

Opinion
Don't implement courses that aren't ready, says retired academic
by Steve Kessell

[Since writing this two weeks ago, the union has decided to lift the ban on the CoS. Given the fiasco of introducing English and other CoS before they were ready, this was a very unwise decision in my view. Steve Kessell]

I rarely agree with the stance taken by the State School Teachers Union, but this time I believe they got it right: the new Year 11 courses of study are not ready to be implemented next year.

This has nothing to do with the teachers' pay claim or their protracted EBA arbitration in the IRC.

There are two simple reasons why the courses should not proceed in February 2009:

They are not ready; and

Teachers will have to work massive amounts of unpaid overtime to get them anywhere near ready.

The Curriculum Council has a history of attempting to introduce inadequately prepared new courses and forcing them upon reluctant teachers.

Now it has added the threat that the old [tried and true TEE] courses will be "unaccredited", while the new ones will have its stamp of approval.

This is precisely what the Council's Acting CEO, David Axworthy, tried to do 18 months ago, and this heavy-handed tactic failed when Education Minister Mark McGowan insisted that teacher juries evaluate the courses prior to their implementation.

The juries sent nearly every course back to the Council for extensive rewriting.

Four new OBE courses (including English) were introduced prematurely, and there have been massive problems with all of them.

I am disappointed that the Council has resorted to such heavy-handed tactics again, but it really is a facile exercise.

I just can't see Alan Carpenter going into an election by telling parents: "Sorry, none of your kids in that cohort will graduate or be eligible for uni, because the Curriculum Council has decided to be stubborn again."

As teacher Marko Vojkovic posted on the PLATO Forum recently:

“Once again, the educational theorists hold sway. They think the courses are 'ready' when the rationale and the pedagogical philosophy are in place.

“But back in the real world, the whole shooting match is nowhere near ready.

“In true prima donna style, the Curriculum Council has arrived at the theatre and announced they are ready to perform.

“But the tickets haven't been printed, the venue hasn't been booked, the sets haven't been made, nobody knows where the key is, and the rest of the cast don't know their lines.

“But the show must go on..”

Here is an example of what teachers claim is missing from the new physics and chemistry courses:

No textbook, lab manual, revision guide, problems books, bank of problems and exam questions covering the new content, list of new equipment required for experiments, comprehensive programs (both sequential and concurrent), actual teaching time allocation, final assessment structure, TISC requirements for graduation, rules for TER calculation, or final exam format.

Other than that, those two courses are “ready”!

As an academic who has taught curriculum development, I am very disappointed that the Curriculum Council refuses to follow some basic tenets of new course development.

These include:

- The provision of all support materials, including textbooks, problem books, lesson plans, revision guides, assessment guides, test question database, and time allocations, not just an incomplete rough outline;
- Trials of all new courses in a small number of schools prior to their state-wide release;
- A suitable lead time – usually 12 months – from teachers' receipt of these materials to implementation; and
- A clear separation of accreditation from course development.

Curriculum Council Chairman Professor Bill Loudon has stated publicly that all of these things need to happen. To date, none of them have.

As I stressed in an opinion piece in The West Australian nearly two years ago [Changes have not solved OBE problem: Major issues remain despite Government compromises, Steve Kessell says, 14 July 2006]:

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

The Council’s accreditation of its own courses is a bit like letting mining companies set their own environmental impact requirements [or putting the fox in charge of the henhouse].

Yes, the teacher juries had their input. But earlier this year, English teachers attending Council-run professional development were told by Council staff that they did not feel obliged to include all of the changes the jury requested [despite the minister’s promises to the contrary]. Rather, they saw them as “guidelines”.

The Council’s current CEO, David Wood, maintains that “almost all the English teacher jury’s recommendations had been implemented” [Changes to OBE English ‘are ignored’, The West Australian, 23 June 2008]. Many English teachers disagree.

But contrary to Mr Woods’ claim, I’m reliably informed that the Council’s ‘English Reference Group’ is now asking teachers if they think it’s OK for them to ignore the jury recommendations! No doubt this feedback will be ignored, too.

Several English teachers have stated that “the new sample exams have many deficiencies and should not be foisted on English teachers and students”.

This is what happens when ill-prepared courses are introduced prematurely. Do we want similar outcomes from another 30 courses?

Admittedly, some courses are more ready than others. And it is possible that, with a huge amount of goodwill and after-hours work, they could be made ready for implementation next year.

But this is asking teachers to do the Council’s job; teachers are employed to deliver the curriculum, not to create it.

And given the very shabby treatment that teachers are receiving from this State Government, I don’t think there’s much good will remaining, much less a desire to put in hundreds of hours of extra unpaid work.

As the Twomey Taskforce report noted [page 127]:

“Another workload issue that was seen as a priority area for attention surrounds the constant changes to curriculum. These appear to be happening for all the wrong reasons and not necessarily for the good of education. As one submission states, *Get the curriculum under control – stop experimenting with kids*. It was argued in submissions that the shift from centralised to teacher curriculum development was not underpinned sufficiently in terms of either support or resourcing at the school level.”

The minister has claimed that "if the union executive went ahead with a ban on preparing the Year 11 courses it would hurt students and anger parents" [Teachers ban 2009 courses planning, 24 June 2008].

I disagree. Another slipshod implementation of inadequately-prepared new courses is what will "hurt students and anger parents".

Steve Kessell retired as Associate Professor, Science and Mathematics Education Centre, Curtin University in 2004.