

## A critique of the SACE Review panel's report on community views

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Kelvin Gregory

School of Education, Flinders University [kelvin.gregory@flinders.edu.au](mailto:kelvin.gregory@flinders.edu.au)

*The South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), introduced in 1992-93, is a credential and formal qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). SACE was recently subjected to a review that led to a series of significant recommendations. These recommendations came out of a process that began with the Review Panel scrutinising existing SACE structures for continuing validity and effectiveness. This paper critically examines claims made by the Review Panel of a resounding confirmation of the need for reform. Since the panel's claims are built upon qualitative data (community submissions), they are critiqued using widely-accepted standards for qualitative research. In particular, this paper examines the panel's evidence regarding "academic creep", the dominance of the academic pathway, and issues regarding the Tertiary Entrance Rank. The findings suggest that the panel's case for reform may apply more to government schools than to the SACE itself. This paper concludes that the case for reform is poorly developed and largely supported by research lacking transparency and unsuited to making generalisations.*

Qualitative research, curriculum, education policy, post-compulsory education

### INTRODUCTION

The Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA), an independent statutory body of the South Australian Government, provides "curriculum, assessment, reporting, and certification services to the students of South Australia, the Northern Territory, and South-East Asia who undertake studies for the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE)" (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 2005, p.5). Introduced in 1992-93, SACE is recognised as a credential and formal qualification within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (Keightley and Keighley-James, 2001). Offering more than 70 subjects over two stages to mostly post-compulsory students, the SACE was recently reviewed by a three-person panel consisting of the Honourable Greg Crafter, Dr. Patricia Crook, and Professor Alan Reid (Crafter, Crook, and Reid, 2006).

The substantive term of reference required the Review Panel to "achieve a curriculum and assessment framework that will meet the diverse needs of all students and result in high and more socially equitable levels of retention, completion and pathways beyond school" (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 28). The authors make a number of recommendations centred upon the creation of a new SACE that is based upon principles, design concepts, and features that are, they claim, flexible and responsive, credible, inclusive, connected, worthwhile, futures-orientated, and supportive of quality learning and teaching. The proposed new SACE represents a substantial shift in conceptualisation of knowledge, the ways in which it is organised, and what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it (Apple, 1993). For example:

[K]nowledge is shaped by the world views and ideologies of those who produce and present it, it is problematic rather than given. (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 106)

It was suggested that the distinction between mathematics–science–technology and arts– humanities–social and cultural studies as areas of knowledge is possibly no longer tenable at a time when the boundaries between disciplines are being blurred. (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 105)

And, the proposed reporting system will utilise a grading system whereby grades from E to A+ represent “achieved” in contrast to common assessment practices that use D to A letter grades to represent passing grades (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 136).

The Review Panel’s Final Report is divided into three major sections: (1) the case for reform, (2) a new SACE within a learning space, and (3) detailed reform proposals. The focus of this paper is largely the case for reform, the platform used to support the sweeping recommendations. The review panel’s report presents this case in three chapters: (1) current challenges, (2) the case for reform - statistical trends and patterns, and (3) the case for reform – community views. This paper critically examines the third of these chapters.

Chapter 3 of the SACE Review Final Report, *The case for reform – community views*, reports on “the extent and depth” to which the South Australian and Northern Territory’s communities “are concerned with senior secondary education and SACE” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 57). The authors argue that these communities’ views “provide a resounding confirmation of the need for reform, and a compelling diagnosis of the areas in which change is required” (p. 57). In establishing their case for reform, the panel have placed their review within the realm of evidence-backed or evidence-based policy (Ritter *et al.*, 2003; Solesbury, 2001). Such a move is commendable since educational decision-making calls “for data that supports conclusions reached from intuition and from the heart” (Montgomery, 2004, p. 160).

By using an evidence-based approach, the Review Panel opens the policy-making process to critique on methodological grounds. The focus of this paper is primarily upon the quality of the research that provides the evidence base for the SACE recommendations.

Central to this paper is the evaluation of the “resounding confirmation” and “compelling diagnosis” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006) for the case for reform. This is done through the use of well-established, widely-held standards for qualitative research. Paraphrasing Apple (1993, p. 224), the paper’s task is simple: to raise enough serious questions to make us stop and think before we rush off and make changes that may be ill-informed and counter-productive. This paper does not directly address the review panel’s recommendations, simply because if the case (i.e., evidence) for reform is not adequate, then the substantive basis of the recommendations is absent.

### STANDARDS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Chapter 3 of the SACE Review Final Report discusses a qualitative study of community views. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) states that two overarching principles underlie the reporting of such research. These are:

First, reports of empirical research should be warranted; that is, adequate evidence should be provided to justify the outcomes and conclusions. Second, reports of empirical research should be transparent; that is, reporting should make explicit the logic of inquiry and activities that led from the development of the initial interest, topic, problem, or research question; through the gathering and analysis of data or empirical evidence; to the articulated outcomes of the study. (Task Force on Reporting of Research Methods in AERA Publications, 2006)

The warrant for claims can be established in a number of ways, including the comparison of evidence from a number of sources. The Review Panel states “knowledge is shaped by the world

views and ideologies of those who produce and present it” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 106; see also Crotty, 1998). Such a view is commensurate with the need for triangulation. Triangulation is a methodological approach in which multiple paradigms, methods, sources, theories, and investigators are employed (Flick, 1992; Lewis and Grimes, 1999). Triangulation has significant potential to expand the depth and breadth of our understandings of complex social issues (Farmer *et al.*, 2006). Triangulation is usually employed for confirmation, completeness and reproduction reasons (McEvoy, 2006; Risjord *et al.*, 2002; Risjord *et al.*, 2001; Zeller, 1997).

Regarding transparency, researchers using a qualitative approach should communicate the logic and interactive processes that led to their account (Altheide and Johnson, 1994). They should enable professional scrutiny and critique of their research (National Research Council, 2002). Researchers should establish the credibility of their findings, ensuring that the account “represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe, explain, or theorise” (Hammersley, 1992). Cutcliffe and McKenna (1999) argue that “the most useful indicator of the credibility of the findings is when the practitioners themselves and the readers of the theory view the findings and regard them as meaningful and applicable in terms of their experience” (p. 379). However, there are obvious limitations to this criterion, including the possibility of practitioner acquiescence and various forms of *groupthink* abounding (Janis, 1982). Groupthink “refers to a process by which a small group of decision makers ...[are] ... more concerned with achieving concurrence among their members than in arriving at carefully considered decisions” (Hensley and Griffin, 1986).

Central to the avoidance of acquiescence and groupthink is the understanding of one’s own position, a desire to learn the partiality of that position, and the expression, questioning, and challenging of differently-situated knowledge (Enslin *et al.*, 2001; Young, 1993). Consequently, the critical examination and reporting of the researcher’s own conceptual framework, including preconceptions, is important in establishing the warrant for each claim (Task Force on Reporting of Research Methods in AERA Publications, 2006). But even that is not enough since “We humans seem to be extremely good at generating ideas, theories, and explanations that have the ring of plausibility. We may be relatively deficient, however, in evaluating and testing our ideas once they are formed” (Gilovich, 1991, p. 59). That can be especially problematic when quotations are selected to support political positions and arguments.

The use of anecdotal evidence can be an especially powerful and persuasive tool in formulating educational policy, with such evidence often being more convincing than statistical evidence, possibly because of its higher imagineability (Hoeken, 2001). Thus the examination of community views presented in the SACE Review Final Report is important, especially if the political or philosophical positions of the researchers are unacknowledged. That examining process starts in this paper with an analysis of the reported participants.

### THE STAKEHOLDERS

The Review Panel appears to have relied on convenience sampling, although it is probable that politically-important case sampling was also utilised (Patton, 1990). Crafter, Crook, and Reid (2006) state that they:

[L]istened to the views of many stakeholders in South Australia and the Northern Territory over a five-month period in mid-2004. Written and oral submissions were received from young people, both in and out of school; their parents and teachers; business, community and government leaders; unions; employers and employee organisations; the education community; and the community at large. (p. 57)

For reasons unknown, the Review Panel did not obtain submissions from South-East Asian SACE participants. In 2005 there were 1288 Asian students studying the South Australian Matriculation (SAM) program based upon SACE stage 2 subjects, representing 6.6 per cent of the students receiving one or more Stage 2 subject in that year (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia, 2005). Of these students, an impressive 97.0 per cent completed the Higher Education Selection Subjects (HESS) requirements for admission to the University of Adelaide, Flinders Universities, and the University of South Australia. The exclusion of these students from the review lends support to the view that the review was selective, avoiding high-performing cohorts. There is not a single quote in the chapter that reflects the view of South-East Asian and other high-performing students. An unrepresentative sample of students is inadequate for the purposes of making generalisations about the SACE student population.

While seeking to ensure that SACE would meet the “diverse needs of all students and result in high and more socially equitable levels of retention, completion and pathways beyond school” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 9), the Review Panel apparently decided not to report why SACE is *appealing* to at least some students. In so doing, the Review Panel has crafted their reform to disempower these students by ignoring, neglecting or downplaying their views. Justification for this action may come from the perception that successful students represent the privileged or societally empowered. For example, Luke (2003) claims that “Australian schools service the social and economic interests of slightly more than half of all Australian youth” (p. 89) while Taylor (1982) writes that “This process of imposition of reality is hidden beneath an ostensibly neutral system which favours those with power in society” (p. 152). Such statements are commensurate with the proposition that through consensual domination, a powerful group in South Australia is controlling education and the state (Robinson, 1996). Peck (2001) argues that “hegemonic power is involved in selecting what knowledge is of value and defines the agenda and limits of any debate by presenting certain concepts and relationships as normal” (p. 61). These theorists do not directly account for the students who ‘escape’ their socio-economic class, but instead argue that these individuals help perpetuate the system:

The exceptional success of those few individuals who escape the collective fate of their class apparently justifies educational selection and gives credence to the myth of the school as a liberating force among those who have been eliminated, by giving the impression that success is exclusively a matter of gifts and work. (Bourdieu, 1976 p. 116)

A trend not recognised by Bourdieu and the Review Panel is the absolute change in advantaged outcomes for young people of all backgrounds (Croll, 2004). Since the 1980s, Australia has witnessed a massive increase in the proportion of young people completing Year 12 studies, entering universities, and moving away from manual labour jobs and into managerial and professional occupations.

If the Review Panel is following a neo-Marxist approach, their report may be read as a subversive political document aimed at destroying an educational hegemony. This would explain why there is not a single quote that indicates what students, teachers, parents, or other stakeholders find positive in the present SACE. In utilising a theory of cultural reproduction, they have seemingly overlooked the upward educational and class mobility between generations (Goldthorpe, 1996).

In order to sustain an argument of hegemonic domination, the Review Panel needs to explicitly describe their theory of microsituational dominance (Collins, 2000). As Sayer (2000) observes

The same causal power can produce different outcomes (for example, economic competition can prompt firms to restructure or to close). Sometimes different causal

mechanisms can produce the same result: for instance, you can lose your job for a variety of reasons. (p. 15)

A microsituational, or individual-level, theory would explain how information is viewed differently by people within the same social setting. For example, how and why do students from the same background engage differently with the SACE? A meso-level could be added to the microsituational explanation to take into account the social environment (Von Scheve and Von Luede, 2005).

A rational-action-theory approach may have been more suitable for the SACE Review in this and other respects. Such a theory assumes that students have both some possibility and some capacity “for acting autonomously and for seeking their goals in ways that are more or less appropriate to the situations in which they find themselves” (Goldthorpe, 1996). In the absence of a microsituational theory, without addressing the overall changes that have taken place in South Australian society, and given the purposive sampling of stakeholders (and their comments), the review fits rather well within the realm of ‘data torturing’.

### **DATA TORTURING**

Data torturing involves manipulating information in a variety of ways until the researcher establishes a desired claim. Like other forms of torture, “it leaves no incriminating marks when done skilfully, and like other forms of torture, it may be difficult to prove even when there is incriminating evidence” (Mills, 1993, p. 1196). Two major types, opportunistic and Procrustean, are identified in the literature. Opportunistic data torturing involves manipulating the significant testing conditions to find the desired results. Such manipulations are reasonably easy to spot and have been, to some degree, circumvented through the use of rigorous statistical reporting standards (Finch *et al.*, 2001). Procrustean data torturing relies on selective reporting. Forms of Procrustean data torturing include selecting participants or information in a way that supports a claim while disregarding or excluding those participants or information likely to undermine a sought-after claim. Thus, the selective use of quotes is one indication of Procrustean data torturing. Selective reporting may involve aggregating the data in ways that support the desired claim or the use of vague or misleading terms such as ‘many’, ‘most’, ‘some’, and ‘few’ without mention of the number and category of stakeholders involved.

### **FREQUENCIES AND THE CASE FOR REFORM**

Where a warranted claim “entails a generalising statement, it should be supported with evidence of its relative frequency” (Task Force on Reporting of Research Methods in AERA Publications, 2006, p. 11). This applies to the use of terms like ‘most’, ‘many,’ and ‘frequently’. In addition, general phrases like ‘Students complained...’ and ‘A number of...’ that are likely to infer generalisability require appropriate support.

A recurrent issue in the “The case for reform – community views” is the apparent generalisation to a population. On the basis of the submissions received by the Review Panel, the report speaks in general terms about students, teachers, and academic subjects. For example, “Many students are disaffected with school for a range of reasons” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 58). Later in the same section of the report, “Numbers of students believed that flexibility would be increased...” and “the lack of success of many students” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 58) adds to the perception of a grave problem. Notwithstanding the possibility that these students are disaffected with school and not SACE per se, the question is how the Review Panel established the nature and extent of this disaffection. Nowhere in the report is the actual number of student respondents mentioned, nor is a population-orientated sampling method described, implemented, or evaluated. Further in the same section is the following statement:

This is consistent with the findings of other Australian research that has attributed the lack of success of many students to the inability or unwillingness of educational institutions to be flexible in their approaches to curriculum, assessment, pedagogy and school organisation and structures. (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 58)

Again the “lack of success of many students” is problematic. Although it can be reasonably argued that all students should experience success, the nature of the success is ill defined and vaguely conceptualised, and the lack of success is both overplayed and poorly reported. To what else can the lack of success be attributed? Of the four references cited to support the statement, the first two (Boughton, 2001; Department of Education Science and Training, 2002) focus upon small case studies of Indigenous students and the third (Thomson, 2002) is a case study of students from an urban area of Adelaide. The fourth reference, a book by Teese and Polesel (2003), is an attack upon a claimed domination of the Year 12 curriculum by universities using primarily Victorian data.

The work of Cormack and colleagues (Cormack, 2004; Cormack and Comber, 1998) cited elsewhere in the Review Report, is based on case study research conducted in less than a dozen schools. The initial report on that research, noting the smaller number of schools, states:

Hence this report makes no claims for generalising beyond these specific student groups. However, the close-up studies of the experiences of students in these schools raise important questions about who are the students at risk of not completing the SACE, and what being ‘at risk’ might mean in different locations and schools. (Cormack and Comber, 1998)

The Review Panel would have been wise to have done likewise and avoided the use of an unqualified ‘many students’.

The pervasiveness of unsubstantiated generalisations and the use of unqualified numerical terms is evident in Table 1. While the text in this table was extracted from Chapter 3 of the SACE Review Final Report, the problem of misleading or inappropriate use of such terms is by no means confined to that chapter. The Review Panel should have documented sampling methods and data reduction strategies if it really wanted to make credible generalisation statements.

### THE FLEXIBILITY OF SACE

The Review Panel makes a number of significant recommendations aimed at reforming SACE. They do so while acknowledging that “The flexibility that already exists in SACE was valued by many respondents but was also considered to be a ‘well kept secret’ and to not go far enough” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 58). At least two sets of questions stemming from their claim should be answered. First, who is keeping it a secret? Is this a problem with SSABSA, schools, teachers, or students, or does the root of the problem lie elsewhere? Second, what are the mechanisms used to keep it a secret? Without an unequivocal answer to these questions, how will implementation problems be rectified? Indeed, it is difficult to envisage a quality review failing to pursue this line of investigation. Second, just how flexible does SACE need to be? We are told “numbers of students” wanted more “opportunities to negotiate the content of their learning and the assessment methods used” (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 58). How do these ‘numbers of students’ compare with the ‘many respondents’? Do these ‘numbers of students’ have ideas to ensure reasonable comparability of assessments? And how will ‘standards’ be maintained? Cormack (2004), reporting on the findings of a small scale case study-type intervention project, recommends more flexibility in the timing of enrolments, results and certification, but what else is needed beyond SSABSA current practices? Importantly, how will the proposed changes maintain the credibility

and integrity of the SACE? Or is SACE to be changed at the whim of apparently disaffected students who may or may not be accountable for their own behaviour?

**Table 1. A selection of unqualified statements (Source: Crafter et al., 2006)**

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Many submissions from schools, individuals and students identified particular stressors associated with SACE studies, especially at Stage 2 level. (p. 59)

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In that sense, it is widely held that for many students Stage 2 is quite unlike any other year either before or after, in terms of its intensity and perceived separation from the reality of their lives. (p. 59)

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The majority of students, teachers and parents gave support in their submissions to there being more recognition of prior learning and accreditation of out-of-school learning. The SSABSA Board said that the current recognition policy could be used to a greater extent to give credit to non-school learning. (pp. 59-60)

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Students believed that relevance would be increased if they had greater opportunity to influence the content of their studies and the methods used to assess their learning. (p. 60)

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Many respondents referred to the importance of developing specific skills and capacities through the senior curriculum. (p. 61)

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A greater capacity for students to negotiate their learning programs and an enhanced capacity to integrate community experience and community-based learning into the SACE were advocated in many submissions as ways to increase the relevance of the curriculum for students. (p. 61)

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There was widespread support for schools having the capacity to shape curriculum and assessment at the local level, within broad centrally developed frameworks. (p. 61)

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A number of schools supported the abandonment of the current SACE pattern requirements, arguing that it inhibited them from tailoring programs to students' interests and career aspirations. Similarly, many students felt that the pattern of subjects they were required to study was restrictive, and prevented them from specialising in areas of interest to them. (p.62)

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Many respondents expressed concern that there had been a trend to make the content of subjects offered at Stage 2 of the SACE more abstract. This was generally accompanied by a concern that the assessment requirements at Stage 2 had become more 'academic'. (p.62)

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There was wide support for a closer association between the SACE and the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework (DETE 2001). This was commonly linked to the fact that Year 10 is part of the Senior Years Band within the SACSA Framework. (p. 64)

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Most respondents considered that current assessment practices within the SACE are problematic. (p. 65)

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Almost half the students interviewed during the consultation process were involved with parttime work and other responsibilities outside school. These students were particularly affected by the assessment demands at Stage 2, as were those young people who were responsible for supporting their families. (pp. 65-66)

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The Panel noted the strength of community concern about the effect of university selection processes on senior secondary education, and the strong and widespread desire for change. (p. 73)

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To the extent that early school leaving and poor performance by certain groups of young people is a symptom of a deeper underlying dissatisfaction with the school experience, the nature of the senior secondary curriculum and the structures and processes that surround it and support young people's engagement in it need to be reformed. The sources of the dissatisfaction include the failure of the curriculum to gain or hold a student's interest; a clash between the culture of the school environment and the student's needs, interests, values or priorities; and a judgment by the student that some other activity promises a better return on time and effort than does staying at school. The need for reform is supported by a wide range of stakeholders. They have identified, each from their own perspectives, the areas that need to be addressed to improve the participation, retention and success of all students and, in some cases, specific changes to correct the current low levels of participation and achievement for specific groups of young people. In light of the groundswell of support for reform and the generally shared diagnosis of what needs to be changed, the Review Panel has identified a set of principles to guide the reform of senior secondary education. These principles form the basis for the recommendations contained in Parts B, C and D of the Report. They are outlined in the following Chapter. (p. 79)

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The Review Panel notes "There is strong support for a personalised approach to learning, using case management strategies to support young people, including mentoring and counselling for those inclined to drop out of the system and those struggling to stay on" (p. 59). Such findings are congruent with Cormack's research (Cormack, 2004; Cormack and Comber, 1998). Notwithstanding the enormous cost of providing intensive individualised educational programs, the question should be asked whether the existing SACE would suffice if such mechanisms were

implemented. The equity of providing such programs for the students who are at risk of dropping out, and not for those students who are underachieving would need to be explored. That the Review Panel did not address the 'gifted students' gives at least tacit support for the notion of a bias against specific sections of the student population and the subjects they choose to study. This leads to a much bigger issue: Is the Review Panel aiming at equity and excellence, or just equity? If the proposed new SACE framework is capability orientated and truly involves 'success for all', then it is both reasonable and certain that concerns about a minimum competency curriculum will surface. From this point of view, excellence is not a primary concern of the Review Panel and hence their recommendation that SACE and the Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) should be further separated is questionable.

### **TERTIARY ENTRANCE RANK, ACADEMIC CREEP, AND SACE**

The Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) is a percentile score derived from specific SACE subjects. The following text appears under the heading 'The case for selecting students for university on the basis of their Year 12 performance':

In their written submissions, the universities argued that a TER based on students' Year 12 results has high credibility as a fair and equitable method of selection for university and gives credibility to the SACE. Along with SSABSA, the universities argued that achievement in the SACE is a better predictor of school leavers' success at university than independent tests of students' potential or aptitude, and that selection for university should continue to be based on achievement in school studies. Some school groups, on the other hand, cited the high proportion of their past students who had dropped out of university within the first year as evidence that the TER was not necessarily a good predictor of success at university. (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 72)

The final sentence in the above quote is not an argument for selecting students on the basis of their Year 12 performance. But more importantly, it is a weak argument against the use of the TER. The TER is not designed to predict student dropout. As the universities argued, it is designed to predict student success! Consider the following questions directed at the final sentence of the above quote:

- Which school groups?
- Was there anything else connecting these school groups? For example, what was climate of the school? What preparation did the students receive for university study?
- What is a high proportion?
- What SACE topics did they take?
- What programs were they enrolled in at university? Does this have an effect on retention?
- Why did the students drop out?

The last question is perhaps the most interesting. Students drop out of university for many reasons, some unrelated to their secondary schooling, TER, or, for that matter, university programs (McLaughlin *et al.*, 1998; Power, 1984; Power *et al.*, 1987; Win and Miller, 2005). Research, some of which was conducted in South Australia, shows that the TER is a strong predictor of achievement in mathematics, chemistry, physics, engineering and medicine but a relatively weak predictor for achievement in the arts, humanities and law (Everett and Robins, 1991; Power *et al.*, 1987). To simply report that 'some school groups' stated that the TER was not a good predictor of success provides little support for severing the links between SACE and TER, and does little justice to the existing body of research literature.



The Review Panel states that “Many respondents expressed concern that there had been a trend to make the content of subjects offered at Stage 2 in the SACE more abstract” (p. 62) and this is generally accompanied with a concern that assessment requirements at Stage 2 had become more ‘academic’. Ignoring the unqualified ‘many respondents’, there are several questions that need to be asked. For example, what is ‘academic’? The authors state that several subjects had been “redeveloped and subsequently rendered out of reach of many students” (p. 61). Again, how many students? What are the characteristics of these students, their teachers and schools? And, implementing more thorough research processes, what changes were made to these subjects, why were these changes made, who made these changes, and how were the changes made? Is this perception widespread, or is it localised? Are there some schools that operate a curriculum model that meets the needs and goals of all students? If so, how do these schools operate? If Crafter et al. (2006) are seeking to challenge a hegemonic system that utilises ‘academic subjects’ as a primary means of control, exposing the curriculum change processes to a thorough review should provide evidence of the hegemonic apparatus. But they passed up this opportunity, begging the question: Why? There is also a need to provide corroborating evidence showing that this claimed detrimental effect is well supported. For example, it would have been relatively easy to compare enrolment and pass rates before and after the changes to subjects, albeit within the limitations of the SSABSA standard-setting process. This analysis could have been completed using a number of comparative categories, including for example, male/female, rural/urban, small school/large school, and Indigenous/non-Indigenous.

Furthermore, changes to subject curriculum and assessment are largely teacher driven through committees and must go through a series of SSABSA reviews. Crafter et al. (2006) stated that greater reliance is being placed upon teacher judgment for assessment “since teachers are closest to the action of student learning, they are in the best positions to make decisions that relate to when, where and how assessment can be used to promote student learning” (p. 129). If this is the case, then the Review Panel needs to reconcile two apparently contradictory lines of thought. Either teachers’ judgement, especially through the peak subject committees, are credible and trustworthy in both curriculum and assessment matters or they are not. Some support for the second position can be found in the literature. For example, Frisbie (1988) reports teacher-made assessment reliabilities of around 0.50. Postlethwaite and Wiley reported final-year achievement data in biology, chemistry, earth sciences, and physics for 23 countries (Postlethwaite and Wiley, 1992). This achievement data has coefficients of variation of 0.25 or higher. Translating this to a SACE scale of 0 to 20, a subject mean of 10 would have a standard deviation of 2.5 or more. Assuming a 2.5 point standard deviation and a reliability of 0.50, the uncertainty in a student’s assessment would be 1.75. In other words, we would be approximately 95 per cent certain a student with a score of 10 on a teacher-made assessment with a reliability of 0.50 would have a true score within the range from 6.5 through to 13.5.

Elsewhere, under a heading “Validity, reliability and fairness” (p. 67), validity is confused with choice of assessment method. Assessment experts do not consider assessment methods as being valid or invalid. Rather, it is the interpretation and use of assessment results that are valid or invalid. That the Review Panel made this most fundamental mistake suggests that the review of SACE was not conducted with a sound knowledge of assessment.

Of course, there is a need to ensure that a suitable curriculum is offered to each student, but consideration needs to be given to whether the Review Panel offers any credible evidence of academic creep. Certainly, triangulation with other sources is required. Marks, McMillan and Hillman (2001) report “A lower proportion of South Australian students take tertiary entrance subjects compared to their peers in other states” (p. 17) (see also Table 2). In 1998, 76.5 per cent of New South Wales students obtained a university entrance score compared with just 65 per cent

in South Australia. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, South Australia has a lower percentage of its population who have a Bachelor degree or higher than any other Australian state, with the single exception of Tasmania. While academic creep may indeed be occurring, there appears to be evidence in the Final Report of an academic cringe effect as they argue that the present SACE is dominated by the TER and university-orientated curricula.

A further problem with the charge of 'academic creep' is that other theories offer better, more plausible alternatives. For example:

It is simpler to assume that there is no systematic variation in levels of aspiration, or related values, among classes, and that variation in the courses of action that are actually taken arises from the fact that, in pursuing any given goal from different class origins, different 'social distances' will have to be traversed ... different opportunities and constraints, and thus the evaluation of different sets of probable costs and benefits, will be involved. (Goldthorpe, 1996 p. 490)

**Table 2. Summary statistics for TER Scores, All Students and By Selected Jurisdiction (Source: Marks, McMillan, and Hillman 2001, p. 65)**

<b>Standard Statistics (Weighted)</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Qld</b>	<b>SA</b>
Mean	70.2	69.1	70.9	64.9	79.9
(Standard error)	(0.5)	(1.0)	(0.9)	(1.2)	(1.0)
Median	73.8	71.1	72.0	70.0	81.5
Standard Deviation	19.8	22.5	19.5	24.1	10.0
Inter-Quartile Range	31.3	29.1	31.2	47.5	22.0
<b>Percent of Sample with Score (Weighted)</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>NSW</b>	<b>Vic</b>	<b>Qld</b>	<b>SA</b>
Of Year 9 Cohort	52.6	57.1	62.6	55.4	45.0
Of Year 12 Participants	68.0	73.0	76.8	70.5	59.4

**Table 3. Level of highest educational attainment as percentage of State total, 2001 (Source: ABS Education and Work, 2001, Cat. No. 6227.0, Table 8)**

<b>State</b>	<b>Year 10 and below</b>	<b>Year 11 to Year 12</b>	<b>Cert. to Adv. Dip.</b>	<b>Bachelors or above</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>New South Wales</b>	35.5	24.6	21.9	18.0	100.0
<b>Victoria</b>	27.5	32.6	20.7	19.1	100.0
<b>Queensland</b>	35.0	27.5	23.1	14.4	100.0
<b>Western Australia</b>	32.0	28.8	23.0	16.2	100.0
<b>South Australia</b>	30.6	34.8	20.9	13.7	100.0
<b>Tasmania</b>	45.1	19.9	23.4	11.6	100.0
<b>Northern Territory</b>	29.9	30.0	24.3	15.8	100.0
<b>Australian Capital Territory</b>	20.7	30.6	19.3	29.4	100.0
<b>Australia</b>	32.6	28.4	21.9	17.1	100.0

Such a view leads one away from a perspective of 'academic' domination towards an examination of the curriculum offered in middle and high schools and its effect on the social distance to be traversed. From this perspective, the less advantaged class position can be ameliorated to a degree through the offering of appropriate curriculum and support structures that minimise the distance between secondary and tertiary education. The separation of secondary education from tertiary education may simply increase any barriers already faced by the working class. What may be more important is the provision of suitable programs, including curricula, to enable students to make

choices without undue concern about the social distances. A thorough review of the middle school curriculum would be a suitable starting point.

**Table 4. Level of highest educational attainment as percentage of State total, 2005 (Source: ABS Education and Work, 2005, Cat. No. 6227.0, Table 13)**

State	Year 10 and below	Year 11 to Year 12	Cert. to Adv. Dip.	Bachelors or above	Total
New South Wales	29.5	24.6	23.3	21.2	100.0
Victoria	23.0	32.0	22.7	21.0	100.0
Queensland	28.7	27.8	25.8	16.6	100.0
Western Australia	26.8	28.1	25.4	18.4	100.0
South Australia	23.9	34.9	23.5	15.7	100.0
Tasmania	39.0	21.3	23.0	15.3	100.0
Northern Territory	22.4	30.1	28.0	18.1	100.0
Australian Capital Territory	17.5	29.7	18.4	32.6	100.0
Australia	27.0	28.3	23.8	19.6	100.0

One more point should be made about the Review Panel's attack on the university pathway. As shown in Table 5, the relationship between TER and parental occupational and educational group is slightly curvilinear, with children of semi-skilled and unskilled parents receiving higher scores than children of skilled manual workers. There was no significant difference between TERs obtained by students with labouring or unskilled parents and those students with professional or managerial parents. Crafter, Crook, and Reid (2006) need to explain this pattern if they are to sustain an argument of curriculum domination by specific social classes.

**Table 5. Mean TER score by Parental Occupational and Educational Group – All Students and by Selected Jurisdiction, 1998 (Marks, McMillan, and Hillman 2001, p.18)**

Parent's Occupational Group	All	NSW	Vic.	Qld	SA
Professional	76.9 (0.7)	75.6 (1.3)	78.8 (1.2)	70.7 (1.9)	83.4 (1.4)
Managerial	72.5 (0.8)	70.9 (1.4)	72.1 (1.6)	68.4 (1.7)	82.5 (1.2)
Sales, Clerical, Service	69.0 (0.9)	67.9 (1.5)	69.7 (1.8)	64.3 (2.3)	75.7 (1.9)
Trades, Skilled Manual	65.3 (0.9)	63.3 (1.5)	66.7 (1.3)	62.1 (2.2)	71.9 (2.0)
Semi-Skilled Manual, Operatives	63.6 (1.2)	62.1 (2.4)	64.7 (2.0)	60.8 (2.9)	77.2 (3.4)
Labourers, Unskilled Manual	64.9 (1.2)	64.6 (2.4)	64.7 (1.7)	59.4 (2.6)	80.0 (2.0)

### CASE FOR REFORM - OF SACE OR (GOVERNMENT) SCHOOLS?

The SACE Review Panel received written submissions and consultations predominately from government schools (Appendices 3 and 4 of the SACE Review Final Report). That most submissions came from the government education sector makes the report rather disturbing. If, as the Review Panel seems to be claiming that:

Many students are disaffected with school (p. 58).

Whether to go to school or not is a daily question for many young people (Researcher on youth at risk, p. 59).

The number of students doing part-time work compounds the problem of school satisfaction (Representative of the Youth Affairs Council of SA, p. 59).

Then the logical question to be asked is: are these comments representative of all students, or do they primarily reflect the views of public school students? The second part of the question has substantial merit since the overall drift is from government to non-government schools and not the other way around. That being the case, it may be that the Review Panel is arguing for an educational reform aimed at addressing problems in the public school sector. Of course, the use of “many” in the quotes is questionable and highlights the need for greater transparency and a detailed sampling plan.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

If the core features of a democratic citizenship include the ability to

Think critically, to participate in public dialogue, to consider the rights and needs of others, to live in harmony with diverse groups of people, to act on important social issues, to be accountable for one’s choices and decisions, and to work to bring about the conditions in which all individuals can develop to their fullest capacity and potentials. (Hyttén, 2006)

Then a suitable litmus test of Australian democracy will be when we create “conditions for a free exchange of ideas ... enabling us to make fully informed decisions” (Hyttén 2006, p. 221) as we strive for equity, self-determination and freedom. Too often the research practices are hidden from the public and blind faith invited or, perhaps more accurately, demanded. Unfortunately, the same can be said of the SACE Review Final Report. As noted by Raymond and Hanushek (2003):

Distinct from other policy fields, reports in education seem to be taken at face value or – worse – on the political orientations of the authors, independent of the rigor of the analysis or the suitability of the inferences that are drawn. (p. 15)

If improving education in South Australia and moving the State towards a fuller realisation of democratic ideals are sought-after outcomes, then reports like those of the SACE Review Panel must invite, encourage, enable, and facilitate the critical analysis of their findings before their recommendations are implemented.

The Review Panel is no doubt serious in their intent to make South Australian schools more socially democratic and more socially just. They have raised many issues that are part of the common lore of South Australian, and perhaps Australian, education.

Democratic schools are both (humanistic and child-centred) . . . in many ways, but their vision extends beyond purposes such as improving the school climate or enhancing students’ self-esteem. Democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them. (Crafter *et al.*, 2006, p. 11)

However, there is little real sense of democratic processes being facilitated by their report. The lack of transparency exposes them to charges of being undemocratic and thus philosophically inconsistent with their espoused aims. Researchers must be accountable, exposing their research to critical review (Fine *et al.*, 2000). Reviews such as that undertaken by Crafter *et al.* (2006) should ensure that the submissions and other information are “audit worthy” (Freedland and Carney, 1992). Given the high stakes attached to the SACE certificate, it is important that independent researchers be able to deconstruct thoroughly the procedures, decisions, and conclusions (Schwandt and Halpern, 1988). The research information and processes used by the

Review Panel must be available for scrutiny. Without this, the authors open themselves to charges of paternalism with an attitude of 'trust us, we know what is best for you, your children and the State'.

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