CURRICULUM CHANGES IN THE PACIFIC SENIOR SECONDARY CERTIFICATE

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The Pacific Senior Secondary Certificate (PSSC) is an accreditation system run by the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment (SPBEA). It is based on a one-year course of study at Form 6 level, and is used by schools in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Western Samoa and Vanuatu. Originally based on the old New Zealand University Entrance system, three recent innovations have injected a uniquely Pacific flavour into certain aspects of the PSSC curriculum.

The first of these innovations has been the development of new internal assessment (i.e., school-based) strategies for the subjects English, Biology, Chemistry and Physics. These strategies were not 'borrowed' from anywhere else, and were only implemented after a long period of consultation with teachers and other education professionals. Basically, 40 per cent of a student's final score in a subject is based on the internal assessment (I.A.) score provided by his or her teacher (the other 60 per cent comes from the final exam). There are, of course, a number of rules that teachers must follow in order to arrive at these I.A. scores. These rules make up the 'framework' around which teachers must build their 'I.A. Program'. This approach provides teachers with some degree of freedom in terms of syllabus implementation, and assessment, but guarantees a certain level of consistency across all schools.

For example, in the sciences, teacher-designed I.A. programmes must include at least 15 practical sessions where students carry out relevant laboratory studies which are then written up in report form. Five of these reports are then used as a basis for half of the internal assessment. The actual content of the practicals, however, is left to the teacher - relevance to the syllabus being the only requirement.

In English, on the other hand, I.A. Programmes have to address specific areas - *Writing, Research, Aural/Oral, Literature, and Other* - each needing to have a weighting within a particular range. These areas are clearly defined but are broad enough to allow many different forms of implementation. This, together with the weighting ranges, is another manifestation of the freedom-within-the-framework approach adopted by the PSSC system.

There are a number of other rules and requirements which make up these I.A. frameworks, but not so many that teachers are drowned in a sea of paper work. Put simply, for English and the sciences, schools must first submit an I.A. programme in a particular format. This shows what 'tasks' will be undertaken by students, when these will be given, and exactly how they will be assessed (scoring criteria, etc.) The SPBEA then evaluates these programmes and either accepts or rejects them. If a programme is rejected, then explanations on how to improve it are provided - and re-submission is required. To ensure that I.A. programmes are in fact being implemented, 'verification' visits are made to schools half way through the year (and occasionally at other times) where student work and teacher records are inspected. Although the main purpose of these visits is to ensure that schools are following their approved programmes, the time is also used to advise teachers on any problems they are encountering.

To ease the passage of these changes through the many schools in the system the SPBEA used a three-pronged approach. Firstly, I.A. programme-writing workshops were offered to teachers in Tonga and Western Samoa. These two countries have the most PSSC-offering schools and, unlike the other participating countries, had no prior experience of internal assessment in these subjects at this level. Secondly, a book was written specifically for teachers who wanted ideas on how to design and implement a useful I.A. programme in any of the four subjects. This has become known as *The Green Book* (this is not surprising given that the correct name is "PSSC

Internal Assessment in English and the Sciences - A Teacher's Guide"). It was distributed in 1992, but has also become popular with educators quite outside the PSSC realm. Thirdly, the SPBEA made a foray into previously unchartered territory (for it) and produced three separate books of suggested practical (laboratory) ideas for teachers of Biology, Chemistry and Physics. These books (fully cited at the end of the article) are designed to help teachers who have limited laboratory equipment and materials, and who are expected to operate under a system that now puts more emphasis on practical work in science.

Although the development process began in 1991, this year (1993) is the first year of implementation of the new I.A. system. The submission and approval process was time-consuming but by-land-large proceeded smoothly, and the verification visits have shown that, in general, teachers are dedicating themselves to this broader and more teacher-dependent form of assessment. The ultimate consequence appears to be as intended - that students are benefiting.

The second vehicle of change to the PSSC system has been the introduction of 'school-based' subjects. Although mentioned in the defining document of the system (i.e., the 'Regulations'), these subjects had never been clearly defined, and the process by which they would come into being had never been specified. They were a dormant concept. This changed in 1991 when PSSC-offering schools were informed of the possibility of such subjects, and were asked to respond if interested.

Two schools eventually decided that they wanted to put in the work required to satisfy the policy and procedures that the SPBEA had now put in place regarding the development of such subjects. A lot of effort - from the schools, the SPBEA, and consultants - went into putting together the prescriptions for these subjects, the first being 'Development Studies' and the second 'Agriculture'. This is the first year (1993) of their implementation.

Briefly, the courses for these subjects have to satisfy certain design requirements before they will be accepted as part of the PSSC system. Assessment in the two existing school-based subjects is by course-work and exam - the latter being drafted by the teacher and submitted for evaluation to the SPBEA. A 'word-grade' based on final scores and other criteria is given to students at the end of the year. This being *credit, satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory.*

Unlike the nine 'regional' PSSC subjects, the student scores for school-based subjects are not statistically moderated or scaled in any way. Also, they are listed as being "school-based" on a student's certificate. This, and the word-grade, clearly separates them from the regional subjects (which are graded by numerals from "1" to "9"). Since school-based subjects are assessed completely 'internally' - by the school - rather than by the internal-external mix used for regional subjects, it makes sense that they be identified on the certificate. This should not be seen as an expression of inferiority however, simply as a difference in approach - one that uses, among other things, an alternative form of assessment. The great strength of school-based subjects is that they can be tailor-made to suit the needs and resources of a particular school community. The two existing subjects have set a vibrant and exciting precedent. Further school-based subjects, and other schools' versions of the current ones, are being developed.

The third project that has pushed the PSSC system further down the road of independent development is the new PSSC Physics syllabus - to be implemented for the first time in 1994. The term "syllabus" is an intentional departure from "prescription", the word the SPBEA usually uses to describe the defining document of a particular subject. The 'new' term is used because of the expanded nature of the document. Rather than briefly listing subject content and assessment details, the new Physics syllabus lists clearly linked objectives for each topic, describes common conceptual difficulties encountered by students, gives practical suggestions, and summarizes some applications of the topic concepts. Furthermore, most of the 140 pages

have diagrams and illustrations that relate to the topics being described. The most important changes however, are the adoption of a core-plus-option approach to the subject design, and the content of the optional work.

About 85 per cent of the subject is 'core' work that must be followed by all students. The remaining 15 per cent of the subject is made up by selecting one of six 'options' to follow. These are units of study that have been designed to make the study of physics more relevant to more students in the PSSC system. Some understanding of the approach taken on this issue can be gained simply by reading the option titles: *Electrostatics, the atom and radioactivity; Boat Physics; Motor vehicle physics; Energy extraction systems; Electronics;* and *Physics and biological systems.* A philosophy of 'modest change but only for those who want it' is also built into the course. If a teacher chooses to follow the first option, then the course of study remains basically the same as it had been for the last four years. The hope however, is that the exciting new teaching possibilities built into the other options will encourage their adoption.

The options will also be represented on the final exam paper - students choosing one of six option sections to answer. Recognising that some teachers will be reluctant to choose an option that has no past exam paper, the SPBEA has also produced a booklet entitled *Sample examination questions (with answers) for the options.* This is intended to give some measure of historical equivalence to the new areas of work. The Physics development, like most others in the system, was based on extensive consultation with potential users - it will be of great interest to see which options prove the most popular in 1994.

Hopefully the foregoing shows that the PSSC is not a stagnant system. Work is constantly taking place on a number of fronts and will continue as long as financial and person-power resources are available.

References

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