

Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification

External assessment processes review 2018

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TASC EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESSES REVIEW 2018

Report by John Firth, Independent Consultant

INTRODUCTION

The Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification (TASC) commissioned this Review in May 2018. The Scope and Terms of Reference were determined following consultation between TASC and key stakeholders including the Australian Education Union (AEU), Independent Education Union (IEU), the Tasmanian Association of State School Organisations (TASSO), school sector heads, the Framework Advisory Council and Principals Reference Group.

It was agreed that the Review would cover the following:

- Recruitment processes for sessional staff (including Marking Coordinators, Markers and Examination Supervisor Coordinators).
- Determination of what constitutes a marking load.
- Payment rates for sessional staff.
- Operational logistics (catering, venue).
- Timely communications.

The Scope included the requirement to consult with all key stakeholders including those directly involved in the external assessment processes – Marking Coordinators, Markers and Supervisor Coordinators.

Following a Request for Quote process, I was appointed to conduct the consultation process and develop a report for the consideration of TASC to provide to the Minister for Education and Training.

WLF Accounting & Advisory (WLF) was commissioned to specifically respond to the marking load and payment rates terms. We collaborated in the design of an online survey to gather data on these terms as part of the overall Review. Their analysis informs my commentary on those terms. WLF provided their own direct response to TASC.

BACKGROUND

An internal audit report conducted by the Internal Audit Office and Risk Management Services of the Department of Education in 2016 found that TASC processes for employment of sessional staff engaged for the external assessment processes did not comply with Employment Direction No 1 which states at 11.1 “The appointment of a casual employee as specified in the relevant award or industrial agreement can only be made from a casual employment register approved in accordance with Clause 15(1)(b) of the Act or from a pool of suitable applicants established following advertisement in the Gazette”.

The Audit recommendation was, “management to develop a policy and associated procedure for the recruitment of casual staff and implement an open and transparent recruitment process.” Management accepted this recommendation.

An independent review of TASC sessional staff, including types of staff and remuneration, was undertaken by WLF Accounting & Advisory in March 2017. The review recommended updating the TASC Regulations to ensure that all categories of TASC sessional staff were accounted for and could be legally employed and remunerated.

TASC kept key stakeholders informed that work was progressing to update the TASC Regulations through a number of channels including correspondence from the Executive Officer, TASC to the President of the AEU on 11 August advising about the new Marker application process, meetings with the Principals Reference Group and communication with principals and TASC Liaison Officers at TASC forums in August 2017.

The Tasmanian Government updated the Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification Act Regulations (Fees) to add categories of fees to enable payment of sessional staff related to the setting, running and marking of external assessments, including exams.

The updated TASC Regulations were Gazetted on 19 August 2017 incorporating the required changes. Immediately following this in early September, the recruitment of external assessment sessional staff commenced, and was undertaken via a merit-based selection process that had not been previously employed.

The timing of these processes led to challenges created by the very tight and compressed timelines to employ staff, some of whom began work in October. The changes to, and timing of, the revised selection processes led to some previous Marking Coordinators, Markers and Supervisor Coordinators being reluctant to apply formally for roles they had previously undertaken.

Key stakeholders including the AEU, IEU and TASSO raised concerns about the changed processes and their possible impact on the external assessment processes.

As a result of the experience of recruiting staff to implement the external assessment processes in 2017, the Minister for Education and Training asked TASC to consider what review process would be undertaken with a view to implementing any necessary improvements to the processes for 2018 and beyond. The Executive Officer, TASC informed the Minister that an external independent review would be undertaken.

Under the legislation, the Office of TASC has the power to, inter alia:

“authorise and direct the undertaking of investigations, inspections, examinations and reviews for the purposes of this Act” s.11(a) of the Office of Tasmanian Assessment, Standards and Certification Act 2003.

Its functions include to:

“set, conduct or arrange for the conduct of and to mark examinations and assessments in senior secondary education...” s.10(d).

In accordance with Government policy, the number of students undertaking Level 3 and 4 courses has grown substantially in the past three years and can be expected to continue to grow for the foreseeable future. For example, the number of written exams grew from 42 to 50 from 2015 to 2017. More significantly, the number of external assessments administered over the same period grew from 15,847 to 21,193 which is a 33.7% increase.

Managing this level of growth while maintaining the quality of the external assessment processes is more than a resource management issue though that is certainly an important component of it. This growth requires an active recruitment and training strategy for sessional staff at all stages of the process from examination setting through supervision, marking, processing and reporting. TASC needs to be actively managing this process together with its partners in the Department of Education. It adds to the importance of improving the current processes. Further details of the recent and continuing growth in enrolments of students undertaking external assessment are contained in Appendix 1.

CONDUCT OF THE REVIEW

Given the scope, short timeline and requirement for consultation, I discussed the organisation of the data gathering with TASC. I determined that we should provide the key affected sessional staff – Marking Coordinators, Markers and Supervisor Coordinators – the maximum opportunity to contribute.

Accordingly, together with WLF, an online survey was designed for each of the three categories to be made available to all participants from 2017. The questions were derived specifically from the Terms of Reference. WLF undertook detailed analysis of the survey data in relation to marking load and payment rates. (The quantitative analyses of the three surveys are attached as Appendices 2, 3 and 4).

In addition, the Office of TASC provided the logistical support for me to meet with representative groups of each category in a series of meetings held around the state in Burnie, Devonport, Launceston and Hobart. (Details are found in Appendix 5).

I also conducted a series of meetings with key stakeholders including the AEU, IEU, Framework Advisory Council, Principals Reference Group, TASSO, key staff in the Department of Education who provide support for TASC's work, and both current and former key staff from TASC involved in the administration of the external assessment processes.

At both the consultation meetings with sessional staff and stakeholder discussions, I had TASC staff to assist me with note taking as I led the discussions. Their notes were extremely thorough and helpful to me but their participation was to assist me in gathering data for my report. An additional benefit for TASC's ongoing work was for their staff to hear first-hand from many of their key sessional staff.

The observations, findings and recommendations are solely my own judgement. I am confident that this process will be positive for future implementation.

Although mainly the work of WLF, I have also made a couple of observations and note my support for the directions proposed by WLF in relation to determining marking load and payment rates.

KEY FINDINGS

Recruitment processes for sessional staff

1. TASC was clearly required to respond to the Audit Report recommendations and those of WLF's report in March 2017. This required design of, and communication about a sensitive change to previous long-established, though technically non-compliant processes.
2. The timing of the changes in 2017 caused considerable difficulties for all parties. Potential applicants were faced with a new and unfamiliar process at a busy time of the year which was considerably later than in previous years and required a quick response.

Moreover, the rationale for the new process wasn't clear to many, nor the requirement for the particular form of the application. Many experienced Marking Coordinators, Markers and Supervisor Coordinators were unclear about why they were being asked to undergo this new process, more than a few felt that the process wasn't respectful of their previous experience and service.

3. TASC faced resultant difficulties in approving sufficient appointments in time to meet the non-negotiable timelines of the end of year external assessment programs. To do so required TASC to draw on the professional commitment of schools and teachers to ensure that students' interests were paramount. This is true, of course, in any year but the timing of events in 2017 made an additional call on that professional commitment.
4. Supervisor Coordinators take the responsibility for ensuring that their supervisors are aware of their duties as outlined in their handbooks. Many of them conduct their own training sessions before the exam period starts.

In 2017, the late appointment process made this more difficult. Restoring a more timely appointment timeline will facilitate this preparation. Consultation with Supervisor Coordinators about the most appropriate preparation of supervisors and providing for recognition of a designated assistant would assist in the smooth conduct of the examinations.

5. Supervisor Coordinators similarly reported a lack of communication about the removal of the category of Deputy Coordinators and the addition of a new category of support supervisors, whose duties weren't clearly delineated or deemed necessary by many Coordinators. There are circumstances that arise during examinations, such as sudden illness, when the Coordinator needs to delegate his/her responsibility to one of the supervisors. In practice, many of the Coordinators informally asked one of their team to take this role.
6. The current registration form signed by Principals for the school to be recognised by TASC as an approved provider includes a requirement that the school will "make provision for release of staff as required by TASC to participate in external assessment processes (for example, marking)".

This means that those staff selected by TASC after applying must be released for such events as the compulsory meeting at the start of marking. In discussion on several occasions the issue was raised as to whether this could be expressed a little more directly in terms of an expectation that schools offering a pre-tertiary (Level 3 or Level 4) course should provide a teacher for marking to ensure full representation of all school sectors and all locations.

Of course, in any given year there will be legitimate personal and professional reasons why a particular teacher would not be available but a discussion of the mutual expectations of TASC and its providers on this and related matters would be helpful.

Determination of what constitutes a marking load / Payment rates for sessional staff

WLF were appointed to undertake this work as part of the Review, however, I make some comments from my discussions with sessional staff.

7. There was a lack of transparency about the move to adjust payments for markers in terms of 'full marking loads.' Maintaining this approach would have led to a number of markers who have ongoing teaching responsibilities during November being unable to participate. It is also unsustainable in terms of getting all the marking done on time and maximising the participation of teachers of these courses in the marking process.

In the event, half loads were approved and used in 2017 and an approach that gives flexibility to Marking Coordinators in their use of Markers from varying locations and with varying commitments should be maintained. I note that this flexibility results in there being a spread of markers across the three school sectors which is broadly proportionate with the spread of enrolments. This compares favourably with many other jurisdictions. (Appendix 5 contains the statistics on this measure).

Operational logistics

8. The use of marking centres in Hobart and Launceston provides an opportunity for enhanced collaboration among marking teams and for greater scrutiny of marking consistency by Marking Coordinators.

There were some criticisms of the physical conditions in some parts of one of the centres. Although marking centres cannot be prescribed as being the only place where marking can take place, not least because of the constraints of distance for regional markers and accessibility for teachers with continuing commitments, they do make a substantial contribution to an efficient and effective marking regime.

The physical conditions should be conducive to effective work especially in relation to seating, space and lighting. The same comments apply to the logistics for the initial marking meetings. Insufficient catering was supplied to at least one meeting. Mistakes in delivery can happen but it is a legitimate expectation that people who are required to travel and attend an all-day meeting will be supplied with a reasonable, not lavish, standard of catering.

The late notification to some people of their selection and scheduling of meetings also created some difficulties in booking accommodation for those who needed it. A more reasonable timeline and notice in future should alleviate this.

9. In the course of conversations about marking, comments about the potential for greater use of information and communications technology occasionally arose. The possibility of using videoconferencing between the north and south for some training purposes was raised. This is worth exploring but the value of personal interaction especially for the initial markers 'meetings should be recognised.

In the medium term, TASC should investigate the potential for investing in some form of online marking system, various forms of which are in use in most other states. Online marking via a form of secure network offers considerable improvements in monitoring of marking for quality assurance, increased security by reducing the physical transportation of papers by private vehicles, enhanced opportunities for regionally located teachers to participate and more efficient processing. It is likely TASC could negotiate an agreement with one of the other members of the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) to gain access to an existing system.

10. The scheduling of marking can be made more flexible. Other than the first three courses, all marking took place within a single week. It should be possible for marking to begin progressively over the examination period as papers are collected and collated. This will give more time for marking of courses with the highest enrolments, alleviating the time constraints of the marking period.
11. A related scheduling issue is the release of the examination timetable. At present, this is finalised following confirmation of final enrolments in pre- tertiary courses in Term 3. The preliminary enrolments in Term 1 could be used equally effectively to schedule examinations to minimise the number of potential clashes. All other states release their examination timetables before the end of Term 2. This provides more time for preparation and greater certainty for students and teachers.
12. As the number of senior secondary providers grows through the Years 11 and 12 Extension Schools initiative, so will the number of examination centres. Students at Extension Schools will expect to sit their examinations at their own schools as do the rest of the cohort. This will add to TASC's requirements to recruit both Supervisor Coordinators and Supervisors. This adds both fixed and variable costs in establishing new centres and ensuring that new Supervisor Coordinators are suitably trained and prepared.
13. The operation of additional examination centres also provides an opportunity for students who currently travel to sit their examinations to do so at a closer location if they choose to do so. Some students will prefer to continue to travel to sit in a familiar setting, others may prefer to reduce their travel time during the examinations. In any case, the establishment of additional centres provides the option. For this option to be exercised, TASC would need to know well in advance to ensure that the correct papers are packed and delivered to the centre where the student intends to sit the paper. This would require a registration of this intent for the student via their home school by the end of Term 3.

The rapid growth in examination centres and, more significantly, the success of recent initiatives in substantially increasing the number of students enrolled in Level 3 and 4 courses in the TCE means that the resources made available to TASC to conduct the external assessment processes should be linked to the number of assessments that need to be administered through the cycle of external assessment.
14. Notwithstanding the difficulties experienced in 2017, the commitment of all participants at all levels enabled the processing to ultimately proceed successfully. The timelines that applied created considerable stress for both TASC and their key sessional staff and are not sustainable. There is ample opportunity to refine processes and implement legally compliant appointment processes within reasonable timelines for 2018 and beyond.

Timely communications

15. The Office of TASC had undergone considerable staffing changes and a number of key people were new to their roles. This added to the communication difficulties reported by many throughout the 2017 assessment process.

A particular concern raised consistently in the survey responses and in most consultation meetings was the lack of effectiveness of the 'enquiries@tasc.tas.gov.au' email being used as the main communication channel. Many respondents reported delays or non-response to queries submitted through this channel together with a sense of anonymity in not knowing who was handling various matters at TASC.

The experience of managing the 2017 external assessment process must be built on and lessons learnt incorporated into ongoing practice.

16. Besides the timeliness of communications there is a broader issue of the quality and scope of communications. The lack of timely consultation with key stakeholders and key participants in the marking process prior to and during the implementation of the changed appointment processes was as frequently remarked as its timing. I understand that TASC has already moved to improve communication with key stakeholders – this is welcome and needs to be consolidated. As TASC implements any changes arising from this Review, it needs to incorporate more substantial and timely consultation with Marking Coordinators, Markers and Examination Supervisor Coordinators. This will ensure that the processes are appropriately informed by the experience and expertise of the practitioners and that implementation is consistently applied.

17. There is ample evidence provided through the Review process of the underlying goodwill and commitment of all participants to the provision of a fair, accurate and reliable external assessment process for all Tasmanian senior secondary students. The Review was welcomed as a recognition by TASC of the need to learn from 2017. This was reinforced by the openness of the responses I received.

Nonetheless, this support was accompanied by clear expectations that the Review will lead to TASC making significant response to any recommendations. The good faith exhibited by many in their participation in 2017 and response to the Review is not without limit.

There is a widespread understanding that TASC was required to change its appointment processes. This is accompanied by an expectation that both the timeliness and appropriateness of communication will be improved, that the application processes will be streamlined and that TASC will enhance the quality of its collaboration with its key sessional staff.

18. I received considerable evidence that both Marking Coordinators and Supervisor Coordinators employ innovative and creative responses to work with their teams to ensure quality, within the guidelines provided by TASC.

This might include various approaches to inducting new markers, ensuring consistent application of marking guides and dealing with exigencies as they arise during examinations. This is an admirable attribute and one which TASC could make more use of by enabling Marking Coordinators and Supervisor Coordinators greater opportunity to inform each other and TASC of their practice.

A common criticism of the events of late 2017 centred on the lack of consultation in shaping and introducing changes. TASC could work more with both groups and markers more generally as they continuously monitor and review their practice.

Consultation obviously includes representative stakeholder groups such as unions, principal groups, TASSO but also goes to developing a more collaborative approach in working with key sessional staff involved in and responsible for very important processes.

19. Related to the issues of consultation and communication that were regularly raised in discussions was the need for greater clarity about roles and responsibilities. Marking Coordinators are generally well known by the teachers of their courses and they can come to take up a de facto 'course adviser' role for teachers seeking advice about a range of matters, sometimes extending beyond the examination marking.

There are various responsibilities for course development, changes to courses, examination specifications, examination setting, marking and reporting for both internal and external assessment. Some of these responsibilities are exercised by the Department of Education which, for example manages the moderation processes. This distribution of

responsibilities requires close collaboration between TASC and the Department and clear communication from both to schools. From the teacher's perspective, they are teaching a single course and they manage the integration of the various components for their students. It is incumbent on TASC and the Department to coordinate their efforts to ensure that teachers receive complete, accurate and timely information about all aspects of the course they are teaching.

20. Constructive responses to these and other observations are certainly possible and have in some instances already begun. Nonetheless, the sort of collaboration in continuous improvement that I am proposing requires a commitment of resourcing both in financial and personnel terms.

The structure and clarification of key roles related to its statutory responsibilities in the Office of TASC need to be consolidated as soon as possible, consistent with best practice appointment processes.

As indicated above, transparency with stakeholders about positions of responsibility for key work and effective means of communication by the people in these positions are central to establishing mutual confidence between TASC and its key stakeholders in schools and the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In respect to the Review Terms of Reference TASC should undertake the following.

Recruitment processes for sessional staff

1. Move immediately to confirm the appointments of Marking Coordinators for all courses for 2018. If there are any courses with a vacancy, they should be advertised as soon as possible.
2. Refine the application process for new applicants for each of the positions available.

Specifically, TASC should develop a template which describes the evidence required to support an application especially related to academic qualifications, teaching and marking experience. A similar template should be developed for Supervisor Coordinators and Supervisors.

It should allow teachers to refer to evidence already on the record through, for example, the Teachers Registration Board, Department of Education employment records. Applications from current teachers for the role of Marker should be endorsed by their school principal or equivalent.

3. Develop and maintain registers of approved Marking Coordinators, Markers and Supervisor Coordinators. Approval should be ongoing, subject to annual confirmation of satisfactory performance, such as is done for casual employees of the Australian Electoral Office.

Once on the register, teachers should indicate annually their availability for the current year and any change in their qualifications, experience and employment status.

4. Establish a register for Markers once Marking Coordinators are endorsed for 2018 and current Markers be asked to confirm their availability.

Updating the register and advertising for new applicants should be open by the end of August and confirmation complete by the end of Term 3 (28 September).

5. For 2019 establish a revised timeline for all appointments of sessional staff associated with the external assessment process. This should include Exam Setters and Exam Critics along with all aspects of the marking process.

The exact timeline should be subject to further negotiation with current incumbents but, as indicated in both survey responses and consultation meetings, TASC should aim to have Marking Coordinators confirmed in Term 1, Markers before the end of Term 3 and Supervisor Coordinators by the end of Term 2.

Determination of what constitutes a marking load/Payment rates for sessional staff

6. Draw on the analysis of marking load undertaken by WLF to establish a total workload required to mark each course and associated payment rates. I have been briefed by WLF about their analysis and proposed recommendations and I believe that they are soundly based on the responses provided to the survey and the consultation meetings.

Operational logistics

7. Allow for the progressive scheduling of marking as papers are collected and collated.
8. Finalise and publish the examination timetable before the end of Term 2 in 2019.
9. Consult with Supervisor Coordinators about the preparation of Supervisors and recognition of a designated assistant in each examination centre.

It should schedule a review meeting with Supervisor Coordinators at the conclusion of the examination marking process.

10. Ensure that the marking centres are appropriately set up with regard to seating, space and lighting and that appropriate catering is provided for markers required to attend all day meetings.
11. Confirm with the Department of Education the policy of establishing Year 11 and 12 Extension Schools as Examination Centres. Plan for the recruitment, training and support of the requisite Supervisor Coordinators and Supervisors.
12. Confirm and communicate processes for allowing students to nominate their preferred examination centres.

Timely communications

13. Confirm ongoing appointments to the key roles that need to be filled in the Office to administer the external assessment process in accordance with its statutory responsibilities. This includes consideration of risks associated with the increasing consultation and communication requirements recommended in this report and the increasing volume of external assessments being undertaken.
14. Communicate clearly to schools about how to contact the appropriate staff member in TASC quickly and effectively concerning issues that may arise related to any aspect of the conduct or marking of the examinations. TASC should clearly identify to schools the names and contact details of the key staff who are responsible for the various elements of the external assessment processes.
15. Establish a timely schedule of meetings with Marking Coordinators and Examination Supervisor Coordinators to provide a platform for consultation about implementation of proposed changes to processes arising from this Review. It may be possible to utilise some existing meetings or it may be necessary to schedule an additional meeting. This should include appropriate opportunities for both groups to evaluate their experiences at the end of the annual marking process. It is crucial to reinforce the mutuality of interest and responsibility of the Office of TASC and its key sessional staff in delivering the highest quality external assessment processes.
16. Establish some key performance measures related to key aspects of assessing and certifying students' work such as meeting timelines for appointments, responding to queries, delivering results.
17. Share its performance on these measures with key stakeholders to deepen the mutual commitments to high quality assessment and certification that underpin its operations.

18. Collaborate with the Department of Education to ensure that schools receive clear, consistent, accurate and timely information about all aspects of internal and external assessment for all courses.
19. In the medium term, investigate options for the introduction of online marking, drawing on the experience of those jurisdictions which are implementing it in various forms.
20. Develop a two-stage implementation plan to phase in those recommendations that TASC chooses to accept. As indicated above, there is some urgency about actions that need to be taken this year to ensure a substantially smoother process and timely communications. I am aware that TASC is in the process of developing a new administrative system, the TASC Reporting and Certification System (TRACS), which Markers will work with in the future.

Given the relationship building with stakeholders I have recommended, my advice would be to integrate the development and implementation plan for TRACS with the full year implementation plan for external assessment processes for 2019.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I would like to thank all of the Marking Coordinators, Markers and Supervisor Coordinators who participated in the consultation meetings and responded to the survey. Your openness, constructive comments and feedback and obvious commitment to the students of Tasmania have demonstrated that the external assessment for senior secondary students is in good hands.

I would similarly like to thank all of the key stakeholder representatives with whom I met – your expertise and commitment are equally invaluable. The Office of TASC supported my work in a friendly, efficient and professional manner and arranged complex organisational requirements over a short period in a very timely manner.

My report and recommendations focus on the key issues related to the Review Terms of Reference. There were many quite detailed and specific suggestions that were raised in both the comments section of the survey and in the meetings. None of these will be lost. TASC has access to all of the responses and TASC staff attended the meetings and took detailed notes. I am confident that TASC has already benefitted greatly from the insights they have gained as I have conducted this Review. These detailed comments will undoubtedly assist TASC as they implement those recommendations which are accepted.

I am conscious that this Review took place within a broader agenda of system change and reform. This includes a number of initiatives at the state level together with the on-going discussions about Commonwealth-State agreements and the proposals of the Gonski 2.0 Report.

This Review was confined to some very specific operational matters that are of immediate concern. Naturally some broader issues were raised in meetings and in survey responses. These will no doubt form part of the discussions into the future of the broader issues. In the meantime, I trust that this Review and its recommendations will contribute to a substantial continuous improvement process in the crucial task of providing all Tasmanian senior secondary students with a high quality curriculum which is assessed in a fair, valid and reliable way.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1.

Graph – Growth of written external assessment administered for TASC accredited courses

Appendix 2.

Marking Coordinator survey responses 2018

Appendix 3.

Marker survey responses 2018

Appendix 4.

Supervisor Coordinator survey responses 2018

Appendix 5.

TASC Review consultation schedule