

Evaluation or Research, Aspirations and Impact: A four year story of the VCE

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Introduction

By the time this paper is presented a project team will have completed a four year study of 15 schools. It is a study of the impact of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) on these schools and the way these schools shaped this post compulsory curriculum reform. This paper will also address the methodological issues associated with a longitudinal study involving a team of people in a very controversial area. After outlining the context and rationale, the way in which the study was conducted will be described. The findings will then be presented in terms of the changing themes that emerged from schools over the four year period. These themes could not have been predicted although the wisdom of hindsight allows some order and explanations to be made. It aspired to be an educational study but many of the issues affecting schools did not have a basis in educational theory and debate. The total experience is one which causes the author to rethink the role of evaluation research and become very wary of future involvement in controversial areas.

Context and Rationale for the Study

The VCE is the Victorian response to post compulsory curriculum reform which has proceeded, largely independently, in each Australian state. The Victorian reform began with a very important discussion paper on the future of post compulsory schooling (Blackburn, 1984). What followed in Victoria was a major restructure of curriculum, similar in many ways to changes in other states (ACACA 1991) and overseas, but having a number of unique features. The VCE can be described as an ambitious response. It was designed to cater for an increased proportion of students completing secondary school (a retention rate increase from 28% to 82% in the decade leading 1992). Major shifts in views about teaching and learning with their origins in teacher and subject association research

became incorporated into a new curriculum structure. These new study designs also included a wide range of assessment approaches as there was a clear attempt to encourage independent learning among students and therefore give credit for success in a wider range of learning demands. The development of the VCE in the early stages was therefore based on currently accepted educational views with a priority on achieving a senior secondary education for all within one award, the VCE. There was also concern that this certificate would have to be credible in the wider community as it represented the most significant connection between school and work. The VCE developers were also conscious of the importance of VCE for tertiary selection. By the late 1980's there were clear signs that tertiary level support and community confidence in the VCE were not going to be easy to achieve and the scene was set for debate and controversy with the media amplifying the misunderstandings and tensions that emerged (Gill, 1991). A political dimension then acted to polarise and simplify the areas of debate leaving the educational issues and the school level responses to the VCE minor components of the public discussion of VCE impression.

This is the context in which I accepted an invitation from the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB) to conduct an independent evaluation of the implementation of the VCE in pilot schools towards the end of 1989. There was some confusion about how these schools were coping in the first year of VCE (English, Mathematics and Australian Studies being conducted at Year 11). It seemed an excellent opportunity to provide an account of school progress with the VCE and perhaps include the school perspective and educational issues into a debate which seemed to centre on tertiary level concerns, lowered standards and worrying trends in assessment practices. The impact of the first report was to fuel the existing controversy rather than clarify the debate and this will be taken up after briefly outlining the approach taken in the study.

The approach taken in the study

Table 1 sets out the range of possible purposes for conducting an evaluation and

enables the focus for this study to be established.

Table 1

Range of purposes for evaluation

1. To establish whether objectives have been achieved.
2. To assist making decisions about teaching materials and approaches.
3. To justify continuation of a program.

4. To revise the teaching/learning approach.
5. To assist making decisions about students.
6. To describe the program to a wider community.
7. to understand what is happening. (Research)
8. To enhance professional development of teachers.

This study was developed with purposes 6 and 7 in mind i.e. a focus on the broad question "What is happening in schools?" rather than "How well is the VCE working?" One of the outcomes of a longitudinal study and a continuing relationship with the communities in 15 schools, was the increasing emphasis on purpose number 8 in Table 1. By the third and fourth years it became clear that involvement with the project team was being seen as an opportunity for schools to check their ideas and gain new ideas from other schools. The requirement to explain their VCE implementation to members of the team was seen as a valuable professional development activity by many teachers. Each of the evaluation reports also allowed the school place their concerns and progress alongside developments in other schools.

From the outset the decision was taken to involve a team of people. This decision allowed for a more intensive study of a larger number of schools. As far as possible the same two or four team members have maintained contact with each school over the four year period. This has led to a deep understanding of each school and the way it has responded to the challenges of the reform.

While a team of people allows for more intensive coverage of schools and the input of a wider diversity of views from differing backgrounds, there are problems developing a sufficient consensus for a final report. In preparing each of the four

reports it was necessary to interview each team member about the important issues emerging from the schools.

Together, this series of interviews lead to a series of statements which had some claim for inclusion in the report. These statements when further discussed formed the core of each report and the themes outlined in the following sections.

Maintaining the relationship with the schools has been a crucial part of the study.

We have set out to provide a school perspective on the VCE and a draft of each report has been sent to all 15 schools for comment. The comments from schools and VCAB have been incorporated into the final report released at least two weeks participant reaction and input.

Findings from the study

The sections that follow will trace major findings emerging from the 15 schools over the four year period. It is interesting to note the way in which the issues varied during the course of the longitudinal study. Significant issues in one year were not in evidence in following visits, an indication of the volatile nature of curriculum implementation and the limited value of evaluations being conducted over short time periods. This observation about changing issues may also indicate the capacity and resilience of schools to respond to challenges while maintaining their primary functions. The impact of such responses on the morale of the school community and the quality of schooling is harder to determine. The longitudinal study did allow the project team to monitor the human response to change and the issues causing greatest difficulty.

The first contact with schools

The study commenced in 1989 with pilot schools who had introduced English, Australian Studies and Mathematics at Year 11. The project team were not prepared for the way in which the VCE had affected schools. The school responses were at odds with the media representation of issues and progress and when the report was released it was the media agenda which prevailed. Three themes will be outlined to represent the school responses to the VCE towards the end of 1989.

We can see the difference ... are you serious?

The first days in schools left a confusing impression of appreciation for many VCE activities and requirements while at the same time dismissing the VCE as a worthwhile qualification. An interview with a group of students went some way to clarifying the issue as the following extract from the first report illustrates.

Talking with David

David has been very patient in describing his experience as a Year 11

student who has studied VCE English, Mathematics and Australian Studies. He

has been able to show me examples of his work in each subject area as we have

talked with four other students. English and Mathematics have been thoroughly

discussed and the students probably don't realise the learning experience they have

provided for the visitor.

We move onto Australian Studies and I begin to examine David's major

project. It is a very interesting piece of work "What about Australian Studies

... what happened in this subject?" David is first to respond "It was a waste of

time" There is no surprise from the others in the group with the frank response,

and Michelle adds "It was really a lot like English".

David's response is difficult for me to reconcile with the quality of the

project I have in front of me. "But what about this (the project) David? This

looks really good." The reply adds to my confusion "Oh, that's just commonsense." I further test his patience by asking him to tell me what he did,

and learn that he had set out to document the history of a well known local

business. Interviews had been conducted with some 15 people associated with the

business over the past 60 years. Original photographs and newspaper articles and

advertisements had been collected and the resulting project was an excellent

account of the way a business had developed and changed and the external forces

which lead to these changes.

"I really enjoyed doing the project and Mr X (the owner of the business)

got me to talk at a meeting and wants to display the project in his showroom."

David is clearly satisfied with what he had achieved. I persist, "What is wrong

with Australian Studies?" David's response receives support from other students

"The subject lacks substance ... there is nothing new ... we spend most of our time

discussing things we already know ... there is no teaching ... hardly any notes."

This student interview stands out from the others because it represents an

important incident which led to a great deal of personal reflection. David's

project clearly demonstrated his ability to work independently, organise and carry

out a worthwhile study and communicate his findings clearly. These were

outcomes found frequently when talking with students and discussing their work.

They are abilities which appear to be among the desired outcomes of Australian

Studies (and VCE subjects in general). David acknowledges satisfaction with his

efforts and identifies the skills he needed to satisfy the work requirements. Yet he

does not appear to value what he has done. For David the learning that is

valued is related to input of new information, the compiling of notes and

subsequent assessment based on this new information.

One teacher explained the issue in terms of the past school experiences of

the students. "Kids want to be taught, they don't want to think.

This is what has

generally happened to them in school anyway and if they are successful in school

they think it is because they have been taught - they have never got much credit

for thinking."

To varying extents, the 3 pilot studies aim to foster independent learning

skills such as problem solving, interviewing, presentation of ideas, etc. In many

cases when it was clear that these skills were being achieved students did not

recognise or value them and often expressed concern that time had been taken

away from what they perceived as "real" learning (i.e. the exposure to formally presented content). This view was reinforced by some parents and teachers. At

least one implication is that successful achievement of the objectives of the

courses may not be perceived as successful outcomes at the school level. The

learning aspirations of the VCAB developers may not be widely shared and the

challenge of implementation may need to include a major public education

program about the purposes of the curricula being developed.

(Northfield et al, 1989 pp. 9-10)

The response of the participants has been shaped by the perception in the wider

community that the VCE has lowered standards and is unlikely to be acceptable to tertiary institutions.

Like the ideas ... but can we make it work?

The project team did not expect to find almost unanimous support for what the VCE was trying to do. At the same time teachers indicated a lack of confidence that the

aspirations could be achieved. Teachers, and to a lesser extent students, were very aware of

the VCE controversies and the struggle for the VCE to gain community respect. Teachers

also noted the extent of changes required and the limited inservice and support that

appeared to be available. They were beginning to see the task ahead and there were doubts

about whether:

(i) VCE could retain political support with a change of government

(ii) teachers could manage the workload and the anticipated assessment responsibilities

(iii) the school could maintain some advocacy of the VCE in the face of the continual reservations being presented in the media.

VCE success or failure will depend on what is done at Years 7-10

The impact of the VCE on the Year 7-10 curriculum was very significant in such a

short time. In some respects this finding was the most important endorsement of the VCE.

The work requirements and teaching learning approaches were being accepted by teachers

and providing directions for revising the total school program. Among the specific initiatives were an increase in problem solving activities, research projects and word processing courses.

There was also widespread use of VCE terminology at junior secondary level as schools began to prepare students for different Year 11 and 12 expectations.

The first report provided explanations for the varying school responses to the VCE.

The schools coping more successfully tended to have received greater levels of support via

VCAB staff, school support centres and network arrangements developed with other schools.

In "successful" schools, VCE had become a school wide curriculum issue, with responses not

limited to subject departments in the school. The school background and tradition was

associated with differing responses within a general acceptance of the VCE. "Academic"

schools tended to be concerned with some of the assessment procedures and whether the

VCE could extend the more able students. Schools with experience of alternative programs

were concerned with workload demands for students and ways of catering for a wide range

of interests and abilities. At this early stage there were already concerns that one certificate

could cater for all, at a time when an increasing proportion of the age cohort were

continuing to Years 11 and 12.

The reaction to the first report was shattering. The description of the school

response to VCE was of little interest with the media still preoccupied with the erosion of

standards and the concerns of tertiary institutions. In fact, the first report increased the

controversy rather than clarifying the changes and introducing the school perspective into the

debate

The second visit to the schools

The first report initiated some debate in 1990, and interest in Monash University

lead the Vice-Chancellor, to provide financial assistance to support a second year of study.

The pilot schools extended English, Mathematics and Australian Studies into Year 12 and so

trialled the common assessment tasks (CATs) to be used to tertiary selection. For the

project team, the schools described new sets of implementation problems and

we began to see the first indications of fundamental concerns which would be recognised and lead to adjustments to the VCE almost two years later.

Who is the VCE for?

The second report documents the mismatch between school level issues and the wider community VCE agenda. Tertiary level concerns continued to dominate an increasingly politicised VCE debate. Schools were concerned with a range of difficult issues such as a widespread lack of understanding and support for VCE, linking the Maths study designs with tertiary requirements and signs of unrealistic work demands on teachers and students. The second report concluded in the following way.

The VCE is important and debate is inevitable and desirable at political, social and educational levels. Not surprisingly, the pilot schools are concerned with the educational issues with the wider community and the media often concerned with other issues. Tension has occurred when contributions to the debate are ill-informed and destructive. This second report is prepared in the hope that a better understanding of the school perspective might assist the continuing debate surrounding the VCE. A satisfactory outcome for future 11 and 12 students depends on all groups working constructively to produce the best possible program. Perhaps our disagreements are more about what is valued as "best" for students - the teachers and students in the pilot schools are beginning to form and express their views.

(Northfield, et al 1991, p.52)

Who is doing the work

Schools and teachers had anticipated the authentication issues and to varying extents procedures were in place to cope with school level assessments of extended tasks. The subsequent media interest in the conduct of the Maths Problem Solving task was not surprising, but implications that teachers were not aware of the issue and not responding were difficult to accept by those aware of the school effort in ensuring

authenticity.

There is no way we can cope with the full VCE

Although the pilot schools were only dealing with 3 study designs, extrapolating assessment requirements to the full VCE lead to concerns about workload and over-

assessment. This concern from schools was in conflict with a widespread view that the VCE had lowered standards. This issue was to arise in 1992, the first year of full implementation of the VCE.

The outcomes of the VCE are different

Teachers and students began to provide evidence of differing learning outcomes at Years 11 and 12 (Northfield and Gill, 1991). Teachers appreciated and valued many of the new approaches in the VCE, while still expressing reservations about its delivery and acceptance in the wider community.

The second report received little attention when released. The school level issues were still of little interest despite continuing controversy in the media. The teacher warnings about over-assessment were ignored, other events would trigger changes in workload requirements in 1992.

The third report - a school perspective is included the debate

The third visit to schools was associated with the full implementation of VCE at Year 11 in all secondary schools. Four extra schools were added to determine whether schools not in the pilot program were having greater difficulties in implementing the VCE. After three years teachers were able to demonstrate their understanding of the VCE and the way in which it could be developed in their school context.

Our VCE is

Associated with a growing understanding of the VCE, each school has made unique adaptations to fit the local context. This "ownership" was a significant development and meant that state-wide changes to the VCE were now seen as interference in the school curriculum. The change in the compulsory nature of Australian Studies was

seen by some teachers as a decision which ignored two years of local development and education of the school community. Other VCAB changes were described as "selling out" schools and a "failure to be patient and support fundamental ideas".

Don't they realise it will not work?

The widespread understanding and acceptance of the VCE approach meant that teacher and student concerns about implementation deserved to be carefully considered.

The following concerns were consistently described in the last year before the full two year implementation of the VCE.

(i) The progressive assessment, argued as a strong feature of VCE was not providing students with any feedback. At the end of the year many students had little idea of their progress because of policies and verification procedures that limited the amount of feedback that could be provided.

(ii) The projected assessment demands for a full Year 12 VCE program were going to make 1992 a year a succession of assessment requirements. This over-assessment was linked to a concern that students were repeating similar tasks (eg. research projects) in different studies and so learning very little from a number of the assessment demands.

(iii) The changing and increased demands on teachers at a time of cutback and limited support were leading to lower morale and increased stress for teachers. The continuing media, tertiary and political campaigns against the VCE were damaging to teachers who were doing their best to make the VCE work successfully in many areas.

(iv) The extra teacher responsibilities associated with verification (ensuring comparability of school-based results) was seen as necessary with assessment becoming more closely linked to learning demands. For some teachers, the verification process is a valuable professional development opportunity as ideas are exchanged and progress is confirmed by colleagues. For other teachers, verification has been associated with pressure groups, conflict about interpreting assessment criteria and extra demands on teachers and schools to complete

requirements. 1992 would be the year when we would see whether these verification concerns were part of teachers learning about the VCE assessment criteria or whether there were more fundamental problems.

After 3 years, the school level experience described in the third report was included in the media discussion of the VCE. The school explanations of the authentication issues

associated with assessment acted to correct an often extreme and emotional presentation of widespread cheating out of control. The continued warnings about over-assessment and excessive workload were ignored. In the middle of the year, the enormous assessment demands placed on some students received publicity and action followed to address an issue that had been foreseen much earlier.

By the time we complete the fourth set of visits there will be a rare long term record of schools responding to a major curriculum reform. This longitudinal study has identified a wide range of implementation issues, some of which have been outlined in this paper. We have learned a great deal about schools and their responses to curriculum change. We were surprised at how issues "waxed and waned" as schools responded to challenges. Teachers have a remarkable capacity to act as a buffer between new and difficult challenges and their students and the primary function of encouraging learning. Finally, we would make the observation that schools should be regarded as more than the sites where externally developed changes are to be implemented. These schools were also sources of knowledge and understanding about the curriculum reform that was being tentatively introduced. Teachers and schools were often well ahead in identifying and addressing the issues and concerns. Stenhouse (1975) argued a crucial aspect of the curriculum process - the policies and plans only gain meaning when schools put the ideas into practice. What a pity we don't use the expertise and experience of teachers to help us identify and understand the details and issues that are so important in managing the implementation process.

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