

Don't Blame Schools!

It seems that Universities (and in the past the Curriculum Council) have been quick to blame schools for what they see as inappropriate student course selections and I am saddened to see headlines "Kids steered off tough courses" (The West June 4-5 2011) and "Exam dodge linked to rankings" (The West June 6 2011). To say that schools "encourage too many students to avoid higher level courses" shows a lack of understanding of the extensive counselling processes that occur in schools. The overwhelming majority of schools counsel students into courses based on their achievement and the future pathway they have chosen. In these "boom times" the reality is that many students don't want university places; they see themselves in training and industry.

There are three issues that impact on the course selections for senior secondary students:

1. *The stage 2 (compulsory) exams are seen as a disincentive by many students, particularly those who are not seeking a university place*
2. *Schools work within finite resourcing constraints and therefore (in most cases) are not able to offer all stages in all courses. Ideally students would be able to choose the stage of course that most closely aligns with their capabilities. The reality is that many schools, during the course selection process, must make decisions about the courses that they are able to timetable within allocated resources.*
3. *Student / Parent choice:* Students and parents are well informed about the requirements for their future direction and regardless of the counselling process and the advice given by schools, students (and parents) make their own choices.

All senior secondary students should be counseled into pathways that provide an appropriate level of challenge and all students should finish Year 12 with a clear direction for their future study, training or employment; this is the case in the overwhelming majority of our schools. Reference to more stage 1 than stage 2 courses in some schools can be explained as many students choosing a tertiary pathway often select a stage 1 course to offset the workload of their stage 3 courses. Without telling students what courses they will be enrolled in we will continue to have the reality that not all students will choose the courses most appropriate to their ability.

As long as stage 2 exams are compulsory, they will act as a disincentive and continue to impact on student course selections. I support stage 2 exams as they broaden tertiary opportunities for students, but they must be non-compulsory (as with our old TEE).

The 'West Australian' article (6th June) suggested that "one reason fewer students did stage 2 is because their scores would affect a school's median Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank". There are numerous reasons for student selections and it is wrong to suggest schools act in their own interests rather than the best interests of their students.

Rob Nairn

President

Western Australian Secondary Schools Executives Association (WASSEA)