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OPINION (page 18)

Changes have not solved OBE problem Major issues remain despite Government compromises, Steve Kessell says

Never before in WA's history has there been such a crisis in education - never before have education issues attracted so much press coverage, or been the lead story on the evening TV news. The government knows that there is already a major voter backlash, and that its education bureaucracy is making bad policy decisions on the run. It knows that several hundred thousand families are rightly worried about their children's education. It also knows that far too much time and money have been wasted on a failed experiment called OBE, outcomes-based education.

How did this crisis happen?

In 1998, the new WA Curriculum Council produced its "Curriculum Framework". Its preamble states: "[This] is neither a curriculum nor a syllabus, but a framework identifying common learning outcomes for all students... It is intended to give schools and teachers flexibility and ownership over curriculum in a dynamic and rapidly-changing world environment."

Many of us welcomed the framework. I included it in the postgraduate teacher education courses that I was teaching at Curtin University's Science and Mathematics Education Centre at the time. But it wasn't long before the "common learning outcomes" became "learning area" (i.e., subject) specific Outcomes, and here the problems arose.

During this period, I was a member of the Curriculum Council's syllabus committee for the Year 11 - 12 Information Systems course, and actually helped write its outcomes. When I (unofficially) worked with teachers trialling it in five Perth secondary schools, cracks began to appear: these subject-specific Outcomes were restricting what the teacher could do, and converting Outcomes to traditional assessment was difficult.

Then came the huge leap and the huge mistake: the Council decided that Outcomes would REPLACE the entire syllabus of each course, and that eight subjective levels, written in obscure educational jargon, would REPLACE traditional marks and assessment.

With one proclamation, the Council turned course content and assessment upside-down, and told teachers "This is the way of the future, embrace it."

Many teachers did not share the almost religious fervour of the OBE believers; they merely went about their core business of teaching, and paid lip service to "levelling".

These teachers have now surfaced because of the imposition of the same unworkable levels into upper school.

Education Minister Ljiljanna Ravlich waxes lyrical about how wonderful OBE has been in K-10. Where is the evidence; where are the objective, independent evaluations? The evidence from elsewhere is extremely discouraging.

The lack of such an independent evaluation is a major reason WA education is in a mess now: the same folks who write the courses evaluate and accredit them.

After more than a year of teachers crying "This won't work," the Government started making face-saving compromises last month. Syllabuses are back; the basic TEE course structure is back; assessment out of 100 is back.

However, levels are still with us, even though their automatic calculation from a per cent mark makes them redundant and makes their interpretation meaningless.

These changes, however welcome, have not solved the OBE problem. Major issues remaining include:

- Year 11 and 12 English is in limbo: the new Year 11 course being taught now has huge problems, and needs a top-to-bottom revision before it is repeated next year or moved into Year 12.
- Despite claims to the contrary, there will be fewer options for non-TEE students next year. How could it be otherwise when more than 400 courses are reduced to 50? Appropriate courses like Senior English, Senior Science and several non-TEE computing courses are about to vanish.
- It is quite unrealistic, to force vocational students to study "basic content" versions of TEE courses, content that is normally studied by TEE students in Years 9 or 10. Mixing 17 year olds, who, before the school leaving age was raised, would have left school already, with younger, more academic Year 10s is a recipe for social disaster.
- Now that attention is being paid to the problems in Years 11 and 12, teachers of Years 8 - 10 are telling us that OBE and levelling are not working in those years either (The West, 6/7).
- Finally, any retention of Levels is unnecessary, misleading and a complete waste of time and effort. Practising bad education and bad assessment is too big a price to pay for ministerial face-saving.

Before any further changes are even considered, the Government needs to commission a thorough and transparent evaluation of OBE from K to 10, completely independent of the government bureaucracies. The lack of such an independent evaluation is a major reason WA education is in a mess now: the same folks who write the courses also evaluate and accredit them.

What the Government really needs to do is pause, listen and authorise the long-overdue review of the Curriculum Council itself, by people who actually know something about education - not politicians, and not non-teaching educational bureaucrats. Such a review is mandated by legislation, which required its completion some time ago. It has not happened, but should, as a matter of urgency. Then, and only then, should we even consider making radical changes to the Year 11 and 12 courses.

Steve Kessell retired as Associate Professor, Science and Mathematics Education Centre, Curtin University in 2004. He also served as the undergraduate co-ordinator of Curtin's School of Computing for 10 years, and was a member of the Curriculum Council's syllabus committee for the TEE Information Systems course.