students during the course. One way to resolve this is to seek credits during Year 10, so that when students begin Year 11 they already have a "working" learning account.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 10:**
>
> 10 (i)   That the QSA explore ways to facilitate the early banking of credits into student learning accounts, so that the account becomes a working reference point as a student progresses through the senior phase of learning.
>
> 10 (ii) That the QSA explore ways to facilitate the banking of credits into student learning accounts for learning that is recognised by the QSA as contributing to the QCE, but was completed by students prior to the registration of their learning accounts.

When students begin the senior phase of learning in South Australia, on establishing the equivalent of a Senior Education and Training (SET) Plan they are awarded one credit towards the South Australia Certificate of Education. The intent is to have credit in the students' learning accounts when they begin the course. That is an option for the QCE, but caution should be exercised: firstly, a SET Plan is not necessarily an amount of learning at a set standard in a particular pattern, so earning a credit towards the QCE risks a "dumbing down" of the requirements, rewarding something that should happen naturally anyway; secondly, a SET Plan is not a "plan" that is completed in Year 10. It is a working document that schools need to refer students to, at times adjusting it to meet the students' needs. It is a pathway rather than a plan, and that is the language that should be used. Awarding it one credit in Year 10 does not give this message either to students or their schools. The message is that they've "done" the SET Plan in Year 10, and this is where it stays.

5.9.4 The Queensland Core Skills Test

There is a common misconception that Queensland students do not undertake an external exam. This misconception appears to be widely held, even in Queensland. Queensland's external exam is the Queensland Core Skills Test, undertaken by every student who wants to receive an Overall Position, and used as a group scaling mechanism for tertiary entrance.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 12:**
>
> That the nature and purpose of the Queensland Core Skills Test be made clear in a brief explanation on the Senior Statement.

Principle 6:   Potential

> Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the President of a great nation. It is what we make of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.
>
> (Nelson Mandela 1995)

6.1 Potential

When the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) was put in place, the recognition of broader forms of learning that lie outside the academic umbrella was a major aspiration. The inclusion of vocational education and training courses on the QCE is a significant step in the inclusion of more "real" learning in the senior phase of learning. At the same time, there is still much "real" learning happening outside the academic and vocational education and training agendas, and much potential to recognise it.

6.2 Learning projects

In attempting to capture this other "real" learning, the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) has extended the scope of learning that can contribute to a QCE beyond the academic and vocational education and training. It now includes the provision for enrichment courses which offer 1 credit towards a student's QCE.

Despite the thought and effort that have gone into the learning projects concept, the reality is that over the three years 2008 to 2010, the uptake by students, though increasing, has been disappointingly low; and the take up is low in the areas where there is the greatest potential for students to undertake learning experiences that are meaningful to their lives, as well as contributing to a pathway for the future. This is particularly the case for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and remote area students, though not confined to them. **Table 3** presented in Section **1.5** (**Learning projects**) is reproduced here:

Table 3: Self-directed learning projects

	2008	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
Number of self-directed learning projects	6 completed	1 completed	23 completed	10 received	11 received
% of self-directed learning projects submitted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	16%	–	65%	–	–

While offering learning projects as an enrichment option for keen and motivated students is admirable and should be continued, it seems that most students lead the full lives of young people today, and they are happy to map out a conventional course as offered by their school, rather than adding in the extra commitment currently needed to engage in a learning project.

Feedback during the review consultations suggests that the learning projects, in both the submission and validation requirements, are being viewed as an extra administrative burden by students and their schools, rather than as a genuine learning opportunity. There is some justification for their taking this view: currently all learning projects have to meet not only the eight elements of the Employability Skills Framework (Australian Chambers of Commerce and Industry 2005), but also a time commitment of between 60 and 80 hours: all to receive 1 credit towards the QCE.

It would appear that under the current requirements, the take up of learning projects will remain low. Yet they have great potential to draw in students currently not being awarded a QCE. This poses a challenge for the QSA: to make the learning projects — conceptually and in the language used to describe them — more attractive to schools and accessible to students, especially those who would benefit most from them. The process needs to be freed up. According to the review consultations, this may well be the most likely way to encourage more students to take up the opportunities that learning projects offer and for more schools to encourage them to do so.

There are a number of possible ways to address this:

- reduce and simplify the formal technical requirements that cause the learning projects to be seen as a burden, rather than an opportunity

- target specific communities and their schools where the learning projects have the greatest potential to engage and benefit students

- couple the first two points above with a strong communication and advocacy drive that offers support as well as information.

There appear to be two particular areas that are currently under-recognised in students' learning that can contribute to the QCE, and which have significant potential, as they constitute "real" learning and learning that is meaningful to the students' human development. The first relates to **co-curricular learning in schools** (Section **6.3**), and the second to the learning of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students** (Section **6.5**).

6.3 Co-curricular learning in schools

The intent behind the QCE is to broaden the types of learning that are recognised for inclusion on the certificate. Many students engage in real and significant learning through their involvement in what can be called the *life world* of the school: learning which is largely separate from the academic and subject world (Sergiovanni 2000). Through this dimension in the life of a school or community, students often engage in deep and at times even life-changing experiences. Learning in the life world of the school can occur through activities such as:

- learning through formal school leadership

- learning through informal leadership in the wider life of the school

- learning through leadership and participation in musicals, plays, and so on

- leadership and learning through sporting activities

- service learning

- cultural learning (e.g. in Aboriginal communities)

- learning in the workplace.

It is acknowledged that this kind of learning is difficult to measure and formally assess. To earn credits for the QCE it would need to constitute an amount of learning at a relevant standard in a recognised pattern. It is suggested that the concept of *authentic learning* (Newmann & Wehlage 1995) can act as a common vehicle to achieve this, at the same time simplifying the requirements for learning projects.

6.4 Authentic learning

Newmann and Wehlage define *authentic learning* as having three dimensions:

- learning that engages students in higher-order thinking

- learning that involves disciplined inquiry

- learning that is portable: it can be applied to other contexts.

The QCE is a broad-based certificate, and its intent both includes and goes beyond cognitive learning. It is awarded at the end of the senior phase of learning so its intent is still educative, rather than the more narrow agenda of preparing young people for tertiary entrance or the workplace. For that purpose, a fourth dimension is added:

- learning that involves the student's human development: personal and interpersonal.

The essence of authentic learning is that it is "real", and it can take place in formal settings such as the classroom, seminars, lectures and the laboratory; or in informal settings in the lives of students beyond the classroom. Some possibilities are sport and recreation, cultural activities such as music and drama productions, community work, leadership work, action in the wider community, in the workplace, or through other life experiences. As well as learning from their teachers and instructors, students may engage in authentic learning through mentors, their peers, or others who have particular expertise.

The value of this kind of informal learning is widely acknowledged. In keeping with the requirements of the QCE, perhaps the four criteria of authentic learning cited above can be adapted for both the submission and validation of learning projects, replacing the eight current criteria. This may well make the community and individual learning projects more "do-able" for schools, encouraging formal recognition of co-curricular learning, and enabling more students, including Aboriginal and Torres Islander and remote area students, to undertake learning that is both meaningful to them, and transferrable to wider contexts.

Furthermore, the QCE requires an *amount* of learning at a particular standard in a particular pattern. A requirement of 60 to 80 hours, plus meeting eight criteria, all for one credit, is indeed intimidating and more likely to deter than attract students: especially those from communities for whom a learning project has the greatest potential for meaningful learning.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 13:**
>
> That for self-directed and community-based learning projects, the four principles of "authentic learning" replace the current requirements; and that a time commitment for learning projects be notional and advisory rather than mandatory.

The four criteria of authentic learning can be expressed as questions:

- Is there higher-order thinking involved?

- Is the learning disciplined and structured?

- Is it portable to other contexts?

- Does it contribute to the student's personal and interpersonal development?

A suggested start to this is for the QSA to seek out representatives from schools whose approach to the examples offered in Section **6.3** is regarded by the QSA as enlightened and educative. They would be invited to a "life world" or "informal learning" advisory committee with QSA personnel, with a view to using authentic learning as validating and quality assuring this learning so it qualifies as a learning project for inclusion on the QCE.

6.5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students

Consultations during this review suggest that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and communities, there appears to be a further block: matching cultural learning projects to the set criteria for a learning project. The criteria for learning projects are drawn from the Employability Skills Framework of the Australian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), set out in **Table 1** on page **19**. This is a strong framework for a workplace learning project, as the link is direct and relevant. At the same time, it makes both the submission and validation of the project onerous. A simpler, but still rigorous set of criteria, may well see a stronger take up. While the Employability Skills Framework is educationally sound, it is also quite substantial, and essentially non-Indigenous in its language and conceptualisation.

In the learning projects section of the QCE Handbook, a complete subsection is devoted to the unique context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture as it relates to learning projects. It is suggested that this can be further applied directly to the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are encouraged to embark on a learning project, both in the submission and validation of the project.

During the review consultations, two key principles emerged that are relevant and specific to learning by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students and their communities:

- **invitation** (Section 6.5.1)

- **Indigenous knowledge principles** (Section 6.5.2).

6.5.1 Invitation

The review consultations reveal a common theme across Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities: they do not relate naturally or easily to schools. There are historical and cultural influences at work which tend to make the relationship between school and community uneasy, and at times untrusting. QSA staff suggested that success in engaging students usually came from personal interactions: if necessary, sitting down with them in their communities and building relationships. It was suggested that students and their communities need an *invitation* to enter the world of formal education, and this needs to be grounded in building trust and in "cultural safety". Cultural safety was explained as an Indigenous concept that essentially enables a person to be secure in their own cultural identity while entering that of another less familiar culture.

This appears to manifest itself in the low take up of learning projects by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students: firstly through the project proposal process, and secondly through the language and conceptual frameworks for assessment.

6.5.2 Indigenous knowledge principles

The QSA has made strong efforts to make learning available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This has resulted in the small but increasing number of learning projects that have been taken up since 2008. The background work that has resulted in the P–10 and Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages syllabuses is also valuable, and suggests a way forward that can inform learning that takes place through learning projects.

The syllabus **invites** [consultant's emphasis] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to articulate community models of knowing (CMK) to clearly indicate terms of entry, engagements and exit with their languages and knowledge … The important distinction with the CMK is that it is formed by the community as a means for others to engage, inquire, respond and reflect on their language and knowledge. The CMK has been conceptualised to assist students, teachers and community know what are the boundaries, open knowledges and restricted areas when it comes to engaging the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and knowledge principles.
(*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages P–10 Syllabus*, QSA 2010, p. 5)

Indigenous knowledge in this syllabus refers to the local and unique knowledge of Indigenous people, which in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts, is interrelated with deep understanding, knowing, and practices of being and living in the world. Indigenous knowledge principles are those that emerge from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge practices, processes and management, both inside and outside Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These knowledge principles, which guide engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and knowledge, have emerged from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.
(*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Senior Syllabus*, QSA 2010, pp. 6 & 7)

In this spirit, a number of Indigenous knowledge principles, which underpin Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interactions and learning have been identified:

- Indigenous knowledge is not "open" knowledge. (Not all Indigenous knowledge is open for research by others.)

- Knowledge is a living thing. (Continuous reflective practice by learners on what and how they are learning.)

- Being present. (Presenting and articulating an Indigenous way of doing things.)

- Let the environment speak (and listen deeply to all the voices that emerge).

- Be a learner, and foster learning. (Fostering a learning process embedded and enmeshed in Indigenous philosophy and education.)

- Authentic and appropriate engagement with the community. (A pattern of relationships, including elders, traditional owners and others.)

- Respect all things. (Especially relationships: listen deeply.)

- Engagement occurs within a field of powerful and often hidden cultural, environmental, historic and social relations.

- Principles are transportable to other contexts, but methodologies are not.
(Davis 2008)

These principles emanate from the culture of the communities themselves: they are not imposed from above by an external authority. Although they reflect a world view that is conceptually different from the western view, at the same time there are similarities in the kind of learning that they encourage. There is surely potential here to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a community or individual learning project that is meaningful to them by drawing on the principles of Indigenous knowledge and research.

Notwithstanding the importance of preserving cultural traditions in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, equal importance needs to be placed on the reality that young people today — whatever their heritage — are now part of the global community. As Alison Wolf points out: "[Young people] are growing up in a world where long periods of study and formal credentials are the norm" (Wolf 2011, p. 7). While the learning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students needs to preserve their heritage, it also needs to prepare them for the demands of a fast-moving, changing and uncertain world. Ideally, their education will draw on the former, and use it as a bridge to develop the latter.

There is the potential for the QSA, through schools and providers that work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their young people, to apply the Indigenous knowledge and research principles to the principle of authentic learning as a bridging process to the QCE's community and individual learning projects, both in the way project proposals are presented to the QSA and in the ways they are assessed.

It is important that these proposed changes are not, and are not perceived to be, "dumbing down" of expectations for students. Probably the most fundamental of all educational principles is that of high expectations. Expressed in various ways including "the Pygmalion effect" (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968), or in slogans like "You can do it" and "I believe in you", the conveying to students of high expectations about what they can achieve, coupled with strong and relevant support, is widely seen as an essential ingredient for maximising student potential. That is implicit in these suggestions.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 14:**
>
> That the framework for "authentic learning" be explored as a way of engaging Indigenous knowledge principles to bridge the cultural and historical issues that currently appear to inhibit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from taking up learning options that may be unique and meaningful to them, and therefore from earning credit towards the QCE.

Principle 7:   Advocacy

John Quincy Adams: *What is their story?*
Theodore Joadson: *Sir?*
John Quincy Adams: *What is their story?*
Theodore Joadson: *Why, they're um … they're from West Africa.*
John Quincy Adams: *No, what is their story?*

Dialogue from the movie, Amistad (1997)

7.1 Advocacy

A common thread throughout this review has been the strength of the Queensland
Certificate of Education (QCE) as a standards- and qualifications-based certificate.
A further theme has been that this strength will be illusory if the certificate is not held in
high esteem by schools, students, parents/carers, tertiary institutions, industry and the
wider community. After three years, consultations undertaken in this review suggest that
the status of the QCE as the main certificate for the senior phase of learning is not well
understood, and is perceived by a significant number of respondents — though not a
majority — as behind that of the Tertiary Entrance Statement, the tertiary entrance rank,
and the International Baccalaureate. At this stage in its development, a more concerted
advocacy initiative is now needed to raise its status.

7.2 The story

The segment of dialogue that introduces this section is taken from the movie *Amistad*.
The "Amistad" was a ship carrying native people who had been captured in Africa, bringing
them to the south of the USA to be bought and sold by slave traders. During the trip the
Africans rebelled and took over the ship, and they have now been brought to America by
the US Navy to face trial for mutiny. In this scene in the movie, ex-President John Quincy
Adams is advising their defence counsel that their "story" needs to be told.

Three years after its introduction, consultations for this review suggest that the QCE's
"story" is not properly understood in schools, or by industry, parents/carers and the wider
community, suggesting that it is not valued as highly as it should be. That is not surprising.
The story behind the QCE is complex, and it is early days. But it is a compelling story, and
at this juncture in the QCE's journey, it is time to step up the attempts to not just give
information and advice but also to tell its story.

7.3 Competition

At present, the QCE is a certificate recognising successful completion of the senior phase
of learning. It finds itself in de facto competition with the QSA's Tertiary Entrance Statement
and tertiary entrance rank, and in real competition with the International Baccalaureate
diploma, even though the purpose of the QCE is significantly different from each of these.
It is suggested that as part of the story of the QCE, a concerted communication and
advocacy drive is now needed to achieve this differentiation.

7.3.1 Competition from within

Firstly, in differentiating itself from the Tertiary Entrance Statement and the tertiary entrance rank, the most important theme in the QCE's story is that students need to meet rigorous requirements to achieve it. It is a standards- and qualifications-based certificate that is a student's passport to the future, and it certificates a variety of "real" learning.

Secondly, the QCE is internationally recognised. In some overseas countries, universities request both the QCE and the Tertiary Entrance Statement for entry to tertiary courses.

Thirdly, the QCE not only offers a variety of pathways for students to achieve it; once they have received the QCE, it provides them with a qualification that can offer a variety of pathways to pursue their chosen future. Its intent is to be rigorous, inclusive and relevant to young people's lives.

Fourthly, neither the Tertiary Entrance Statement nor the tertiary entrance rank are qualifications: they are a means for deciding tertiary entrance. Their purpose is fundamentally different from that of the QCE. Just as it was important to differentiate between the Overall Position and Field Positions entered on the Tertiary Entrance Statement on the one hand, and Levels of Achievement entered on the Senior Certificate on the other, a similar differentiation now needs to be established for the QCE.

7.3.2 Competition externally: the International Baccalaureate

The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) needs to move to establish the QCE's credentials against the International Baccalaureate diploma. From the review consultations, it is clear that the QCE and the International Baccalaureate are currently in unofficial, but real competition, with some schools implicitly or overtly presenting the International Baccalaureate to students and parents/carers as a superior alternative to the QCE. At the same time, International Baccalaureate schools are making demands on the QSA for equivalence in literacy and numeracy towards a QCE. This is problematic because whether alternative courses might demand higher levels of achievement or not, the key requirement for a QCE is to achieve a qualification at a designated minimum standard.

Key differences between the two approaches to curriculum are set out in Table 7 below. These differences need to be spelled out in a concerted advocacy initiative by the QSA.

Table 7: Comparing the QCE and the International Baccalaureate

Queensland Certificate of Education	International Baccalaureate Diploma
An approach to learning devised and administered in Queensland	An approach to learning devised and administered from northern Europe
A two-year semesterised course	A two-year, non-semesterised course
Continuous assessment, with results for each semester	Assessment at the end of a two-year course
School- or workplace-based assessment	Externally set assessment
Teacher assessment the major input to final result	Minimal teacher input to final result
Variety of modes of assessment	One mode of assessment
Reporting on five Levels of Achievement	Reporting on a 7 to 1 scale
An external exam (the Queensland Core Skills Test) used as a group scaling mechanism for tertiary entrance	An external exam with individual student results used for tertiary entrance
Levels of Achievement are not used for tertiary entrance	Equivalence on results (7–1) given for tertiary entrance

7.3.3 Qualifications-based

The QCE formally records what students have demonstrated they can do. This means that it records students' qualifications: at least a Sound Achievement, a rating of Competent, or a Pass. If a course chooses to assess its students by placing students in bands on a 7–1 curve, that is a valid and accepted mode of assessment, but it does not record that students have demonstrated what they can do, nor do students who are rated below a 4 have a qualification in the context of the QCE. This means that schools choosing to offer the International Baccalaureate over the QSA curriculum will have a problem if they want their students to be awarded a QCE when those students do not meet the criteria.

7.3.4 Who owns this problem?

The QSA may justifiably take the view that if a school makes the decision to opt out of Queensland's semesterised qualifications-based course with externally-moderated school-based assessment leading to QSA certification, and opts instead for a non-semesterised course based on 7–1 exit levels in an external exam set in northern Europe and held at the end of two years with its own certification, then decides that it also wants its students to be awarded a QCE, that is perhaps the school's problem. The QSA may well ask why it should alter its standards of rigour in order to accommodate schools who choose to educate their students through a different curriculum based on different concepts and a different model of assessment. It is reasonable for the QSA to suggest to the school that this is not the QSA's problem: it is an advocacy issue for the school to explain to its parents/carers and students why it has decided on its chosen approach.

7.4 Advocacy for the QCE

With the QCE now three years down the track and still struggling to have its identity and its strengths recognised, it is important that the QSA raise the communication bar, define "rigour" in terms relevant to the QCE, and mount a strong advocacy campaign that highlights what the QCE can provide to students, the rigour in its processes, and its international recognition. The International Baccalaureate does not have a monopoly on how rigour is conceptualised, nor on international acceptance.

This is not intended to attack or demean the International Baccalaureate. It is to communicate and advocate for the QCE on the same criteria that the International Baccalaureate schools themselves have established. An example of this appeared in the *Courier-Mail*, 27 May 2011. In speaking about the results of the 2010 Year 12 students, the principal of an International Baccalaureate school in Brisbane refers to the "acclaimed" International Baccalaureate, and states that: "The IB scores are translated into Overall Positions and tertiary entry rankings worldwide, giving students access to international universities". The implication many would draw from this is that the QCE is neither "acclaimed" nor does it give "access to international universities". In a professional but firm way, the QSA needs to counter the damage statements like this are causing to the status of the QCE.

> **This is addressed in Recommendation 1 (i):**
>
> That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to promoting the credibility and portability of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE): in particular affirming that it is rigorous, standards- and qualifications-based, and internationally recognised.
>
> As a general principle, this affirmation should be the first statement made on every document and communication that offers information and advice about the QCE.
> (See also Sections 2.2 and 3.3)

As an example, in the *Planning your QCE Pathway* document, p. 2, in the "About the QCE" section, the introductory statement should read: "The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) is Queensland's major schooling qualification. It is a rigorous, internationally recognised qualification."

This extends to the presentation of the QCE itself. The statement near the bottom should be altered to read: "This qualification is recognised within the Australian Qualifications Framework, and is recognised internationally."

7.5 A new conceptualisation?

7.5.1 A coherent approach

With the implementation of the Queensland Government's *Education and Training Reforms for the Future* and the introduction of the QCE, the QSA became responsible for the full P–12 education of Queensland students. The QSA document *Learning P–12* sets out a coherent approach through three cumulative phases of learning: early, middle and senior. It is a logical concept then, that the QCE issued to students on completing Year 12 represents 12 years (or more) of learning. The achievements they finish with at the end of Year 12 are not just the result of their learning in the senior phase: much foundation and building of skills and capabilities have occurred along the way, during the early and middle phases.

As part of its advocacy, and recognition of the cumulative nature of learning, perhaps the QCE should be conceptualised as the culmination of 12 years (or more) of a student's education, and therefore be a certificate validating that, and carrying the added credibility that significant learning has occurred along the way. It would then represent an important rite of passage in the student's life.

That would seem to have two advantages: it gives the QCE a purpose that clearly differentiates it from other documentation that students receive on completion of Year 12 or its equivalent, and it removes the competition with those documents because it is certificating the whole of a student's formal education to date, not just the senior phase.

7.5.2 Issuing of the QCE

The QCE is issued to eligible students on the completion of Year 12 or its equivalent. For those students who do not complete all requirements by the end of Year 12, the alternative certificate, the interim Statement of Results, is issued showing what they have successfully completed. These students can be issued a QCE after they finish school, provided they complete the necessary work to earn 20 credits within seven years of finishing Year 12.

This paves the way for the QCE (with its accompanying QCE Senior Statement) and the interim Statement of Results to be the centrepiece of the school or other provider's "graduation" celebrations when they finish at the end of Year 12. The differentiation from other certificates needs to be clear, and its status should reflect that it symbolises, for the great majority of students, an important rite of passage from one stage of their lives to the next.

The impression gained from the review consultations is that this is not currently the case. Indeed, in publishing its version of the 2010 Year 12 statistics on 31 May, the *Courier-Mail* did not mention the QCE, though it has a column for every school. The accompanying articles focused on the Overall Position data: a clear implication that these are seen as the indicators of the effectiveness of Queensland schools, and the success of their students.

In attempting to move the focus from the Overall Position to the QCE in the public eye, the QSA would find support from the very great majority of schools, though it is acknowledged that the task is a difficult one.

It is also acknowledged that there are issues regarding the timelines that currently govern the issuing of the QCE to students in December, and bringing timelines forward would limit even further the available teaching, learning and assessment time for Term 4. That is not an acceptable option. Perhaps schools could emulate what universities do, and hold a "graduation" ceremony early in the new year at which the certificates are presented to the students.

This is addressed in Recommendation 3:

That the QCE be conceptualised, publicised and awarded as signifying the successful culmination of learning achieved during the senior phase of learning.

7.6 A (radically) new conception?

Some discussions during the review consultations linked the perceived relevance and status of the QCE with the way it is presented. Currently it is part of the Senior Education Profile, which also includes the Senior Statement, the Tertiary Entrance Statement, the Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement, or the Statement of Results.

What if the QCE were to attach its name to a package of all of these, and replace the Senior Education Profile; so that what students receive on completion of Year 12 or its equivalent, is *The QCE Portfolio*? This portfolio could be presented in a fold-out format, such as the example given in **Appendix 1**. In order to keep the portfolio concise and accessible, the often lengthy details regarding vocational education and training courses could be issued as a supplementary "additional information" document, keeping the main document compact and easy to read and understand.

It is acknowledged that the usual format for a qualification is a single sheet without detail, which is therefore able to be framed. The suggestion to format it as above assumes that few students would frame their QCE, and on its own it gives no information other than that the student has qualified to receive it. The likely gains in the QCE's usefulness for students through its clarity and ease of accessing the information would seem to outweigh the conservative "no detail" format, and would significantly raise the status of the QCE, as its portfolio would now incorporate the Overall Position information and the school's Exit Statement.

The QCE would now head up a package. It would eliminate the competition with the Tertiary Entrance Statement because that now becomes part of what constitutes the QCE Portfolio (it would also look impressive beside an International Baccalaureate diploma).

Students who receive an Overall Position and other qualifications but not a QCE would receive an alternative package, perhaps titled the Student Profile. (The language is important, and terminology offered here is a suggestion that the QSA may well improve on).

This is addressed in Recommendation 4:

That the QSA rebrand the Senior Education Profile as a QCE "package" that incorporates the Senior Statement, Statement of Results, Tertiary Entrance Statement, School Exit Statement, and additional details related to these. A suggested title is *The QCE Portfolio*.

Part 3:   Conclusions

Key messages

In essence, the key messages from this report are:

(i)   The introduction of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) is a logical step in the evolving journey of education in Queensland.

(ii)   The QCE is widely accepted and appreciated in Queensland.

(iii)   It is achieving the aims of the Queensland Government's *Education and Training Reforms for the Future* agenda, and is well attuned to the philosophy and aims of the Australian Curriculum.

(iv)   With its broad conceptualising of learning combined with externally moderated school-based assessment, the QCE is a strong model for student learning in the 21st century.

(v)   There is strong support for a broad-based approach to literacy and numeracy, and this is in keeping with similar approaches expressed in recent industry and education reports consulted for this review.

Statements (i) to (iv) above indicate that encouraging progress has been made over the three years since the QCE was introduced. At the same time, there are important areas identified in the review that need attention if the QCE is to fully meet the aspirations that underpin it.

(vi)   The main tension for the QCE lies in achieving the balance between inclusion and flexibility on the one hand, and the integrity of its standards on the other.

(vii)   With students having seven years after completing Year 12 or its equivalent to gain the necessary credits for the QCE, the focus should be on the quality of the learning and how it empowers the students for their future pathways, not on numbers alone. Double-dipping of credits and the setting of numerical targets by external bodies, including government, are counterproductive, and are actually geared at creating superficial numbers that do not translate into any benefit for students.

A further disadvantage of these practices is that they devalue the integrity of the QCE in the eyes of the wider community, particularly industry.

(viii) The information and communication technology systems currently being used to gather and process the data for the QCE are inadequate. The task is now highly complex, and the current systems are outdated and running at close to their capacity. An integrated upgrade is urgently needed.

(ix)   The business processes related to the QCE are essentially sound and despite some difficulties they are effective.

(x)   There are still groups that are under-represented in achieving the QCE. Encouraging gains have been made, but progress continues to be difficult and slow.

(xi)   Three years on, despite the acknowledged quality of QSA materials, the QCE is not well understood in schools, industry or the wider community. An initiative that combines communication and advocacy is now needed, particularly to ensure broad public understanding of the QCE's rigour and its international recognition.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the QSA review its communication strategy with a view to:

(i) promoting the credibility and portability of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE): in particular affirming that it is rigorous, standards- and qualifications-based, and internationally recognised.

As a general principle, this affirmation should be the first statement made on every document and communication that offers information and advice about the QCE (Sections **2.2**, **3.3** and **7.4**)

(ii) promoting the QCE as valuing a variety of learning through a variety of pathways; and the relevance of that learning, and those pathways, for students in the world of the early 21st century
(Sections **1.3** and **3.2**)

(iii) promoting the powerful synergy of the variety of learning and pathways generated by the QCE on the one hand, and the inclusion and flexibility of school-based assessment on the other
(Section **1.3**)

(iv) promoting the compatibility and resonance of the QCE with the developing Australian Curriculum
(Section **1.3**)

(v) revising the language used in conjunction with the QCE, for example:

- the SET Plan should become the SET Pathway
- "futures planning" should replace "careers planning"
- "achievements" and "learnings" should replace "outcomes"
- students earn "credits", not "points"
- acronyms should be used sparingly and selectively
(Section **5.8.1**)

(vi) offering advice to organisations that work with disengaged students on how best to communicate information about the QCE
(Section **5.5**)

(vii) promoting the QCE as a qualification that can be attained over nine years, and that schools should make professional judgments about how they approach this option with students
(Section **1.2**)

(viii) providing clarity and assistance to schools regarding eligibility for students to receive a Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA)
(Section **1.6**)

(ix) reviewing and clarifying its advice and assistance to schools and other providers regarding the eligibility of international students to receive the QCE.
(Section **1.9**)

Recommendation 2

That the QSA compose and publicise a statement on the purpose of the senior phase of learning, presenting it as a time of continuing human development: the third stage of a cumulative process of learning from P–12.
(Section **5.7**)

Recommendation 3

That the QCE be conceptualised, publicised and awarded as signifying the successful culmination of learning achieved during the senior phase of learning.
(Section **7.5**)

Recommendation 4

That the QSA rebrand the Senior Education Profile as a QCE "package" that incorporates the Senior Statement, Statement of Results, Tertiary Entrance Statement, School Exit Statement, and additional details related to these. A suggested title is *The QCE Portfolio*.
(Section **7.6**)

Recommendation 5

(i)   That the QSA make clear that each discrete amount of learning can only earn credit once towards the QCE.

(ii)   That the QSA devise a policy to address instances of schools breaching this requirement.

(Section **3.5.3**)

Recommendation 6

(i)   That the QSA broaden the literacy and numeracy requirements for the QCE to include subjects beyond dedicated English and Mathematics.

(ii)   That the eligibility criteria for literacy and numeracy on the QCE continue to be set at the level of a "qualification": a Sound Achievement or higher, Competent, or a Pass.

(Sections **4.5** and **4.7**)

Recommendation 7

That the QSA mount a concerted communication initiative to clearly differentiate between the principle of a "qualification" on the one hand, and the principle of "equivalence" for the purpose of tertiary or other course entry on the other.

This will involve a review of current QSA materials that relate to the QCE.
(Section **5.4**)

Recommendation 8

That as a matter of urgency, an integrated information and communication technology system designed specifically for the purpose of the QCE be implemented.
(Section **5.9.2**)

Recommendation 9

That the QSA develop an organisation-wide understanding of and commitment to the QCE by involving all staff across all areas in investigating, discussing and resolving key issues that relate to the QCE.

(Section **5.9.1**)

Recommendation 10

(i)   That the QSA explore ways to facilitate the early banking of credits into student learning accounts, so that the account becomes a working reference point as a student progresses through the senior phase of learning.

(ii)   That the QSA explore ways to facilitate the banking of credits into student learning accounts for learning that is recognised by the QSA as contributing to the QCE, but was completed by students prior to the registration of their learning accounts.

(Section **5.9.3**)

Recommendation 11

That the QSA explore the feasibility of issuing QCEs to students online, to provide additional time for learning providers to submit data in a timely way for the issuing of the QCEs, and for students to check the accuracy of the data and report any anomalies to the QSA before a final hard copy is issued.

(Section **5.9.2**)

Recommendation 12

That the nature and purpose of the Queensland Core Skills Test be made clear in a brief explanation on the Senior Statement.

(Section **5.9.4**)

Recommendation 13

That for self-directed and community-based learning projects, the four principles of "authentic learning" replace the current requirements; and that a time commitment for learning projects be notional and advisory rather than mandatory.

(Section **6.4**)

Recommendation 14

That the framework for "authentic learning" be explored as a way of engaging Indigenous knowledge principles to bridge the cultural and historical issues that currently appear to inhibit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from taking up learning options that may be unique and meaningful to them, and therefore from earning credit towards the QCE.

(Section **6.5.2**)

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Appendix 1: Potential layout of proposed QCE portfolio

QCE portfolio: draft option for consultation
4 July 2011
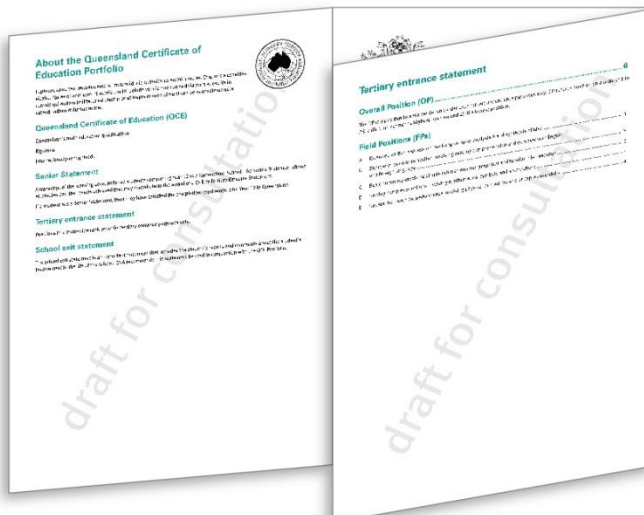
Appendix 2: Acknowledgement of contributors to consultations

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Industry representatives

International Baccalaureate schools

ISQ Education Committee

Parents/carers

Private learning providers

QSA Connect schools (expressed an interest through QSA Connect)

Queensland Independent Education Union

Queensland Teachers' Union

School sectors

Students (including current and past students from 2008 to 2010)

TAFE educational leaders

Targeted schools (rural, low socioeconomic areas, high population of Indigenous students)

University and other learning providers — student services

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Appendix 3: Membership of the QCE Review Reference Group

Representative group	Position	Member
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