

Changing the conditions for success: the introduction of school-assessed coursework and student performance in the VCE.

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Introduction

'How do you make assessment fair and impartial? And what does fair and impartial mean when it is so obvious that some highly predictable social groups do far better out of the credentialling processes at this level than others.' (McCrae 1992, p.9)

The problem of fair assessment and access to higher education, and the domination of education by the struggle for position (Marginson 1993) have been revisited recently by academics and successive governments in Victoria. Richard Teese has made a significant contribution to the debate in his book, *Academic Success and Social Power* (2000). He argues that the senior secondary curriculum has institutionalised inequality to the extent that the individual is no longer at the centre of educational outcomes; instead we can accurately predict outcomes for particular groups from year to year (Teese 2000, p.224). At the same time, the Kirby report was released by the Victorian Minister for Post-compulsory Education and Training, Lynn Kosky. The report relied heavily on Teese's data to assess the 'less than optimal' outcomes for young Victorians who are so disadvantaged in their learning and social circumstances that they 'fall through the cracks' in a system that lacks accountability for all 15-19 year olds (Kirby 2000, p.7). More recently, a report from Monash University by Bob Birrell and others on the nexus between school sector and successful entry to higher education was promoted in the media as further evidence of the decline of public education.

VCE Scores: How Government Schools are Failing the Test. (The Age, 2002)

A more constructive critique of Birrell's report was offered by the federal opposition spokesperson on education, Jenny Macklin,

'...there is something ugly in the findings of From Place to Place, the Monash University report on school, location and access to university. The findings tell a story of old, new and emerging inequalities (Macklin, 2002).

A range of policy solutions have been proposed as a response to the stresses under which the school system and higher education sector are growing. Stresses such as increased retention rates, inflation of credentials, sustained levels of youth unemployment and problems of vocational training for graduates (Teese, p.220). These solutions, and the way in which mass senior secondary education has been made problematic, will be considered in the concluding sections of this paper. The main focus of this research however, is on the reforms announced by the Victorian government in 1998 and implemented for the first time in 2000. Changes which have produced some positive - and largely unreported - results for particular groups of students in the final two years of secondary education.

In December 1997, the Victorian government announced changes to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). These changes were the result of a review chaired by Professor Kwong

Lee Dow to respond to widespread community concern over the authenticity of students' work, and the unnecessary stress and workload for students and teachers resulting from a form of school-based assessment known as CATs, or common assessment tasks (VCE Review, 1997). The review confirmed the integrity of a single certificate at the senior secondary level, but recommended that priority be given to reforming 'the assessment regime to ensure that it is as fair as possible for all students (VCE Review, p.1).

The result of this review, known as the revised VCE, was a new assessment program that tipped the balance in the contribution of external and school-based assessment back in the favour of external assessment. It also introduced standards based outcomes into curriculum design. The days of CATs for all students and all VCE studies had come to an end. The new arrangements in their place led to some unexpected consequences.

School-based CATs - a short history

CATs were a central part of the reconstruction of senior secondary education in Victoria, which was undertaken amidst acrimonious public debate in the late 1980s. Opinions on the new qualification, the VCE, and the new assessment system were divided. Professors Pennington, Opat and B.A. Santamaria, together with a number of elite school principals kept the media occupied with their debate over what was described as an educational (and social) revolution. Fears of falling standards and the inability of the secondary system to fulfill the key role of social selection were widely promoted,

So how will students be chosen for particular courses, especially those for which the competition for entrance is the hottest? (Richardson, 1989)

This weakening of academic standards is made worse by the fact that...proposed courses have to be "seen by students to be intrinsically attractive and useful". (Donnelly, 1989)

There is no doubt however, that many groups such as the peak teacher organizations, the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (VSTA), and others had great hope in the capacity of the new assessment arrangements to make a difference in the highly competitive and selective nature of the final year of schooling in Victoria. This side of the debate believed, that

'by assessing performance in various studies through a set of well structured tasks, it will be possible to give recognition to a wider range of learning goals...' (VCAB 1988b, p.2)

CATs, according to the official assessment policy announced by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (VCAB) would,

- accommodate the full range of student backgrounds and aptitudes, providing access and intrinsic motivation to low-achieving students while continuing to challenge the high achievers;
- place less emphasis on ranking and comparing students and yet provide for fair and efficient selection in a context of declining work and further study opportunities;

- place greater value on the involvement of students and on the professional judgement of teachers in making assessment decision while maintaining statewide standards and ensuring comparability of assessments across schools and providers;
- provide more detailed information about students' achievement but in ways which reduce or at least hold constant administrative costs and teachers workloads;
- relieve students of some of the more acute pressures engendered by the current end-of year examination and yet avoid placing students under constant pressure throughout the year; and
- accommodate a wider range of studies and learning goals but within a common assessment and reporting framework .

(VCAB 1988b)

Under the new certificate there were two levels of assessment. The first was satisfactory completion of the unit of study, which was based on the teacher's judgement that the student had satisfactorily completed all work requirements specified for the unit, and in accordance with the criteria in the study design. Work requirements were small tasks such as keeping a journal or work book, a short report, an essay, poster or a report on a practical experiment. Each study typically required between 4 and 6 work requirements. The second judgment to be made by the teacher, concerned how well the student had performed. Graded assessment was not a compulsory aspect of the course; students could and did qualify for the award of the VCE without undertaking graded assessment. If students wanted a score however, for tertiary entrance purposes, then he or she had to undertake the common assessment tasks and receive a grade. The teacher's judgment on the student's performance had to be made by applying common statewide criteria.

The other distinguishing feature of the new qualification was the weighting given to school assessment. In the majority of VCE studies, school-based assessment counted for between 50 and 75 per cent of the student's final assessment. Only mathematics, science and language studies had two external assessments in the form of examinations, each of which contributed one third of the student's final result.

Most studies had two school-assessed CATs and one examination CAT. The task was specified in the curriculum document (the study design) and was undertaken by all students in the study at the same time, over the same time period, and within the same word limit. CATs typically included extended essays, a report of an investigation or piece of research, an analysis task, a set of structured questions, a folio of writing or graphic work, a performance, or the creation of a design, product or model. The typical word range was 1500 to 2000 words, these were designed to be sustained pieces of writing.

The problem with CATs

Although there was some discretion at the school level in terms of varying some of the details of the task, the tasks as specified in the curriculum document did not vary greatly from year to year. This meant that the tasks could be recycled and even became commercially available. Outstanding pieces of work were published and widely accessible to students.

'The open-ended nature of some CATs was seen to create pressures on students to continually polish and perfect work that may already be of an excellent standard. It was reported that some students were spending more

than 100 hours on tasks that were meant to be completed in twenty hours'. (VCE Review, p.33)

Within the first year of full implementation, the Minister called for an evaluation of the verification system used to validate the results given by schools. The findings of this report, undertaken by Professor Tim Brown and Professor Sam Ball, were quite candid and rather disappointing in terms of the wider range of educational and learning goals that CATs were supposed to measure. It was also an indictment of the inability of many teachers to assess their own students reliably and fairly, even if for a whole range of well-intentioned reasons.

The school's prior knowledge of the candidate must systematically bias scores assigned to that candidate.

The scores assigned in one school for a particular level of student achievement could be considerably different from those assigned in another.

(Brown and Ball, p.3)

The final report on the verification process in 1992 found that;

- there is evidence of possible bias in the grades of some schools and in the grades provided by some Verification Panel Chairpersons;
- a minority of teachers are involved in unfair practices regarding their assessments;
- some of the CATs provide a bias in favour of students from affluent backgrounds;
- across all of a given student's grades, the impact of the problems outlined in this report might only be marginal. Even so, it is imperative that VCAB reconsider its procedures in order to ensure that the advantages of the VCE are not damaged by inadequate implementation procedures and practices.

(Brown and Ball, 1992 p.iv)

After only one year of CATs, a single index system of ranking students was introduced as part of a package of measures to compensate for the potential weaknesses in reliability. The level of contribution of school-based assessment however, remained the same. The stakes in school assessment therefore remained high. New arrangements were introduced to standardize scores and introduce a percentile rank for each study based on the summation of all CAT scores in the study. Tolerance ranges were introduced, if the whole of a school's internally assessed CATs fell within the tolerance range, the school's grades would be confirmed. Another measure, the General Achievement Test was also introduced to identify anomalous assessments and to provide another external score for the majority of studies with only one external examination.

From CATs to coursework: changing the conditions for assessment and monitoring the outcomes

The main areas of concern expressed during the 1997 VCE Review included, excessive workload, authentication of students' work and ensuring comparability of schools' assessments.

...there is a widely held perception that the problem of students handing in CATs that are not entirely their own work is a major weakness of the VCE. (VCE Review, p.37)

CATs involved large amounts of unsupervised work undertaken outside the classroom, considerable drafting and redrafting and had identical, similar or predictable topics each year. CATs could be anticipated and planned for in advance by publishers and other commercial enterprises, or could be readily obtained from previous students (VCE Review, 1997). There were claims of tutors over assisting students, professionally desk-top published reports, essays and folio work, to the point where it became difficult to identify how much of the final product was the student's own. Equally important to equity matters were the educational questions about how much learning had taken place after the first few drafts.

In 1998, the (then) Board of Studies introduced stronger measures for monitoring and supervising students' work and for detecting possible breaches of authentication. Teachers were required to sight the student's work at three stages in the development process and to document and record the features of the work in progress. This was a significant administrative imposition on teachers, and was only tolerated on the understanding that the requirement was temporary. All parties now agreed that the assessment system needed to change.

In response to the problems identified through the Review, the Board of Studies replaced CATs with coursework and increased the contribution of external assessment in a large number of studies. School-assessed coursework would comprise assessment tasks which must be part of the regular teaching and learning program; tasks must not unduly add to the workload associated with that program and must be completed mainly in class and within a limited time frame.

Across VCE studies the scope for the majority of assessment tasks under this new regime was limited to 40-50 minutes, 80-100 minutes or 120-150 minutes. The maximum period over which the task should be undertaken is within one or two weeks. There would be no tasks undertaken over an extended period of time, unless the outcome was a product such as a painting or sculpture which could be easily identified as the student's own work.

The design of the task and timing for assessment now became totally a school level decision. Students between schools no longer took common tasks at the same time. Instead, schools were required to choose from the designated list of tasks in the study design, create their own topic and choose when to assess their students.

The complex issue of ensuring comparability of school-based assessments has been one of the greatest challenges for the developers of the VCE...as it has been for developers of assessment systems elsewhere. (VCE Review, p.37)

To ensure statewide consistency of schools' assessments of coursework, the Board of Studies introduced statistical moderation using examination and GAT results.

The introduction of school assessed coursework was monitored throughout the year by the Board of Studies in a number of ways. Focus group meetings were held with teachers around the state; surveys were conducted and an extensive audit that involved every teacher in every school was undertaken. For the purposes of the 2000 coursework audit, every year 12 VCE teacher in every school, in every revised subject had to submit an assessment folio for the student who had been randomly identified by the Board's administrative software system. The result of these monitoring activities was a comprehensive picture of the effect of introducing coursework. The other result was an industrial issue over workload. One of the negotiated outcomes of what would be for many teachers an onerous task in a year already burdened by change, was a guarantee to provide feedback on the individual teacher's assessment program. In the first year of the revised

VCE, teachers submitted thousands of folios of assessment tasks with details of their assessment programs for feedback from the Board of Studies in just a few months.

Yet another source of information was a survey administered in June 2000 at the end of the first semester of the new arrangements. Teachers responded to a series of questions relating to student workload and the administration of coursework assessment. Teachers in 11 studies (subjects) were targeted including English, maths, science studies and history. Some 348 schools were represented in the 1138 responses, and many of these replied on behalf of individuals as well as faculty groups. When teachers in a majority of studies reported a decrease in workload for their students (Board of Studies, 2000), the media found another story, *Pupils rest while teachers labour* (Herald Sun 2000). This was a reference to the self-reporting of an increase in teachers' own workload during a year of revised curriculum and assessment arrangements. One of the unexpected outcomes however, was a reported reduction in student absenteeism. Students were no longer staying away for days to complete their CATs; instead they were turning up and completing their assessments in class in accordance with the new policy (Board of Studies 2000).

The effect on student performance

Under the reforms, teachers were required to change the basis for their judgement about satisfactory completion as well as the student's level of performance. In workshops held throughout the state in the year preceding implementation, teachers expressed uncertainty about the capacity of some students to meet the new standards made explicit in the outcomes. As a result there was some concern (and significant political repercussions) if fewer students were eligible for completion of the certificate due to reforms designed to fix comparability of graded assessments, not reduce completion rates. There would need to be a balance between,

The need to ensure standards of achievement for the award of a certificate that is rigorous and challenging for all students' (VCE Review, p.33)

and the need to meet expectations for successful completion,

The Board of Studies expects the same number of students to satisfactorily complete the VCE in 2000 as have satisfactorily completed the certificate in the past.

(Professor Kwong Lee Dow, 1999)

Thus the final satisfactory completion rates for years 11 and 12 were eagerly awaited. There were a number of surprises. In the 24 revised VCE studies introduced in 2000 the number of students gaining satisfactory completion at the unit level increased in 90 per cent of studies, or in 104 out of 115 revised units. This data was then compared with the results for studies which had not been revised in 2000 and with data from the previous 4 years for the revised studies.

'There was also notably a greater improvement in the performance of boys in terms of satisfactory completion levels. (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2001)

Instead of having to complete assessment tasks, generally out of class time, students now completed their assessments in class.

The award of satisfactory completion for a unit is based on a decision that the student has demonstrated achievement of the set of outcomes specified for the unit. This decision will be based on the teacher's assessment of the student's overall performance on assessment tasks designated for the unit.

(Board of Studies, 1999)

The most notable improvement was the increase in satisfactory completion of the only compulsory study in the VCE, English at both Unit 1 of 3% and unit 2 of 2.4 %. (VCAA 2001) This meant that approximately 3,000 more students successfully completed year 11 English in the year 2000 than had completed in 1999.

In addition, there was a reduction in the number of students identified as Not Assessed, which means that the student had not undertaken the assessment. As a result, more students would have access to a Study Score and possibly tertiary entrance. In summary, the revised arrangements in 2000 contributed to the following:

- a reduction in student workload;
- an improvement in student attendance;
- an improved capacity for teachers to ensure that students' work is their own;
- an improvement in satisfactory completion rates at the unit level;
- the improvement in satisfactory completion had been higher for males at the unit level; and
- a more even spread to student workload.

However, in solving the problems of authentication, comparability of assessment and undue assistance, other (unintended) outcomes occurred. In the survey on coursework assessment described earlier, teachers reported a reduction in the quality of students' work. The new tasks produced within shorter time periods did not look as polished as the work previously produced over months in some cases for CATs. There had also been a narrowing down of the assessment base in many studies, and in some cases an over reliance on tests. In shifting the emphasis away from school-assessment to the examination, many teachers used the external model of assessment as the basis for all of their assessments throughout the year. The absence of drafting was of particular concern to English teachers and reported through consultation forums and the survey.

History teachers reported in their surveys that they regretted the loss of extended research tasks, but enjoyed the opportunity for more teaching and learning time, which was previously devoted to assessment. Some English teachers similarly regretted the loss of the opportunity to practice the craft of writing and the final presentation of students' work in the form of a folio (Board of Studies, 2000). Whilst there is now more time available for teaching and learning activities, it seems in the high stakes environment of the VCE, that if they don't count for assessment purposes teachers (and students) are reluctant to spend much time on them.

Movement at the top: a first for government schools

An extremely encouraging trend was identified for the first time in 2001. This was the first year of full implementation for all revised studies (except for the small candidature LOTE studies which were introduced in 2002).

The Victorian Premier's Awards recognise outstanding achievement in VCE studies. This achievement is only recognized in studies with a minimum enrolment of 100 students. To achieve at this level the student needs to perform in the top one per cent of the cohort

undertaking a particular study. These are the students who can and have exercised 'scholastic power', and who will most likely 'convey themselves to the doors of the elite institutions' (Teese 2000, p.216). At the apex of VCE achievement is the Top All Round VCE Achievers award, given to the few students who have achieved this level of academic success in five VCE studies. To qualify as an All Round VCE Achiever, the student must achieve a score of 46 or greater in five or more VCE or VCE VET studies. For the first time in 2001 the study scores from both 2000 and 2001 were included in the calculations in recognition of the fact that many students are undertaking studies at Unit 3 and 4 level in year 11. In addition to the All Round awards, individual study awards are also made under the Premier's Awards. These awards were based only on achievement in the year 2001. To qualify for an award, a student must achieve the highest study score, which is usually 50. Only five students in each VCE study (with a minimum enrolment of 100) receive awards. In English and Mathematics, the top 10 students are selected.

According to history, and confirmed by the respective research by Teese and Birrell, students who achieve at this level in the VCE should mainly come from the private school sector or a selective government high school. The breakdown however, in the awards for 2001 by sector show that there was a nine per cent increase in the number of students in government schools receiving a Premier's award between 2000 and 2001. (Table 1 at the end of this paper shows the percentages according to sector between 1998 and 2001). For the first time, government school students comprised the largest percentage of recipients of awards, receiving 41 per cent of awards compared to 38 per cent for students from independent schools and 20 per cent for students coming from Catholic schools. More students in government schools performed in the top one per cent of the cohort than students from independent schools. The percentage still does not represent the overall size of the sector in the VCE, however it is a significant improvement on past performance.

Under the revised assessment arrangements, the overall contribution of school assessment to the student's study score was reduced, and statistical moderation adjusted the school's assessment of the group with the group's performance on the examination. Prior to these changes, in a majority of studies, the student's CATs contributed the major portion of the study score. It seems that the level of resources a student could bring to this form of assessment task had more of an influence than merit on the result. This hypothesis requires further investigation and monitoring in 2002. It may be that the end of CATs has levelled the playing field, at least for the time being.

Academic success and school location, a final word

Teese's account of 'the social inequalities that are such a habitual and institutionalised part of secondary education' calls for a 'collective response on behalf of the most disadvantaged groups to match the corporate power exercised by the socially most advantaged groups.' (Teese, p.224) There is one aspect however, in the construction of his analysis that is itself biased and portrays an unfair picture of upper secondary education in Victoria in recent times. Teese admits that for the purpose of his analysis,

Failure is arbitrarily defined as achievement in the lowest fifth of performance. (Teese, p.210)

This approach needs explication. In 2001, 142,132 students were enrolled in the VCE. At the time of writing, the number has grown to 154,672 students, although it should be noted that the 2001 figure is a final (end of year) count. Retention rates in upper secondary education are growing, on this at least, the politicians, academics and policy makers agree. In 2001 the enrolments by gender were 52 per cent female and 48 per cent male. Out of the approximately 48 000 students eligible to complete the VCE in 2001, 90 per cent had

studied mathematics (by choice) in their final two years of schooling. The satisfactory completion rate, as has been discussed above, is improving together with participation levels. In 2001 the figure was 95.3 per cent, or in other words, 95.3 per cent of students with sufficient units of study in their program to qualify for the certificate met the requirements for satisfactory completion. This includes a requirement for sufficient study at year 12 (units 3 and 4) level. Further, in 2001 over 48,000 students completed a general secondary education to a standard that qualifies them for entry to an apprenticeship, employment, to further training and possibly also higher education. All of these destinations, not just tertiary selection, depend on places available. No pathway can lead to a place which doesn't exist.

Underpinning this achievement is the tremendous effort of teachers in extending opportunities in demanding subjects 'to an increasingly diverse population, rather than simply accommodating students in devalued streams' (Teese, p.222). Against a rising standard of tasks, 'an ever more mixed population has been given access to preparatory mathematics, and many students without family advantages have succeeded'. (Teese, p.222)

However, if the growth of mass secondary schooling has achieved more that is often recognized, much remains to be done. (Teese, p.222)

Teese, like Birrell to a great extent, described students as having *failed* their secondary education and as *failing* a subject according to a single indicator, the student's ranking for the purpose of tertiary entrance. The Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank (ENTER) is the relative order of merit of students based on aggregation and the scaling of scores achieved in VCE subjects. It is an unfair attribution and label for the many thousands of students who have met the requirements of the VCE and who are now employed, employed, undertaking further education or training and who finished in the lowest fifth of a lowest fifth of a cohort. Since the introduction of the VCE, students' results have been reported as a grade from A+ to E and for certification purposes as satisfactory 'S', satisfactory 'S', or not satisfactory 'N'. The information serves a wide range of purposes and purposes and audiences. This is not to say that there are not differential social and social and economic consequences of finishing in the lowest, as opposed to the top fifth of the top fifth of the cohort, or as Kirby (2000) pointed out, the destructive consequences of consequences of not finishing at all. It is widely recognised, and now part of the Victorian the Victorian government's accountability measures, that completion of year 12, or its 12, or its equivalent, is a critical factor in a young person's life chances. The debate now debate now needs to shift to what sort of equivalent or alternative is appropriate at this level.

appropriate at this level.

On a similar matter, there are also inaccuracies and exaggerated effects in the report from Monash University by Birrell and others. These have arisen due to the particular form of his data. The Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre (VTAC) data used as the basis of the report, *From Place to Place* only provides a record of the ENTER achieved by each student who applied through VTAC for entry to university or TAFE college in 2001 (Birrell 2002, p.8). Thus the entire VCE population for all sectors is not included. It is recognized however, that this would provide a significant sample from which to extrapolate. The ENTER is quite a different statistic from the Study Score and these differences in characteristics were never recognized and acknowledged in the report. Hence small changes in median study scores were reported as significant changes in ENTER scores, partly because of the effect of scaling and partly because of the different intervals.

Similarly, the method of categorizing schools according to location yields quite different results from those that arise when the students are categorized by location. The population of Geelong Grammar, for example, is drawn from high socio-economic areas throughout the

state (and overseas) compared to the population of most government schools in the area. In such cases, any comparisons made on the basis of the school's location rather than a more accurate reflection of the socio-economic background of the students are likely to be unfair. This is not meant to excuse schools which are under performing and which must be accountable to their communities for their students outcomes. Birrell and others have raised some old questions about the practice of tertiary selection, as well as the inequitable distribution of resources under the funding policy introduced in 1999 by the Howard government. It is this policy that has resulted in many non-government schools with resources of more than double those of government schools receiving increased grants from the federal government (Macklin, 2002).

New solutions for the post-compulsory years

There has been a return in Victoria to debates of an educational kind, rather than educational administration, measurement and management dominating the policy agenda. The new Labour government in 1999 promised to make education its number one priority. It appears in the first term of office to have kept that promise. There is then a political will to mediate the unequal social and educational outcomes that arise from schooling. Patterns which commentators agree are reproduced from generation to generation.

Public education is not simply the outcome of government policy. It is also reciprocally bound to the rest of the public sphere. (Marginson 1993, p.240)

The Kirby review was the first to recognise that changing the lives of disadvantaged 15 to 19 year olds would require cross sectoral support, as well as new arrangements at the local level to provide the necessary intervention and structural change required to break institutionalised patterns of inequality. To this end, Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) have been introduced throughout the state. The membership is comprised of government and non-government agencies, local community leaders and employers to resolve the problems young people face finding employment and training in the area. An evaluation of this initiative is currently underway with a report expected in 2003. .

There is another solution currently being trialled in Victoria, a new senior secondary qualification, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). Victoria has abandoned the single certificate model in the post-compulsory years in response to increased retention rates and sustained levels of youth unemployment. VCAL is intended for young people without adequate levels of numeracy and literacy to provide a direct pathway to employment. It will be important however, for future research to be undertaken on the outcomes of this new qualification and the reintroduction of educational streaming based solely on occupation. Similarly, there are other issues of inequality to investigate as well. Current enrolments, for example, at the post-compulsory level in vocational education and training initiatives in schools (VET in schools) on the basis of gender show some other generational patterns of inequality. The 2002 figures based on major industry categories for female enrolments are as follows;

Automotive 4.5 %

Business Services 78.5 %

Community Services and Health 93.6 %

Cultural and recreation 36.7 %

Electrotechnology and Communication 23.6%

General Manufacturing 33%,

Metals and engineering 1.9%

Primary and forest 51.6 %

Tourism and hospitality 70 %

Grand total of female Vet in Schools enrolments, 43% (VCAA, 2002).

The new vocationalism in upper secondary education also warrants further consideration.

Conclusion

There are new pressures on upper secondary education in the twenty-first century; pressures which have been felt by systems in the past, rising demand for general education, new technology and sustained unemployment. Mass secondary education in the post-compulsory years is proving to be a strain on the capacity to qualify young people for jobs that are largely non-existent. Similarly, the flow-on effect to tertiary education with increased demand for places that either don't exist or are only available to those who can afford to pay. Within this uncertain and unforgiving environment, competition for places and employment intensifies. It is critical then, in such times that the assessment of students which can provide access to such limited positional goods (Marginson) be as fair and reliable as possible.

The new arrangements introduced in 2000 have improved the opportunities for educational success at both ends of the post-compulsory spectrum. Satisfactory completion rates under the new assessment conditions have improved. The highest increase in satisfactory completion was experienced by males. At the top end of the scale, where the most academically able compete for the most prestigious tertiary places and occupations (Teese 2000), for the first time students from government schools received the highest number of individual study awards by finishing in the top one per cent of the 2001 study cohort. The end of CATs marked the end of a system of attempting to measure a broader range of learning goals and abilities, and a system in which the resources brought to the task seem to have effected the student's results. However, it has also marked a shift in the outcomes for particular groups of students. It is unlikely, that this effect will be sustained. The evolving context in which the struggle for economic dominance occurs 'requires the social beneficiaries of school to build and rebuild their advantages anew' (Teese p.220).

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Table 1

VCE Premier's Awards - Yearly Sector Totals (1998-2001)

Total Number of Awards by Sector Type

	2001		2000		1999		1998	
Independent	97	38%	110	45%	127	50%	123	49%
Government	105	41%	79	32%	76	30%	82	33%
Catholic	51	20%	49	20%	44	18%	40	16%
Adult Providers	2	1%	7	3%	3	1%	3	1%
Single LOTE Providers	1	<1%	1	<1%	2	1%	1	<1%
Total	256	100%	246	100%	252	100%	249	100%

(Unpublished VCAA data)