

# ***‘Durable, Credible, Flexible’***

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**Issues Brief on the NSW HSC:  
its strengths and options for  
future enhancements**

**MAY 2025**

# **‘Durable, Credible, Flexible’**

## **The strengths of NSW’s HSC, and options for future enhancements**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

#### **SCOPE**

The NSW *Higher School Certificate* (HSC) is now entering its 59<sup>th</sup> year and remains at the apex of the state’s education landscape for its scale, prestige, and dominant place in educational discourse. Amidst recent reviews, the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) is assessing options for incremental improvements, noting the unique strengths and widespread currency of the credential. This Issues Brief is a contribution to NESA’s work; we hope further discussion ensues.

#### **KEY STRENGTHS OF THE HSC**

- ▶ **Pathway-Agnostic:** Designed to support all post-school pathways equally, and ensure students are not prematurely streamed into university or vocational tracks.
- ▶ **Domain Depth:** Assesses a wide range of subject-specific knowledge and skills, including general skills, rewarding conscientiousness and applied efforts over time.
- ▶ **External Exams:** Externally conducted and moderated assessments maintain a level playing field for students, prevents grade inflation, and underpins public confidence.
- ▶ **Local & Accountable Governance:** Unlike many overseas qualifications, the HSC and its external examinations remain administered by a local, governmental authority.
- ▶ **Teacher Input:** NSW teachers’ input to all levels of HSC design and implementation, including syllabus development and marking.
- ▶ **Adaptability:** The HSC is a constantly evolving credential; the subject of regular reviews over its nearly 60-year history, its pattern of regular, incremental change has underlain its longevity and relevance.

#### **SELECTED CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES**

- ▶ **Reform HSC awards:** The current system of awards can distort subject selection, in many cases disincentivising enrolment in subjects with difficulty in achieving top bands. Combining recognition for high-scaled marks with top band recognition would make awards fairer and reduce misconceptions on subject scaling.
- ▶ **Reduce reliance on take-home assessments:** The rise of AI heightens the risk of misconduct and reduced learning in take-home assessments. It calls for an expanded use of in-school and external assessments, not only written exams, but potentially more oral interviews and practical works as well.
- ▶ **Proactive minimum standards:** While fewer than 1% of candidates fail the HSC Minimum Standard, better leveraging the tests as an early diagnostic tool and intervention catalyst can reduce the number of students confronted with this outcome.
- ▶ **Consider better utilising scaled subject scores:** HSC Band results are frequently used in university admissions (bonus points, prerequisites, etc.), yet scaled subject marks are generally the more rigorous measure. Scaled subject scores are a valuable source of information on student performance and could complement the ATAR where subject-specific credentials are desired.



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## KEY STRENGTHS

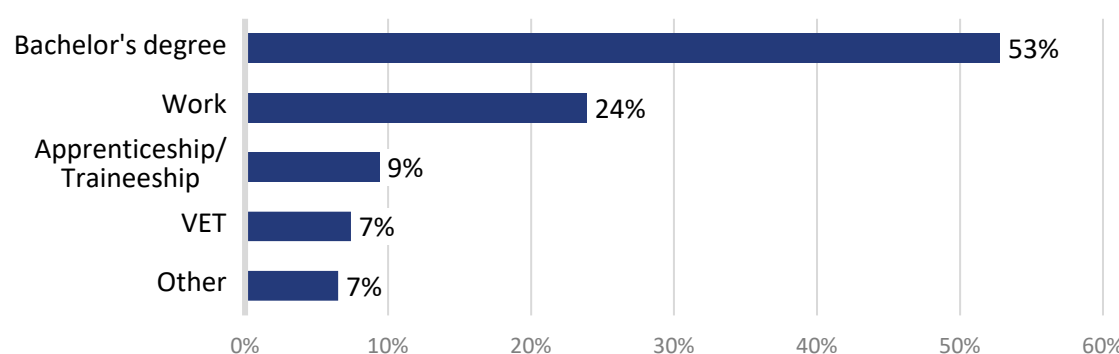
### PATHWAY-AGNOSTIC

A defining strength of the HSC as a credential is its flexibility, not just in timeframes (as an accumulative credential, many of its courses can be completed on accelerated or extended schedules<sup>1 2</sup>), but in the paths it supports; the HSC is designed to be a pathway-agnostic credential that accommodates a wide range of student ambitions. Whether a student is aiming for university admission, vocational education, or direct entry into the workforce, the HSC provides a rigorous and credible certification while not prematurely streaming school students into restrictive tracks.

While HSC results are often analysed through the lens of university admissions, the pathway-agnostic feature ensures that the credential exists to serve *all* school students, including those choosing vocational education pathways. Of the state's 65,000 Year 12 leavers in 2023, only around half (52.8%) went straight on to begin a Bachelor degree.<sup>3</sup> More fundamentally, this feature recognises that academic achievement in school is important for its own sake, as an educational rite of passage, not just for its capacity to unlock entrance to tertiary education.

### Only half of Year 12 completers go straight on to university.

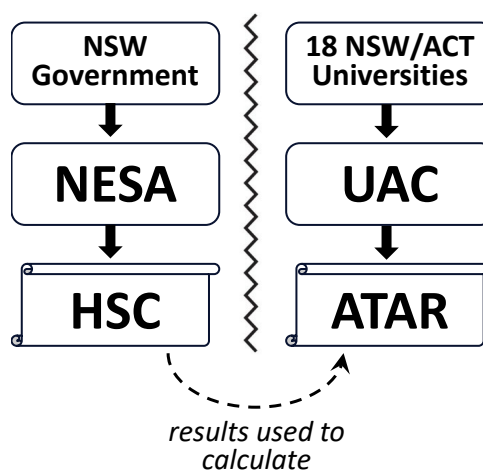
*Estimates for NSW Year 12 Completers post-school destinations, 2023*




Indeed, this pathway-agnostic feature is underscored by multiple points of explicit separation from the university admissions process. University admission standards for school leavers most commonly rely on the ATAR,<sup>4</sup> not HSC results *per se* (raw HSC exam marks are aligned and scaled to generate the ATAR<sup>5</sup>), and only 83% of HSC recipients are eligible for the ATAR. More broadly, while the HSC is transparently governed and administered by an independent NSW government agency, the *NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA)*, the ATAR is generated and released through the *Universities Admissions Centre (UAC)*, which is governed by a committee of vice-chancellors representing the 18 NSW and ACT universities.<sup>6</sup>

### The HSC is deliberately separated from university admissions in both governance and operations.

*Separate governances for HSC and ATAR*





The HSC's pathway-agnostic design contrasts with jurisdictions that have adopted a rigid dual-certification (VET / General Education and University) system, such as Victoria, which experimented with a vocationally oriented certificate but later retreated from that model,<sup>7</sup> following the Firth Review (2020) which recommended an “*integrated senior secondary certificate*”, which the HSC has always been.<sup>8</sup> Overseas, many end-of-school certificates or exams are specifically designed for university entrance, such as the UK's *A-Levels* or the USA's *SAT*<sup>9</sup> or *ACT*<sup>10</sup>, unlike the HSC which accommodates all pathways through a single exam regime.

The decision to maintain a single certificate in NSW can be traced back to HSC's inception in 1967 and was explicitly reaffirmed in the McGaw Review (1997).<sup>11</sup> To this day, it ensures that all students retain choice and adaptability throughout their secondary education.

## EXTERNAL EXAMS

As established during the 1997-2002 McGaw HSC Review process,<sup>12</sup> external assessments are the cornerstone of public trust in the HSC. By relying on externally moderated assessments and NESA-invigilated, standardised tests, the HSC has maintained a reputation as a fair and rigorous credential, ensuring that all students are judged on a level playing field. These assessments, combined with continuous school-based assessment with marks moderated against exam performance, minimise the risk of grade inflation, reduce subjective bias, and provide a consistent benchmark for academic achievement. The process also ensures the integrity of school-based assessments through NESA's moderating process.


An advantage of external standardised testing is that it mitigates the advantage that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds may receive in opportunities for extracurricular activities and help with take-home assignments, two often posited alternatives.<sup>13</sup> HSC exams minimise the influence of a student's social capital, playing an outsized role in assessments such as major projects or personal portfolios. Research underscores the equity benefits of standardised testing over more subjective options. For example, a Stanford University study found that personal essays had a higher correlation with students' socio-economic background than SAT results.<sup>14</sup> Stanford University and many other American colleges are reinstating ACT/SAT test requirements for university admissions,<sup>15 16</sup> underscoring the growing evidence base behind the strengths of standardised testing.

A similar phenomenon was seen in the UK's A-Levels in 2020, when COVID caused external exams to be cancelled, the consequences were rampant grade inflation, with particular advantages seen for students with parents from highly educated backgrounds.<sup>17 18</sup> Likewise, the history of the implementation of the Victorian approach to *Common Assessment Tasks* (CATs) since the 1990s has demonstrated similar problematic outcomes.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, again, there is the history of the abolition and then restoration of external exams in Queensland.<sup>20 21 22</sup>

To be sure, there is evidence of inequality within the senior secondary education system, including student backgrounds, access to additional resources and tutoring, and geographic disparities. While no system is without its challenges, external examinations help ‘level the playing field’ and remain a critical pillar of the HSC. By maintaining consistency, transparency, and rigour, external examinations help safeguard the integrity of student achievement and reinforce public confidence in the credential.

## LOCAL & ACCOUNTABLE GOVERNANCE, AND TEACHER INPUT

The HSC is centrally, locally, and publicly governed, ensuring it is publicly accountable and oriented to local priorities. Moreover, NSW teachers are fully involved in all aspects of HSC design and implementation through relevant NESA Committees. This aspect of practitioner input to HSC design and implementation of the HSC has been a key aspect of the HSC credential since its inception in 1967.



This is not the case for many equivalent credentials in overseas jurisdictions. For example, the UK's university entrance exams, the *A-levels*, are administered through five different examination boards, some privately governed, such as the *Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations* (OCR), whose parent organisation is *Cambridge University Press & Assessment*.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the US's SAT is run by a non-government not-for-profit, *College Board*,<sup>24</sup> while the US's ACT is administered by a for-profit company, *ACT, Inc.*<sup>25</sup> By contrast, in NSW final exams are governed and administered by an independent NSW Government agency, the *New South Wales Education Standards Authority* (NESA),<sup>26</sup> whose board includes a range of education experts, government and union representatives, and executives from the Catholic and Independent school sectors.<sup>27</sup> This model of governance is a key strength of the HSC, maximising its levels of accountability and public trust.

## DOMAIN DEPTH

One of the HSC's defining characteristics is its depth and breadth of domains, setting it apart from many alternative exams used for university entrance. A comparison with the US's widely used SAT and ACT tests illustrates this distinction.

While the HSC covers almost 150 courses, allowing students to tailor their studies to their interests and strengths, the SAT and ACT focus primarily on Mathematics, English, and limited aspects of Science. While the HSC curriculum encourages acquiring depth of knowledge within each subject area and skills related to applying that knowledge, the SAT and ACT emphasise general critical thinking and problem-solving skills, often requiring little prior domain knowledge. Finally, the SAT and ACT are standalone point-in-time exams, while the HSC incorporates a mix of exams, coursework, and continuous assessment over two years.

As a result, while the SAT and ACT reward innate reasoning abilities, the HSC places greater value on sustained effort, subject mastery, and long-term engagement with academic disciplines and specialised subjects. This structure benefits students with a strong work ethic and a passion for specific subjects.

The HSC's domain depth certainly comes with challenges. For example, smaller and rural schools can find it difficult to offer the full range of HSC subjects, and there are difficulties for UAC in reliably scaling subjects with smaller cohorts. While there is room for discussion about the optimal range and concentration of subjects, the HSC's domain depth remains a key strength (indeed, the 2020 Curriculum Review<sup>28</sup> recommended aspiring to even greater depth in subject syllabi).

## ADAPTABILITY

Far from being a static or outdated credential, the HSC has consistently evolved to meet contemporary educational challenges. Since its inception in 1967, it has been the subject of numerous reviews, both external and internal, that have each led to meaningful reforms.

Some 'landmark' reviews are worth noting. From 1911 to 1957, secondary education was supported by two certificates, the Intermediate Certificate (broadly Year 9) and the Leaving Certificate (Year 11). The foundational Wyndham Report (1957) led to the abolition of the *Leaving Certificate* and its replacement with the HSC, with the first exams held in 1967. The Swan/McKinnon Report (1984) led to the short-lived *Certificate of Secondary Education* for those leaving school at the age of 15. After studying its implementation, the new certificate was thought to unintentionally incentivise leaving school early. Consequently, the Carrick Review (1989) led to its reversion to the *School Certificate*. More broadly, the Carrick Review consciously re-endorsed the 'single credential' approach over models of early streaming of students.



The McGaw Review (1997) – an especially wide-ranging and public review – separated the HSC from University Entrance Scores, explicitly underlining it as a pathway-agnostic credential, with the Masters Review (2002) reaffirming this approach. From 2016 to 2018, BOSTES (Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards) and then NESA completed the ‘Strengthening the HSC’ Review, which resulted in the ‘Stronger HSC Standards’ policy direction. This included the requirement that all HSC students meet a minimum standard in literacy and numeracy, and assess students’ ability to apply their knowledge and skills.<sup>29 30</sup> The Curriculum Review (2020), still being implemented, has helped maintain the relevance of HSC’s content and status to the present day.

Beyond the ‘landmark’ reviews, the HSC is constantly being improved through internal reviews, such as NESA’s in-train review of HSC disability provisions,<sup>31 32</sup> or other government actions, such as successfully persuading NSW universities to delay their early offer schemes for HSC students.<sup>33 34</sup>

Overall, the history of the HSC is one of constant renewal. This adaptability has allowed the HSC to incrementally yet substantively integrate new curricula, assessment forms, grading systems, and award regimes. Periodic claims from futurist edu-tech hopefuls who advocate moving away from the 60-year-old HSC appear ignorant of its record of ongoing enhancements and adaptability.

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## **The HSC has maintained its relevance since 1967 through a regular cycle of review and renewal.**

*Key reviews and milestones in the history of the HSC*



## NOTE ON INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE (IB)

The *International Baccalaureate* (IB) – specifically its *Diploma Programme* (DP) for students aged 16 to 19 – is often compared to the HSC, amidst a wider trend of consideration from schools and parents towards explicitly “international” qualifications (for example, one school is now offering the Cambridge A-Levels<sup>35</sup>). While in some cases the IB is appropriate for a particular student’s circumstances, and is well supported in several school communities, the HSC is the more recognised and respected credential.




For example, the HSC’s governance is public and local, through the independent NSW Government agency, the *New South Wales Education Standards Authority* (NESA).<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the IB is ultimately governed by a non-profit foundation based in Switzerland, which means the rules and procedures governing the IB will not always be aligned with the priorities of NSW students and parents. Moreover, the IB operates a ‘user-pays’ model, with schools offering the programme typically charged a fee of ~\$20,000, while the HSC remains free and accessible to all NSW schools.

Finally, over the last decade, the IB has encountered controversy, with accusations of unfairness and inflated grades.<sup>37</sup> For example, the “Grading Scandal” of 2020, where “*tens of thousands of students received nonsensical grades, which were determined using undisclosed AI models*”.<sup>38 39</sup> Or more recently, in 2022, after analysts noticed an abnormally high share of IB students being awarded the highest possible ATAR scores (99.95), a review<sup>40</sup> of the ATAR conversion process forced changes that have reduced the number of high ATARs awarded through the program.<sup>41</sup> The HSC has been spared from equivalent controversies through its more rigorous ATAR conversion process, which has benefited from longer experience and much larger cohorts.

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### Key strengths of the HSC over alternatives are its being free, and publicly & locally governed and administered.

*Selected differences between HSC and IB*

	International Baccalaureate	HSC
 Governance	Privatised	Public (NESA, with NSW teacher input)
 Cost	User-pays (~\$20k per school)	Free
 Location	Offshore (HQ in Geneva, Switzerland)	Local (HQ on Clarence St, Sydney)



## SELECTED CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

### REFORMING HSC AWARDS

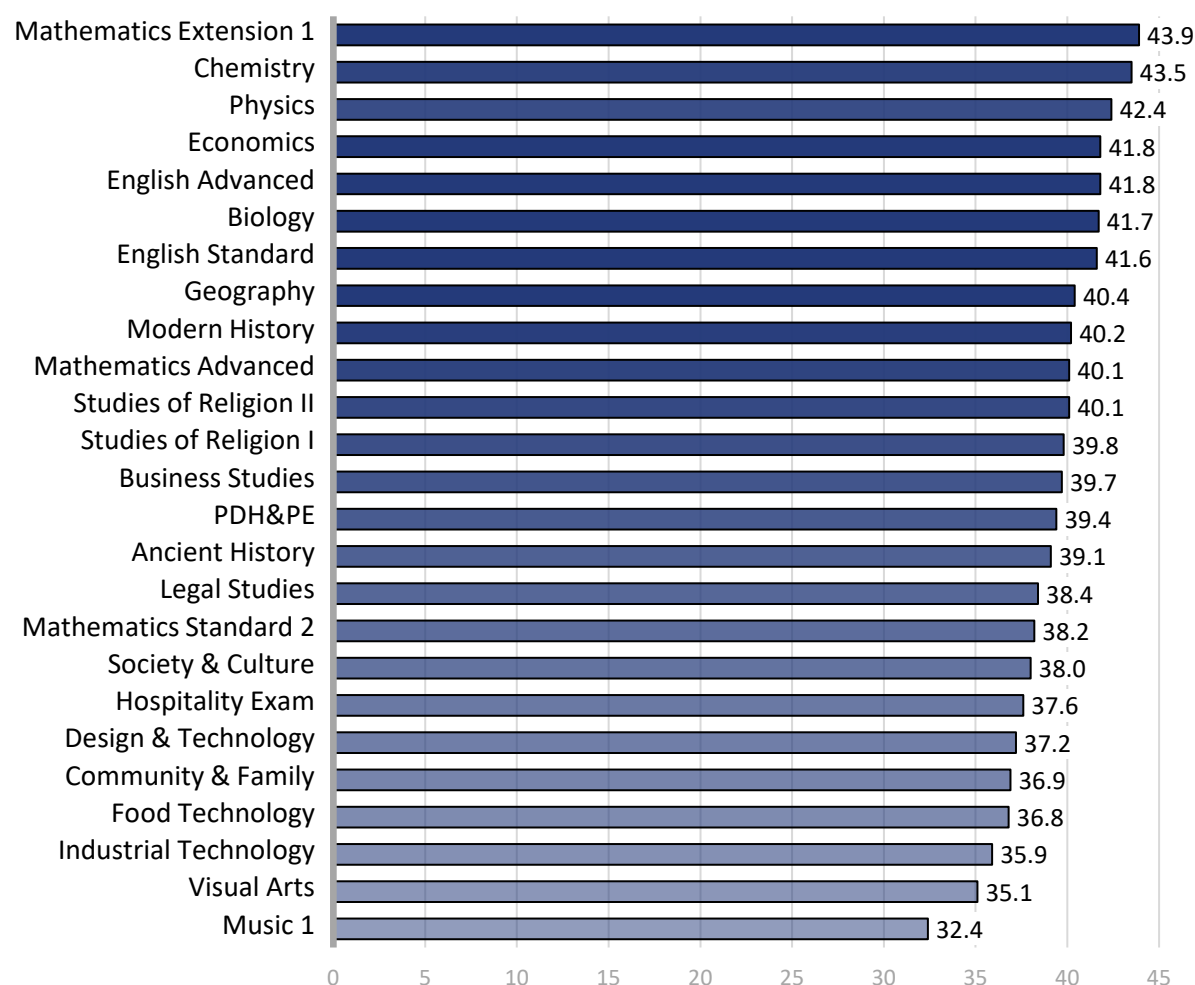
The current system of HSC awards, the *HSC Merit Lists* based on achieving top Bands, is unfair to students and distorts subject selection, and should be amended to include high scaled marks.

**HSC Bands** are a way of reporting student performance. Each Band represents a particular range of marks. For a typical 2-unit subject, Bands range from 1 to 6 (Band 6 = 90-100 marks, Band 5 = 80-89 marks, and so on), and for extension subjects, from Band E1 (lowest) to Band E4 (highest). Bands are awarded based on different standards or '*performance descriptors*' for each individual subject. For a given subject, the difficulty in achieving a top band can change from year to year, as does the share of students achieving that top band. Further, bands are not comparable across subjects; it is more difficult to achieve a top Band in some subjects than others.

This varying level of difficulty can be expressed in the form of **scaled marks**, as calculated by the *Universities Admission Centre* (UAC). Scaled marks are raw HSC marks adjusted to reflect the difficulty of each subject.<sup>42</sup> For example, it takes a scaled mark of at least 43.5 to achieve a Band 6 in *Chemistry*, but only 32.4 to achieve a Band 6 in *Music 1*.<sup>43</sup>

### Band 6 difficulty varies significantly by subject.

*Estimated minimum scaled mark to achieve a Band 6/E4, most popular subjects, 2024*



This sometimes vast difference between HSC Bands and scaled marks is due to their different purposes. While scaled marks were designed to calculate ATARs (or predecessors in tertiary entrance scores), HSC Bands were designed to measure performance *within a subject* and were never designed to compare performance *across subjects*. Misinterpretations of these differences are exacerbated by the HSC awards and their attendant publicity.

The current system of HSC awards has not changed substantively in over 20 years. The vast majority of awards are for achieving a Band 6 or Band E4, the *Distinguished Achiever* award. These awards are released to the media each year, and aggregates by school form the basis of the HSC school rankings or 'league tables' published in the newspapers each December.

This present system causes a range of recurring problems:

**1 High-achievers missing out on awards:** Awards criteria based solely on achieving top bands excludes many high-achieving students from receiving awards. For example, it remains possible for a student to reach an ATAR of 96 yet receive zero awards. Or in the inverse example, it is possible for a student with a respectable ATAR of 88 to receive six *Distinguished Achiever* awards plus an *All Rounder* award. This unfairness extends to teachers and school staff; strong class-wide performance in difficult subjects will often go unrecognised.

### HSC awards criteria are unfair to many high-achieving students.

*Sample comparison of HSC study selections and impact on potential awards (2024 estimates)<sup>44</sup>*

HSC Course	HSC Mark (out of 100)	HSC Band	UAC Scaled Mark (out of 50)
English Advanced	90	Band 6	41.2
Maths Standard 2	90	Band 6	37.9
German Beginners	90	Band 6	38.1
Music 1	90	Band 6	31.5
Visual Arts	90	Band 6	34.2



ALL  
ROUNDER



DISTINGUISHED  
ACHIEVER (5x)

ATAR  
88.00

HSC Course	HSC Mark (out of 100)	HSC Band	UAC Scaled Mark (out of 50)
English Advanced	89	Band 5	40.8
Chemistry	89	Band 5	42.9
Physics	89	Band 5	41.7
French Continuers	89	Band 5	39.6
Economics	89	Band 5	41.1



NO  
AWARDS

ATAR  
96.05

**2 Distorted subject selection:** While there is a range of causes for declining and/or low enrolments in many ‘difficult’ or high-scaling HSC subjects (e.g. *Economics*<sup>45</sup>), a significant driver is the HSC awards criteria. The publicity and prestige attached to the awards sustain the myth that Band 6s are the best performance metric, and thus choosing easier subjects can boost one’s ATAR. Even where the scaling process is well-understood, there is an incentive for teachers or parents to nudge students towards easier subjects where there is a higher chance of earning an award. As frequently reported in the media:

*Education analysts believe the switch to less rigorous options is driven by schools who wish to quietly divert less academically inclined students away from more difficult subjects because those students could jeopardise a school’s performance in league tables.*<sup>46</sup>

As UAC warns:

*Because HSC marks and scaled marks serve these two different purposes, comparing HSC and scaled marks can lead to misinterpretations that may inappropriately affect student choices of courses to study.*<sup>47</sup>

This dynamic may be particularly harmful to STEM subjects, where the lack of Band 6 recognition in difficult courses like Physics, Chemistry, and higher-level Mathematics is thought to unintentionally steer students away from pursuing these fields at university and TAFE.<sup>48</sup>

**3 Flawed results analysis:** Some schools’ staff inappropriately use Band 6s as the central KPI in their HSC improvement analysis, rather than the more robust measures of scaled marks or ATARs.’ This comes from either a misunderstanding about the scaling process or a desire to pursue higher rankings in league tables (gains in Band 6s can receive celebratory media coverage, gains in median ATAR will remain hidden).

#### THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE

Note, school system authorities generally use more appropriate KPIs. For example, for two decades, NSW Catholic Schools’ HSC analysis projects have used value-add models based on scaled marks, which are more reflective of academic performance and more consistent from year to year and thus more appropriate for longitudinal analysis.

A simple, incremental measure to mitigate each of these problems would be to **reward students for achieving high scaled marks** (say, 40 or above), either through a new award (e.g. Elite Achiever) or through an alternative pathway to earn the existing *Distinguished Achiever* award.

There are larger reforms available that would address these issues more comprehensively. For example, publishing a wider range of measures per school – such as median ATAR, ‘value-add’ model results compared to past NAPLAN scores, VET participation and completion rates, and post-school outcomes (see The Kathleen Burrow Research Institute’s 2022 report, *HSC Public Reporting Reform*<sup>49</sup>) – would better reflect the different models of schools’ success and avoid a distorted focus on the single measure of top bands. While these reforms would be welcome, they are more complex to achieve, and some would involve amending the legislation governing the publication of school results, such as Section 18A of the *NSW Education Act* (1990).<sup>50</sup>

By contrast, creating a new award for high-scaled marks can be done without any changes to legislation, and with minimal additional budget or resources. The main workload would be coordinating with UAC, which calculates the scaled marks to obtain the list of qualifying students – an additional but hardly insurmountable administrative burden.

### Models of HSC Success

The problems concerning HSC awards exist within a broader issue of how to ensure appropriate recognition of the achievements of HSC students. These achievements obviously extend far beyond top bands and high ATARs. Appropriate recognition is important to encourage students in their further endeavours and to inspire new cohorts of students to follow in their paths.

In the context of the HSC, there is no single model of achievement. For some students, top marks, such as a Band 6, might be an appropriate goal. For others, however, a Band 4 might represent high growth, particularly if achieved in the face of disadvantages, or a weaker starting point (e.g. low Year 9 NAPLAN scores). For those HSC students not going to university, success will often lie not just in good grades, but in attaining relevant VET qualifications, industry connections or traineeships.

The narrow focus on Band 6s may recognise one type of academic excellence but ignores the other forms of achievements in excellence and equity – two foundational goals of Australia's education system.<sup>51</sup> Both awards and public reporting of HSC outcomes in general should be more reflective of this duality. For Catholic education, it is especially important that such a regime promote the welfare and recognise the achievements of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including students with disability, indigenous students, and those from low socio-educational backgrounds.

While not as simple an exercise as calculating Band 6s, it is possible for achievements in these other realms to be recognised. An example is the cross-sector *Brother John Taylor Memorial Prize*,<sup>52</sup> named after the NSW Catholic school leader in the 1980s and 90s, <sup>53</sup> presented each year “to a student or students who have overcome significant hardship to achieve academic excellence in their HSC.”

Ultimately, recognising a wider range of HSC achievements, and relatedly, expanding the range of public reporting, can help avoid a distorted focus on any single, narrow measure of success, and bring the December discourse on the HSC more in line with the values that underpin the credential.

## EXPANDING AND RE-CONCEPTUALISING EXTERNAL EXAMS

The rising use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools calls for an expanded use of external assessments to maintain fairness and public trust in the HSC.

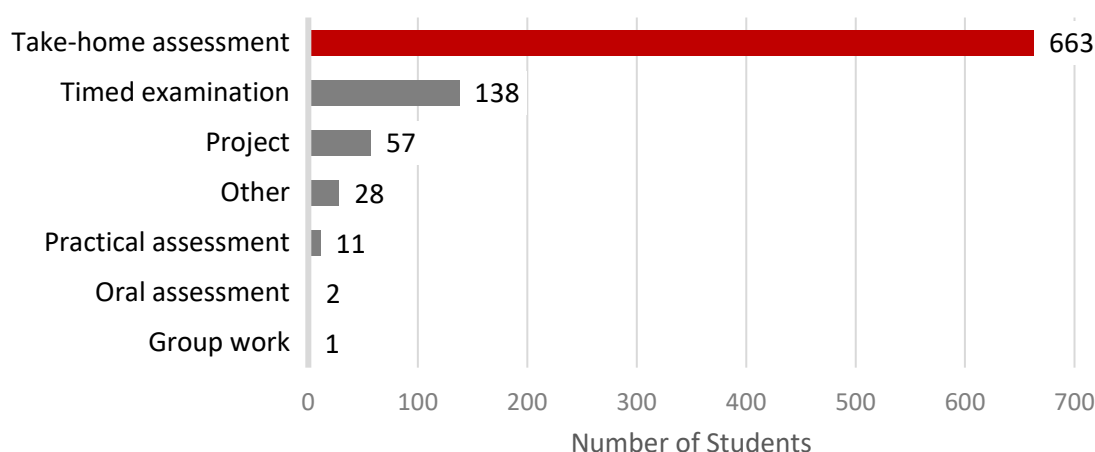
It is difficult to predict precisely how the AI 'revolution' will affect school learning. There may well come to pass an 'optimistic' scenario, where students use AI to enhance their learning, and educators find ways to effectively integrate AI into both take-home assessments and in-person exams. Clearly, educators should continue to explore opportunities within this 'optimistic' scenario.

Yet prudence suggests educators should concurrently prepare for the 'pessimistic' scenario, where students turn to AI as a 'shortcut' (at best) or 'cheat' (at worst) in ways that diminish formative learning, reduce diagnostic reliability, and undermine fairness in the awarding of grades. The research base on the threat and ubiquity of AI cheating in education is overwhelming.<sup>54 55 56 57</sup> This risk is especially acute with respect to take-home assessments.

In the context of school assessment, it is intuitive that the **risks of plagiarism, collusion, or other malpractice are higher in take-home assessments than in the invigilated testing environment of an in-person exam**. This was the Victorian experience with take-home *Common Assessment Tasks* for the VCE.<sup>58</sup> It is also backed up by available statistics on HSC malpractice. In 2023, there were nearly five times more (4.8x) offences in take-home assessments than in timed examinations.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, there has been a steady rise in plagiarism in take-home assignments, up from 323 in 2019 to 465 in 2023. While still a relatively small number – the 771 students involved in offences represent only 1% of the total HSC cohort of 80,000 students – these figures nevertheless underline how tangible and immediately scalable the risk is from AI.


### **HSC malpractices are nearly five times more common in take-home assessments than in timed examinations.**

*HSC assessment breaches by type, 2024<sup>60</sup>*





NESA has already taken some measures to address the challenge, for example, releasing a policy in 2024, *Use of Artificial Intelligence by students*,<sup>61 62</sup> which warns “...current rules for cheating and plagiarism still apply to AI”, while making the essential point: Like any technology, AI can augment teaching and learning, curriculum, and pedagogy. AI will never replace a strong curriculum, effective assessment and good teaching practices.

Nevertheless, it is likely that required policy responses will soon extend to the nature of HSC assessments themselves.



Currently, HSC assessments are a mix of NESA-invigilated external examinations and school-administered assessment. The latter is a mix of take-home assessments and internal examinations, with much of the apportionment between the two assessment types up to the school's discretion. In the future, it is likely that the share of NESA-invigilated assessments and internal school examinations will increase, and that the share of take-home assessments will have to decrease until such time that the AI threat to assessment integrity can be satisfactorily contained.

Importantly, expanded external assessments do not need to be restricted solely to written examinations. While essays are traditionally the most common type of external exam, there are many alternative precedents. HSC language subjects frequently employ recorded, oral examinations, and HSC Creative Arts subjects (Drama, Music, Dance, Visual Arts) frequently rely on live performances and practical works as components of course assessments. In the tradition of the *Viva*, there may also be opportunities for assessable or structured conversations between teachers and students about their learning area, with NESA potentially providing the structure, and marking rubrics for comparability. Over its history, the HSC has proven itself flexible in broadening the concept of assessment beyond solely written, timed examinations, and in the face of the AI challenge, there is scope to expand this concept even further.





## PROACTIVE MINIMUM STANDARDS

While the number of students failing to meet the *HSC Minimum Standard* is low, they are nevertheless a priority group in need of earlier diagnostics and interventions.

To be awarded the HSC, secondary school students are required to not just successfully complete Years 11 & 12 studies (or equivalent) but also meet the HSC Minimum Standard via online tests in *Reading, Writing, and Numeracy*<sup>63</sup> (exemptions apply to students undertaking HSC *Life Skills* courses<sup>64</sup>). First introduced in 2020, more than 99% of HSC candidates pass these tests each year.

In 2024, 571 students did not meet the minimum standard, representing around 0.72% of HSC students. While 40 students did not meet the standard in any of the three domains, the most common point of failure was writing (486 students failing), followed by numeracy (204 students).

These figures are clearly too high, and thus, a key evolution of the HSC Minimum Standard must be **earlier diagnostics and interventions** so that students in Year 12 are not confronted with this outcome.

Importantly, there is high flexibility in both the dates and frequency for the conduct of these tests. Students are eligible to sit the tests as early as Year 10 and can attempt them up to four times each year (in Year 12, this limit is increased to six times).<sup>65</sup> However, many schools choose to wait until Year 12 to offer the test, limiting opportunities for diagnostics and targeted support towards those failing. Better practice is for schools to offer the tests multiple times, first in Year 10 (typically Term 4), and then at additional points across Years 11 and 12 for those students who did not pass an earlier attempt. Analysing the item-level test results for points of failure can be used for diagnostics and informed interventions.

While the minimum standard is a valued component of the HSC, its value as a diagnostic tool is yet to be fully realised.

### Limitations of Year 9 NAPLAN for diagnostics

While Year 9 NAPLAN can in theory act such an ‘early warning system’, its main limitation is that many students do not participate in Year 9 NAPLAN; for example, last year in NSW one in ten Year 9 students (nearly 10,000) were not assessed in Numeracy – while 1.8% of the Year 9 cohort were exempt, a further 0.3% were “non-attempts”, 1.7% were formally withdrawn, and 6.2% were absent.<sup>66</sup>

## RECORD OF SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT (ROSA) – UNFINISHED BUSINESS

NSW technically maintains two end-of-school certificates: the HSC and the **Record of School Achievement (RoSA)**,<sup>67</sup> both formal *Awards of Study* enshrined in NSW legislation.<sup>68</sup> RoSA replaced the *School Certificate* in 2012 and is awarded to students who leave school after Year 10 and before completing the HSC.<sup>69</sup> However, RoSA has failed to gain significant credibility among students, employers, or tertiary institutions. Unlike historical precedents where NSW maintained two widely recognised certificates (for example, the *Intermediate Certificate* and *Leaving Certificate* from 1911–1957, and then the *School Certificate* and *Higher School Certificate* from 1967 to 2012), today’s RoSA is largely overlooked. It is therefore ironic that discussions of reform are centred exclusively around the HSC, while its adjacent credential is absent from educational discourse despite seemingly being far more ‘ripe’ for reform.

### RoSA occupies a low profile and unclear purpose in NSW’s education landscape, although it is one of the two formal “Awards of Study”.

Sample RoSA certificate

**NSW** | Education Standards Authority

### RECORD OF SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT


This is to certify that  
**Sample Student**  
of  
**Other Sample High School**  
has met the requirements of the Record of School Achievement \*  
and has received the results shown below.

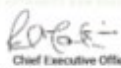
**STAGE 5 COURSES**

Year	Course	Result
2022	English (200)	C
	Mathematics (200)	C5
	Science (200)	D
	Geography (100)	C
	History (100)	D
	Food Technology (200)	D
	Personal Development, Health and P.E. (100)	C

**Years 7 to 10 Mandatory Curriculum Requirements**

English	Completed
Mathematics	Completed
Science	Completed
Human Society and its Environment	Completed
Languages	Completed
Technology	Completed
Music	Completed
Visual Arts	Completed
Personal Development, Health and P.E.	Completed

 Student Number: 58588763  
Issued by NESA without alteration or erasure on 25 August 2023 at Sydney, NSW, Australia

  
Chief Executive Officer  
NSW Education Standards Authority

123456789

The McGaw Review (1997) proposed a much stronger model for a school-leaving credential, but it was only partially implemented. It recommended the creation of a credential that would record not only students' school-based results but also their outcomes in new, state-wide tests in literacy and numeracy. However, this critical second element was never adopted.

**RECOMMENDATION 18**

*That the School Certificate be abolished and replaced, for students leaving school at any time from the end of Year 10 up to the time at which they are eligible for a Higher School Certificate, by a Statement of Achievement, issued under the authority of the Board of Studies and recording:*

- *the student's results on state-wide tests in at least literacy and numeracy towards the end of Year 10 (or in Year 11 if the student chooses to repeat the tests); and*
- *school-based results in all courses completed in Year 10 and subsequently, prior to departure from school.<sup>70</sup>*

The strength of this proposed model was in ensuring that even students who exited before the HSC would have access to a similarly standards-based, externally moderated measure of their capabilities.

Importantly, implementing McGaw's original recommendation today would not require legislative change. Section 94 of the NSW Education Act already provides for the requisite RoSA examinations, moderated on a state-wide basis.<sup>71</sup> Restoring this missing element would simply require action by NESA and Ministerial concurrence.

The state of RoSA requires urgent attention from NESA to explore this or other ways for transforming it into a meaningful credential that properly complements the HSC, as was always intended. Further work in this area is recommended.

## **THE HSC AND ATAR: GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBOURS**

The use of the HSC by universities for their admission processes comes with challenges. First and foremost, the HSC is a world-leading end-of-school credential that acknowledges completion of a rigorous schooling experience. However, the HSC can be too easily drawn into the ATAR's orbit, and this should be resisted. Equally, the relationship cannot be dissolved but can be improved. The following is proffered for consideration by relevant stakeholders.

For the HSC and ATAR, it is a case of good fences make good neighbours.

### **Utilising scaled subject marks in university admissions**

Universities frequently rely on HSC Bands in their admissions policies; however, utilising scaled subject marks could provide fairer and more rigorous entry standards.


Although the ATAR remains the dominant pathway for school students' entry into university, there are certain contexts where subject-specific results are used to satisfy supplementary criteria. In these contexts, NSW universities tend to rely too heavily on HSC Bands for bonus points, early offer schemes, and course prerequisites.


Many universities **provide bonus ATAR points** (also referred to as "**adjustment factors**") based on HSC Bands.<sup>72</sup> This can create inconsistencies, such as UNSW's HSC Plus Scheme.<sup>73</sup> A student applying for a Bachelor of Arts at UNSW can earn three bonus points for achieving a Band 6, regardless of the subject. A Band 6 in English Advanced (minimum scaled mark: 40.82) earns the same number of bonus points

as a Band 6 in Modern Greek Beginner (minimum scaled mark: 28.34), despite the wide difference in difficulty. HSC students are thus penalised for choosing difficult subjects and must work much harder to be eligible for bonus points.

## Many universities provide bonus ATAR points based on HSC Bands, rather than scaled marks.

Sample from UNSW HSC Plus Scheme<sup>74</sup>





### HSC Plus 2025 Admission

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Faculty Arts, Design and Architecture

UAC Program 422000 - B Arts

**Aboriginal Studies**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**All language and Literature courses**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**All language courses Beginners**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**All language courses Continuing**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**All language courses Extension**

Band	Bonus Point
E4	3
E3	2
E2	1

**All language in Context courses**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**Ancient History**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**Dance**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**Drama**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**Economics**

Band	Bonus Point
6	3
5	2
4	1

**English (Advanced)**

Band	Bonus Point
6	5
5	3
4	1

**English Extension 1**

Band	Bonus Point
E4	5
E3	3
E2	1

Reliance on HSC Bands also creates inequities in university **course prerequisites**,<sup>75</sup> albeit to a lesser extent. For example, HSC prerequisites for a *Bachelor of Economics* at the University of Sydney are a Band 4 or above in *Mathematics Advanced*, or a Band E3 or above in *Mathematics Extension 1* or 2.<sup>76</sup> A student receiving a Band 6 in *Mathematics Standard 2* would not meet these prerequisites, despite earning a higher scaled mark (37.5 or higher) than the minimums for *Mathematics Advanced* (25.1) or *Mathematics Extension 1* (34.8).<sup>77</sup> Thus, this system penalises high-achieving students who enrolled in a lower Maths subject (this is a common occurrence, for example, through either poor guidance or a lack of confidence). A fairer and more consistent system could be to set a minimum scaled mark (say, 25) across *all* Maths subjects. Once again, using HSC Bands outside their core purpose creates inequities. The same principles should apply to **early offer schemes**, such as the University of Western Sydney's *HSC True Reward*,<sup>78</sup> which similarly tends to ignore differences in difficulties across subjects.


A simple policy measure is available that would encourage universities to shift their reliance on HSC Bands towards HSC scaled marks, and **include HSC scaled marks on Student ATAR Certificates, and**

conditionally pass on this data to universities (if it is not being done already). Scaled marks already appear on ATAR Certificates in other states, for example, Western Australia, and it would be a simple process for UAC to repeat this in New South Wales.<sup>79 80</sup> Universities would then have access to a much more accurate and stable measure of subject-specific performance.

More fundamentally, the shift from Bands to scaled marks would further shift universities' admissions criteria away from the HSC (a pathway-agnostic credential) and towards UAC (a tertiary admissions organisation), in line with policy intentions to insulate the HSC from the contagion of university admissions processes. The HSC should be informing ATAR, not the ATAR informing HSC.

## Scaled marks are not included on NSW ATAR Certificates, even though they appear on those of other states, such as Western Australia.

Sample ATAR Certificates for NSW<sup>81</sup>, WA<sup>82</sup>




**AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY ADMISSION RANK.**  
**2023 ADVICE**

Full name: JANE CITIZEN  
Year 12 student number: 35887119  
**AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY ADMISSION RANK (ATAR): 76.55 \*SEVEN\*SIX\*\*FIVE\*FIVE\***

Shown below are the ATAR courses which were available for inclusion in the ATAR, together with the units that were actually included in the calculation. Information about ATAR eligibility and the calculation of the ATAR are available at <http://www.uac.edu.au/atar>.

Course name	Category	Year completed	Unit value	Units included in calculation of ATAR
Biology	A	2023	2	2
Business Studies	A	2022	2	2
English Advanced	A	2023	2	2
Mathematics Advanced	A	2023	2	2
Software Design & Development	A	2023	2	2
Entertainment Industry Examination	B	2023	2	0



**ATAR CERTIFICATE**  
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN YEAR 12

Student Name: Mr Bill Citizen  
Student Number: 21000000  
Year of Results: YYYY  
Category: School Leaver

**Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR): 86.95**

Year	Course/Subject	Scaled Score
YYYY	Chemistry	71.4
YYYY	Physics	65.6
YYYY	Mathematics Methods	62.0
YYYY	English	54.7
YYYY	French: Second Language	41.3

### ATAR vs Scaled Subject Marks

In the context of university admission policy, scaled marks should be seen as a *complement* rather than a *substitute* for the ATAR. Both metrics have their respective strengths and weaknesses, and there is absolutely no need to create a false choice between utilising one or the other. The ATAR is superior for some purposes; for example, it is comparable across states and territories, is a more intuitive number, and is more representative of total study effort across Years 11 and 12.<sup>83</sup> Making both ATAR and subject scaled marks available in university admissions policy could be a 'win-win' step, favouring flexibility over a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.

## Some universities have Early Offer schemes that rely on HSC Bands.

Sample from University of Western Sydney HSC True Reward<sup>84</sup>

WSU CODE	PROGRAM TITLE	CAMPUSES	YEAR 11 SUBJECT RESULT*	YEAR 12 SUBJECT BAND
2537	Bachelor of Arts/ Bachelor of Laws	Campbelltown and Parramatta	<p>Any 1 of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal Studies - A</li> <li>English Extension 1 - A</li> <li>English Extension 2 - A</li> </ul> <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English Advanced - B or above</li> </ul> <p>AND</p> <p>Any 1 of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal Studies - B or above</li> <li>Modern History - B or above</li> <li>Ancient History - B or above</li> <li>History Extension - B or above</li> <li>Economics - B or above</li> <li>Society and Culture - B or above</li> <li>Studies of Religion 2 - B or above</li> <li>Language Continuers programs - B or above</li> </ul>	<p>Any 1 of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal Studies - Band 5 or above</li> <li>English Extension 1 - E3 or above</li> <li>English Extension 2 - E3 or above</li> </ul> <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English Advanced - Band 5 or above</li> </ul> <p>AND</p> <p>Any 1 of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Legal Studies - Band 4 or above</li> <li>Modern History - Band 4 or above</li> <li>Ancient History - Band 4 or above</li> <li>History Extension - E1 or above</li> <li>Economics - Band 4 or above</li> <li>Society and Culture - Band 4 or above</li> <li>Studies of Religion 2 - Band 4 or above</li> <li>Language Continuers programs - Band 4 or above</li> </ul>

In the above example, a student applying for *Bachelor of Arts / Bachelor of Laws* at the University of Western Sydney, could qualify for their Early Offer Scheme through achieving scaled marks of 29.5 in *English Advanced* and 34.3 in *Portuguese Continuers*, or equally, through 27.6 in *Legal Studies* and 13.0 in *Society and Culture*.



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