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SMC&PA Submission 65
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Inquiry into assessment methods for senior maths, chemistry and physics

I have followed the proceedings very carefully, and listened to all sides of the argument. I will declare my interest as someone who is not happy with the current system, but was certainly open to hearing what everyone had to say. I have taught in the UK and Australia. I am currently a Head of Department, and have been so since 2004 in two different schools. I would like to make the following points:

- Student workload – whilst the QSA has recently revised the word count for science assessment items, it failed to provide an example of "A" standard student work within the recommendation. The Physics example was approximately 6,500 words. For your high achievers, this places enormous stress in terms of their work output (especially if they have chosen more than one science)
- Validity – I act as a tutor for the children of family friends from time to time. I know that my contribution to their work has the potential to inflate their apparent performance. I refuse to write assignments for students, but I know there are tutors who do this. A student with a willing tutor is able to demonstrate a much higher level of performance and there is little I can do, as a teacher, to counteract this
- Teaching assessment – I have spent most of my career as the only (or one of only two) chemistry teachers in a school. In such a position, there are no real checks regarding what I teach in relation to the assessment. The system has the capacity to allow teachers to "teach to the test", which is often the very aspect of external exams that people do not like. Surely, if I have a tendency to "teach to a test", the fact that I know what the questions are going to be presents more of a problem?
- Moderation/verification – I have been a panellist for nearly ten year. Our system is fundamentally flawed – we currently have two panellists review the work from a school. Why do we not allow a single panellist to review one school? Is it because panellists have to agree on their recommendations? This suggests that there is a difference in the opinions of panellists and it accounts for the instances where a school is provided with feedback to support their assessment packages for one year, but is then provided with a suite of recommendations the following year. I have been in this situation – amazingly, the QSA would not accept my defence that I was only acting on the recommendations from the previous year (where our assessment package and decisions were fully supported). I was told that the recommendations from a previous year cannot be used to question contradictory recommendations in the following year
- Use of criteria – the ambiguity of the present criteria leads to the problems discussed in the previous point. I find it difficult to explain what the criteria specifically mean when addressed to assessment items (and we are told not to alter them to make them "user-friendly"). It has introduced a high degree of subjectivity into judgements.
- QCS testing – I have never really understood how the QSA justify the methodology of testing in the QCS and subsequent manipulation of data. I have been told on numerous occasions at professional development that multiple choice questions are one dimensional and cannot be used to evaluate the performance of a student above a "C-level". Subsequently, the use of multiple choice (both in my own assessment instruments and those that I review at panel) has diminished significantly. However, multiple choice stills constitutes two of the four papers in the QCS test.
- Use of numerical data – I am also a QCS Short Response marker. We use very specific criteria to mark questions which, I am sure, are converted to numbers. I have taken the time to understand how a student's performance in individual subjects within a school is combined with QCS data to produce an overall OP score. I do not understand why/how we can be told that the use of individual percentage scores does not inform fully of a student's performance. My broad A-E decisions across three separate criteria are eventually used to produce a level of achievement (which is a point on a 1 to 50 scale) and from that I am asked to assign a single number (SAI) on a scale of 200 to 400. Why is the use of numbers so frowned upon when subsequent decisions are based purely on numerical factors (such as means, standard deviations, adjusted means etc?)

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