

**The Students at Risk of Not Completing the  
SACE (STAR 3) Project**

**FINAL REPORT**

**March 2004**

**SSABSA**  
SENIOR SECONDARY ASSESSMENT  
BOARD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

**SACE**  
SOUTH AUSTRALIAN  
CERTIFICATE OF  
EDUCATION



## FOREWORD

The three Students at Risk of Not Completing the SACE (STAR) projects arose from the SACE Improvement Strategy in the 1990s.

The first [STAR project](#) explored the factors involved in students' non-completion of the SACE. The findings of that research were reported in December 1998.

The STAR 2 Project sought to identify and trial curriculum and assessment strategies that emerged from research evidence and school experience, which would assist students to gain the SACE. As the [STAR 2 Report](#) suggested several improvements to increase flexibility at Stage 1, the Board decided to conduct a third STAR Project, focusing on flexibility at Stage 2.

The STAR 3 Project, which is reported here, investigated strategies to assist students who:

- had been successful in Stage 1 but did not continue into Stage 2;
- left during Stage 2;
- undertook Stage 2 studies, but who were not successful in achieving the SACE.

All three STAR projects have been composed of collaborative action research involving teachers and students in schools, SSABSA staff, and the Board.

The Board is looking closely at these reports in formulating its response to its current policies and procedures.

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# **STAR 3 PROJECT**

## **Part 1**

### **Issues Arising from across the STAR 3 Project Work and from the School Final Reports**

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This brief paper encapsulates an analysis of the STAR 3 minutes and the final reports of the schools to the project completed at the end of 2003. It should be noted that the project exhibited a number of strengths that add to the trustworthiness of the results and suggestions recorded here as well as working within a range of limitations which restricted the scope of its inquiry.

The strengths of the project were:

- the range of schools involved (although there were only six they represented a good range across government, Catholic and non-government schools, and included two non-metropolitan schools)
- the experience and seniority of the school-based researchers including key administrators and highly respected teacher leaders
- the long-term nature of the project so that the researchers could engage in an on-going analysis and build a shared understanding of the challenges facing schools in relation to SACE completion at Stage 2
- the ongoing interaction established by the research design between school and SSABSA personnel and an independent university researcher which allowed for different perspectives to be introduced and considered.

The limitations to be considered included:

- the relatively small number of schools meaning that the project could not provide a state-wide perspective on the issues explored. Also the schools were engaged in related but not identical strategies, so the results of each represent single cases which remain to be more widely trialled
- the restrictions in the scope of the strategies that could be trialled given that the schools had largely to work within the current SACE structures when supporting students at risk of not completing

The following outcomes from the project are reported in relation to these strengths and limitations.

The overview is presented in three main categories which incorporate findings from the research conducted by the schools and suggested implications from this research. I begin with a brief section on the outcomes for students from the project research before moving on to discuss the findings of the research in relation to the SACE and the role of the schools.

## **The Students**

Overall the interventions designed in Phase 4 /5 of the project for supporting students at risk of not completing were highly successful. Four of the schools designed projects which aimed to directly impact on completion rates (Pt Augusta and St Joseph's were indirectly related to completion). The most wide-ranging of these was Windsor Gardens which instituted wide ranging school reforms to manage students by cohort and to provide comprehensive monitoring and intervention support to students at risk. The school reported raising its retention rate from 57% in 2002 to 85% in 2003 as a result of this work. Trinity initiated specific interventions for a group of 12 at risk students whilst developing whole school procedures for identifying, monitoring and supporting such students and reported a rise in their median TER score to 85.6 from a recent median of 71. Importantly, they reported higher quality outcomes for students who previously were completing SACE but not being able to use it as a pathway to work or further study. This suggests the school has worked to better match students' study patterns to their post-school goals and has concentrated on better vocational and vocational study outcomes for some students instead of a high SACE score for

all. Tyndale reported complete success in their trial of Extension Studies as a way of keeping a group of six students engaged in school – for one student Extension Studies was the only Stage 2 subject completed successfully. St Michael's was unable to trial its proposed strategy of offering students the opportunity to complete a two-unit stage 2 subject over two calendar years due to the offer of such an option not being taken up by the targeted group of at risk students (this is the subject of discussion below).

In many ways it was the lessons learned from negotiating these strategies and dealing with the unexpected obstacles (and successes) that was as valuable to the project as these broad outcomes. A few insights are discussed in brief here.

First, it was notable that discussion of the challenges facing students moved somewhat away from psychological attributions of lack of confidence, ability to organise and self-esteem as explanations for risk to a more nuanced understanding of the tasks facing young people in a rapidly changing economy and social setting. A common theme towards the end of the project was understanding that students need to manage risk and to negotiate their futures given that traditional routes to employment or study were changing and multiplying. There was a strong belief that what students needed was not so much 'confidence' but the ability to envisage and elaborate their futures in ways that helped them to set goals and maintain connections to school. Where students were given the support to do this, confidence and commitment followed. This new insight does not detract from earlier findings from the project (see interim report) which showed that issues such as mental and physical health continued to present as causes of student risk, as well as their involvement in part-time work (Windsor Gardens Vocational College estimated that a commitment of more than 8 hours per week greatly impacted on students' ability to successfully study a traditional SACE Stage 2 pattern).

Second, schools recognised that students at risk of not completing were the least likely to be able to imagine and elaborate on their futures and needed massive institutional support to do this (this is taken up more under the heading of 'the school' below). For example, St Michael's noted that the very at risk students it aimed its strategy at, did not take up the opportunity offered because they simply weren't engaged in the information flows (mostly print-based) that helped them think about how to manage their study pathways. Clearly coming up with alternative options and making these available via traditional information sessions and materials were not the way to connect with such students.

A third outcome of the project for the majority of participants was to move away from the view that SACE completion was an absolutely necessary component of a satisfactory schooling outcome for at risk students. Schools reported that students leaving school before SACE completion could be a positive outcome for students, especially if it meant moving into employment or further study. So, as well as improving retention, the project reported success at exiting students into apprenticeship, work and vocational study pathways. This places a question mark under retention as a sole indicator of successful schooling for students. It should be noted that the schools saw the need for more information about the long term outcomes for such students, noting that students may be disadvantaged if apprenticeships or jobs don't last. Two schools (St Michael's and St Joseph's) reported very positive long-term outcomes for such students—attributing this to the strong community support received by such students.

One final point worthy of note was the statement by Trinity College that a significant percentage of their students (around 20–25%) constituted a 'tail' who were either at risk of not completing, or of completing but not in a way that helped them towards a productive future. There is no reason to think that proportions mentioned here would be any smaller for most schools, and in some cases the proportion could easily be imagined to be larger. This insight suggests that the issue of 'risk' in relation to the SACE is not restricted to a small number of 'outlier' students, especially if thought about beyond simply achieving the certificate. One of the key contributions made by the schools in this study is that they

reimagined the SACE beyond a piece of paper and a set of assessments to asking how the SACE experience could be used to set up all students for productive post-school education, training or work. As will be seen, thought about in this way, some of the requirements of the SACE Certificate were seen to be detrimental to a significant group of students in achieving in this outcome.

## The SACE

The STAR 3 project was charged with examining the issues of students not completing and Stage 2 of the SACE. The insights developed from conducting this investigation are presented here in relation to Stage 2 syllabus issues, and SACE structure and flexibility.

### Stage 2 Syllabus Issues

None of the work of the project could be quarantined to Stage 2 and most of the discussion here refers to the connections between this stage and Stage 1 subjects.

One of the key concerns identified early in the project was the concept of the ‘leap’ of difficulty students experienced when coming to Stage 2 subjects. Two schools (Pt Augusta and Pt Lincoln) specifically addressed this issue in their research. This investigation revealed a number of tensions operating within the SACE between its stated goal of being a certificate achievable by all, and as a pathway into university. Both schools reported that Stage 1 took account of the former (and therefore had very flexible assessment approaches) whilst Stage 2 was dominated by the latter (and therefore had a more restrictive approach to assessment). Both schools also noted that the inclusive approach used in Stage 1 often did not prepare students for the kinds and standards of assessment tasks they would meet in Stage 2 — this was exacerbated in these country schools by the fact that cohort sizes were smaller and there was less likely to be streaming of Stage 1 students into different groups according to the likelihood of studying the subject at Stage 2.

Both schools worked in different ways to address this issue. St Joseph’s did this by designing new kinds of assessment criteria for students at Stage 1 that would provide both for achievability by all and an indication, for students who may go on to Stage 2, of the ways that they could build their work towards Stage 2 standards. Port Augusta worked back from Stage 2 demands to consider how the language and the requirements of Stage 2 might be introduced and better taught in year 10 and Stage 1. All of this work raised the question: Is there a big leap of difficulty, or is the difference really the interpretation of the assessment procedures between Stage 1 and 2 as they are interpreted by teachers? A related question is: What coherence is there between the Stage 2 syllabus and Stage 1 documents conceptually, and in terms of assessment practices?

A number of participants were at pains to point out that subjects which had particular kinds of assessment practices were especially good at knocking out at risk students. These included:

- not meeting deadlines meant that students lost marks
- topic based studies which meant that students had to pass each topic (students would drop out as soon as they failed one topic)
- subjects with high literacy requirements
- subjects where retrieval of grades was not possible

The schools nominated Vocational and Community Studies as subjects which *did* work to keep at risk students committed and learning, especially for the way that the assessment practices and criteria for success were organic to the learning so that success in a task was evidence of the learning required.

One final issue of note in regard to the syllabus of Stage 2 subjects was that both rural schools commented on the difficulties that staff experienced in understanding the requirements of the subjects they taught and therefore interpreting these requirements for students. This reinforces the findings from both the STAR 1 and STAR 2 projects that teachers (especially, but not exclusively, those in the country) need professional development to develop shared understandings of the intentions and meanings of syllabus statements if they are to help students to be successful. This issue is particularly important in a school such as Pt Augusta with high turnover, a higher percentage of early career teachers, and higher proportions of teachers working outside their fields of specialisation.

### **SACE Structure and Flexibility**

Longstanding binaries in senior secondary education between the academic (mind) and the vocational (body) students were clearly in evidence in our work in the project. As was noted in the STAR 1 report, these longstanding discourses, which were dominant before the design of the SACE, continue to exert a strong hold on practices and attitudes in schools (and beyond). Indeed, the structure of the SACE with its subject groups that embody language rich and quantitative/experimental (now Group 1 and Group 2) and require students to study across these groups at Stage 2 is reminiscent of the arguments for a ‘general education’ (combining arts and science) which dominated educational thinking at the turn of the twentieth century (Cormack, 2003). The grouping of subjects is just one aspect of the structure of SACE examined by the schools, others were the requirement for three two unit sequences at Stage 2, the timing of SACE enrolment and results, and the linkages between VET courses and the SACE. The following discusses key issues and questions arising from the work of the schools around SACE structures and flexibility.

Overall, the schools indicated that the ‘centre of gravity’ of the SACE continued to be students who were seeking entry to university. This meant that the structures, practices and procedures inherent in the SACE assumed this group as the mainstream, and cast other students as different, or special cases. In many ways the schools noted how working with students at risk of not completing meant ‘working around’ current structures, accessing ‘special’ provisions, or pushing the boundaries of the current rules (where teachers had the knowledge and confidence to do this).

One example of this was the comment from a number of schools that ‘flexibility’ was hard work, noting the range and amount of ‘paperwork’ required for subjects such as Vocational Studies and Community Studies which were most often utilised to meet the needs of at risk students. Tyndale and Trinity also commented on the extra cost associated with taking on innovative subjects such as Extension Studies, or for offering hybrid programs to students (e.g. extra jobs such as tracking student study to ensure they matched the SACE pattern, ensuring Voc Ed results were appropriately recorded and counted towards the SACE). Richard Teese (2003) has noted the way that schools serving the most privileged students have maximised their returns on senior secondary curriculum by routinising and aligning their work to the competitive academic curriculum. There is no such a possibility for schools seeking to serve the non-academic, non university-bound students—supporting such students is hard and costly work where virtually every move has to be justified and most curriculum built virtually from the ground up. The demands to justify, record, align, and moderate such work do not compare to the well-practised structures and procedures used in ‘mainstream’ subjects. Herein lies a major challenge for SSABSA if it is to support all students to achieve the SACE – to find ways to ease the administration, delivery and assessment of what are currently seen to be ‘special’ or ‘innovative’ courses.

Towards the end of the project, the schools formed a strong view that the requirement for three 2 unit sequences as Stage 2 was also a barrier to the students at risk of not completing. This, and the requirements of completing a Group 2, two unit sequence were identified as key

barriers for the students they were supporting. Most schools reported having students who could not complete because they could not pass a two-unit Group 2 sequence.

Having examined the justifications provided for these two requirements there were strong statements from school researchers that these structures had little relevance to the students who were not aiming at university entry. One school highlighted a student whose subject choice had been guided by goals to enter a particular vocation. In spite of completing a Certificate II course, gaining entry to a Certificate III, and having completed 26 units of SACE, this student was not eligible for a SACE certificate. Certainly such a student could claim to have studied an area in depth, but the particular pattern of the SACE prevented the student leaving to Certificate III study with a SACE Certificate. Windsor-Gardens has proposed SSABSA allowing schools to offer three 2 unit Stage 2 subjects in concentrated form within one semester, such is the number of students for whom this is a problem. The question is whether this requirement is a problem in itself, or justifiable in what is post-compulsory education where students are now preparing for such diverse post-school pathways. Should schools need to go to such extreme lengths for such vocationally oriented students or is the pattern outmoded? The Windsor Gardens report provides a useful example of the 'tidy SACE' and the 'untidy SACE' student to highlight such difficulties.

Overall, the project led the researchers to strongly question the relevance of the current structure and to encourage greater flexibility in its form. Trials of subjects such as Extension Studies and the overall 'case management' approach taken by schools to 'designer year 12' showed that, with greater flexibility, schools can offer programs that help students plan and work towards satisfying post-school options. Sometimes, however, they may not be able to take a SACE certificate with them given current structures. Schools also recommended that SSABSA experiment with allowing more flexibility in timing of enrolments, results and even the award of the certificate. Here are some of the ideas put forward as possibilities:

1. allowing two-unit subjects to be studied in concentrated form in one semester
2. allowing enrolment in two-unit subjects from July to July
3. allowing subject flexibility – eg depending on design, a subject could be counted as Group 2 or Group 1
4. allowing 'fallback' enrolment where the mode of assessment can be changed to reflect changed circumstances – eg from PES to PAS

None of these suggestions could be trialled, and each is premised on SACE as it is currently structured. At the very least these proposals demonstrate the flexibility that schools are willing to offer to provide for at risk students.

## **The Schools**

The project research necessarily touched on how schools organise themselves and on teachers' work. While this was a project sponsored by SSABSA, it was clear that there would be implications for schools and these are explored here.

## **School Management and Structure**

The research focus of the project on generating data about students at risk proved to be a very influential model for the school leaders involved. As the project progressed, gathering the kind of data required for the project—how to identify, monitor and support students at risk—came to be seen as a central activity for school leaders charged with managing the SACE. Over the period of the project, the school leaders established systems for generating data about students and using that to direct policy and action in their schools. Examples included:

- gathering historical data about completions, retention, destinations, and subject results to use as a base for identifying trouble spots and evaluating interventions. Schools did this through consulting SSABSA databases, their own school databases, and through interviewing and surveying students who had completed—e.g. St Michael’s tracked student destinations through the school community networks
- establishing systems for identifying student risk behaviour—e.g. Trinity coordinated a range of sources from the chaplain to subject teachers; Windsor Gardens established a new pastoral care system with trained year 12 teachers using locally developed indicators
- identifying key dates/weeks for reviewing data to identify those students at risk
- establishing a management ‘team’ responsible for oversight of the data review
- appointing a person with responsibility for tracking SACE patterns and converting VET units into SACE results

Such work arose out of, and further facilitated, decisions by some schools to more flexibly ‘case manage’ students and provide individualised responses to students’ situations and goals. Two schools had established specific sites within the school to manage such work (Open Learning Centre at Trinity; Extended Learning Centre at Tyndale) to provide a more flexible learning environment that operated outside or alongside the typical school timetable. These sites seem to provide an indication of the direction that senior secondary school may have to take if greater flexibility is offered in the SACE. Similarly, across most project schools, there were moves to establish forms of senior secondary campuses/sites which were characterised by a more ‘adult’ learning environment and timetabling flexibility to cater for part-time study, hybrid courses, adult students, part-time work and so on.

One school (Windsor Gardens) reorganised its senior students into pathway ‘cohorts’ depending on the students’ planned post-school destinations (university, hospitality, building and construction, community services and health etc.). This was based on intensive counselling of students from Year 10 the appointment of care groups, and timetabling that ensured that cohorts were as much as possible working together as a community of support. Interestingly, this innovation, developed to support at risk students, had huge benefits for all, including the university pathway students, reinforcing the lesson identified by Connell (1994) that reforms aimed at the most disadvantaged students almost always end up working well for all students.

However, not all aspects of such school reform were positive. The research team identified as a concern the way that the increased data generation on and monitoring of at risk students placed the spotlight on them and had the potential to negatively highlight their position in schools. Clearly, work needs to be done with school leaders to identify the ethical implications of such monitoring and develop guidelines for generating and using data about students. On a structural front, some schools noted that they could well be penalised for being flexible in their support for students. For example, allowing students to reduce subject load, or to study offsite, often could lead to the school losing funding as a student dropped below particular thresholds for time at school. This is a matter of some concern that needs to be followed up with funding providers, to ensure that schools that work in unusual ways with students and take the trouble to work flexibly, are not unduly penalised for their troubles.

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Much of the work of the project, implied new kinds of roles for Stage 2 teachers which many of the schools noted teachers needed training to develop. Examples included:

- generating data about students (e.g. attendance, assignments, personal crises—teachers already are involved in such activities, but typically not in a coordinated team effort built around a timetable)
- ongoing counselling for students on study options (implies teachers have a good working knowledge of SACE structures, options, rules, flexibility)
- curriculum and assessment negotiation with students to keep them in the game, rather than knock them out
- mentoring students in developing skills and knowledge in areas of interest
- working as a member of a cohort/year 12 team to adapt structures, timetables, curriculum offerings, special events to student needs
- becoming an advocate for students which involved changing assumptions about why students were at risk (eg not laziness, hopelessness) and developing the skills to help them plan a future, manage risks etc.
- generating new pedagogies and assessment strategies to explicitly teach required learning outcomes

Much of the above list represents a new kind of job description for someone who would have seen themselves as a specialist ‘subject’ teacher in year 12, and represents a real challenge for teachers (often in the country) with little experience or who are teaching outside their areas of expertise. The implications for professional development arising from the work of the project are clear.

## **Conclusion**

The intention of this overview has been to provide a guide and an entry point into reading the individual school reports of their work in the project. In gathering together the insights from the reports some of the insights that arose from across the work of the schools have also been highlighted. This project has argued for considering students currently considered as ‘at risk’ from the margins of the SACE to its centre. It can be argued that the work done in this project is an indication of the kind of work that will be needed for all students in an era of rapidly changing work and higher education contexts. Processes for helping students to predict and manage their own risk, and imagine and set goals for their future, developed here for a particular cohort, are needed by all students. The kinds of flexibility and adaptability for the SACE argued in this overview, will not be achieved through policy changes alone. This report has identified key leadership, management, administrative and professional development implications of such a move. As challenging as these changes may seem, it is heartening to know that a group of schools was able to deliver such flexibility and adaptability, even within the constraints of the current structure of the SACE.

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## Part 2: The School Final Reports

# Port Augusta Secondary School Star 3 Report

**Nik Ludborzs and Natalie Noack**

## Introduction

### School Context

The STAR 3 Project for Port Augusta Secondary School was based at the Senior Campus and focused specifically on the English and Society and Environment learning areas. The makeup of the student population at the school strongly influenced the nature of the project and our reasons for focusing on this particular area. The school consists of a Middle School Campus (Years 8 and 9) and a Senior Campus (Years 10 to 12). Each campus has a student population of approximately 300 students. Of this number, at least 30% are Indigenous students, and at least 45% of all students are on school card.

Traditionally the town has based itself on the rail and power generation industries, however, with the downsizing of these industries the population declined, as did the availability of trade-based job opportunities. However, in the last few years there has been significant growth in tourism and service industry areas and an increase in the need for tradespeople to work in areas such as the Playford Power Station refurbishment and the Alice Springs to Darwin rail link. Approximately 30% of our Stage 2 students apply for tertiary entrance, while the majority seek employment, traineeships, or apprenticeships within the local area. It is the very nature of our student clientele that led us to investigate the implications of the language of the SACE on student achievement and outcomes.

Literacy and language skills have tended to be a weakness for many of our students, who struggle with many aspects of the language-rich subject areas. A significant number of Indigenous students have been classified as ESL students and we are currently assessing the literacy of all Year 9 students for early intervention in Year 10. Many of the students come from communities where there is little contact with standard or academic English. In some cases our students may be the first in their family to actually aim to complete their schooling to Year 12.

### Project Overview

Initially we had hoped to examine the language and concepts of the SACE across a broad range of subjects: Maths, Science, English, and Society and Environment. However, we soon realised the enormity of this task and decided to focus on the learning area Society and Environment. Initial discussions with faculty members revealed concerns with the way in which the language of the SACE is both written and interpreted. The interpretation of Learning Outcomes and Assessment Criteria continues to be problematic for students who are unfamiliar with the 'jargon' of assessment.

Our initial investigation was to examine the leap in the workload and specific curriculum requirements between Stage 1 and 2. The results of our interviews with Stage 2 students and staff revealed that Stage 1 did not prepare students for Stage 2 adequately. Staff felt that they needed to concentrate on giving students skill development that should have occurred at Stage 1. From this we began to examine the most significant challenges that students faced in Stage 2. While students didn't necessarily state the complexities of language as their key concern, they did note that often they didn't understand the different style or format of assignments they were to complete.

In response to such concerns we concentrated our investigation on the way in which we prepare our Year 10 students for entry into the SACE. We developed a 'top down' approach by selecting significant terms and language from the Stage 2 curriculum statements, by:

- identifying where the same concepts and terms were used and developed in Stage 1 curriculum statements

- assessing where, and if, we introduced such language in our Year 10 courses.

Through meetings with the English/Society and Environment curriculum team we were able to establish that:

- learning outcomes at Stage 1 tend to be overlooked or modified significantly as teachers negotiated assessments in relation to the specific needs of individuals and classes;
- assessment criteria, particularly at Stage 1, tend to be documented for SACE purposes but are so open to interpretation that it is difficult to explain to students the very nature of the task.
- students are reluctant to engage in understanding the specific assessment criteria or learning outcomes. As one teacher observed, such written materials often end up in the bin because students don't understand what they are reading and therefore find it irrelevant, instead asking, "But what do we need to do to pass?"
- The very structure of curriculum statements is confusing for staff. For instance, Stage 2 Tourism asks teachers to devise assessment tasks that consider the learning outcomes, communication skills, practical skills, and criteria for judging performance. Many of the terms and much of the language across subjects is similar, yet presented in different forms that create ambiguity and make it difficult to explain the task to students.
- All Stage 1 teachers stated that, because of its complexity, they do not provide students with a copy of the curriculum statement. At Stage 2 teachers were more likely to work through the document with their students.
- All teachers who were surveyed stated that their biggest challenge in delivering the curriculum to our students lay in the complexity of language and terminology of the curriculum documents.

In short, it was concluded that for our students in particular (or for those whose literacy skills are limited or below that of SACE Stage 1 or Stage 2 'standard'), the language of the curriculum statements limits their understanding of the requirements for success.

### **Issues Affecting the Project**

As stated, we soon modified our original idea of examining a broad range of curriculum areas, as we realised we had not truly acknowledged or comprehended the enormity of our task. The complexities and ambiguities of the SACE curriculum materials were overwhelming. Narrowing our field of investigation allowed us to work with a smaller group of teachers in a specific subject area.

Unfortunately, time was the biggest obstacle to achieving what we wanted. It seems ironic that in trying to complete a project that could potentially improve the success of our students in the SACE, we could not be allocated time to do this.

Staffing changes and turnover presented a further challenge. Such disruptions to student learning, in effect, enhanced some of the findings of our project. When staff are required to teach outside of their areas of expertise it can be difficult for them to grasp the concepts and terminology required to deliver the curriculum to students. As well, Year 10 students have any number of teachers throughout the year for core subjects, such as Society and Environment, as we struggle to fill staffing vacancies. The teacher's focus is frequently less on curriculum and skill development — long-term learning — than on getting to know the class. For this reason we have begun looking at how we can ensure that our Year 10 students continue to develop and improve their learning in Society and Environment despite changes to staffing.

## The Language of the SACE

### Assessment Criteria and Curriculum Statements

To establish the extent to which particular concepts/language dominate the curriculum, it was first necessary to identify key words that were frequently used in the curriculum statements and how many times these words appeared in the selected documents. Key terms were taken from the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria and, in the case of Stage 2 Tourism, from the tourism skills section as well. To develop our understanding of how we design tasks (formative and summative) and how we assess student learning, we have chosen to apply Bloom's Taxonomy to our research. This provides a structured format for defining the level of learning expected from students when investigating the language of the SACE. Table 1 below shows our analysis of the tasks students were asked to perform in the curriculum statements of the four subjects that we examined.

**Table 1: Analysis of language in curriculum statement tasks**

Terms	Stage 1 Australian Studies	Stage 2 Modern History	Stage 2 Tourism	Stage 2 Geography Studies
Demonstrate	1	1	0	6
Understand(ing)	6	2	3	7
Identify	3	7	3	7
Explain	4	2	4	3
Evaluate	2	0	12	7
Communicate(ing)	4	0	4	5
Select	1	0	0	0
Interpret	1	0	2	0
Analyse\analysis	2	4	6	3
Define	1	0	0	0
Describe	1	0	1	1
Investigate	2	0	3	0
Justify	1	0	0	0
Undertake	1	0	0	0
Respond	0	0	1	1
Review	0	0	1	0
Extrapolate	0	0	2	3
Examine	0	2	4	3
Apply	0	8	5	0
Show	0	0	0	1
Observe	0	0	0	1
Recognise	0	0	0	1
Predict	0	0	0	1
Illustrate	0	0	0	1
Formulate	0	3	0	0

Give reasons	0	4	0	0
Construct	0	5	0	0
Synthesise	0	1	0	0

Several things became apparent when identifying the language of the curriculum statements. Firstly, in the case of Stage 1 Australian Studies, a subject that all students need to complete for the SACE, six key terms were used in the learning outcomes — *demonstrate, understand/ing, identify, explain, evaluate, and communicate*. However, the Assessment Criteria included nine other terms — *select, interpret, analysis, define, describe, investigate, determine, justify, and undertake*. It would appear that teaching to the learning outcomes and then applying the assessment criteria would create some confusion in how teachers assess the learning outcomes of students.

To find out how the two areas are used together for student learning, we worked with the current Australian Studies teacher. Using the following issue study task we investigated how the concepts are taught and assessed.

### SAMPLE AUSTRALIAN STUDIES STAGE 1 ASSESSMENT TASK FROM ISSUE STUDY ASSESSMENT COMPONENT

#### Issue Study Task

*Students are to choose a resource such as power, water, timber, coal, gold, agricultural products or any other resources required by society.*

*Research the history of obtaining this resource and the attitudes and methods used.*

*Identify and research an environmentally friendly method of obtaining this resource.*

*Outline why we as a society use the environmentally friendly method. Outline the advantages and disadvantages of using this method. Provide a balanced view without personal bias.*

*Discuss why the changes are occurring and where they are occurring.*

*Make a personal statement explaining your attitude to this issue.*

*In order to achieve a broader understanding, you are to collect newspaper articles or small Internet resources. These are to be used in your report and attached as appendixes to your final copy.*

*The Assessment Criteria for the Issues Study is as follows:*

*The ability to critically evaluate the issue*

*The ability to identify and explain a range of perspectives on the issue*

*Understanding of the applications of Australian citizenship to the issue*

*The capacity to explain options for sustainable futures for all Australians*

*The ability to communicate an informed personal response, using a variety of modes.*

Within this one task students are being asked to *identify, explain, evaluate, communicate, and apply* to the issue the broad concept of Australian citizenship. We must then assume that

students have been introduced to these terms within their formative work, and realise that one set of criteria (the learning outcomes) guides their learning while the other (assessment criteria) assesses their learning. The teacher explained that the learning outcomes were largely ignored and used only as a rough outline of what should be taught within the course, because explaining learning outcomes to students is complex and few students are interested in knowing what they were to learn about.

If included on the task sheet or given to students as part of this Issue Study component, the learning outcomes would have been:

Identify and explain the perspectives of Indigenous Australians on issues in contemporary society.

Critically evaluate contemporary issues in Australian society.

Communicate understandings of socially just and environmentally sustainable futures for all Australians.

If the task is considered generally, then all of the learning outcomes are being addressed, but the language in which these outcomes are conveyed in the assessment criteria differs, causing confusion for teachers and students. Further still, if we assess the usefulness of the criteria against Bloom's Taxonomy we find that the first assessment criteria requires a high level of skill (to critically *evaluate* the issue), while the other concepts fall into the lower levels of *comprehension* and *application*. Our own understanding and interpretation of terms such as *evaluate* will also influence student learning outcomes. We need to be clear within ourselves what we are looking for in a student's work as evidence of *evaluation* taking place.

The following table breaks down the key terms and concepts found within the curriculum statements, as shown in the previous table, and applies them to the six levels within Bloom's Taxonomy.

**Table 2: Key terms and concepts from the curriculum statements**

Knowledge	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
2	6	8	3	1	6

(The term *respond* was problematic in the sense that the level it can be assigned to will depend on what type of response is required for the assessment task or learning outcome and what is being responded to.)

By examining the language in the context of Bloom's Taxonomy, we can see that there is a focus within the SACE on students being able to comprehend, apply, and evaluate information. Our own school needs to clarify where these skills are being developed and whether we are adequately equipping students with the lower level skills, from which the higher-level skills can be developed. One particular problem that has arisen within faculty discussions is the use of the term *research* and what this actually means. As the means to developing the *knowledge* required for *comprehension* right through to *evaluation*, we tend to use research as a learning tool quite poorly. Students become dependent on taking material directly from sources without building any knowledge of the topic, which is vital if they are to effectively use that information to meet assessment criteria.

Further to this, students with poor literacy skills find it difficult to locate relevant information and, even when found, are reluctant to try to select the necessary content for their assignments. Teaching students explicitly the skills for independent research will need to become a focus within our school if we are to extend students confidently beyond the *knowledge* level. Our biggest challenge in developing students' research skills in Australian Studies at Year 10 is to force ourselves to be more explicit in our instructions. For instance, the sample task for Australian Studies provided earlier instructs students to *research, outline,*

and *identify* particular information, but what do we actually mean by these terms? What are we expecting from the students? How do we visualise the completed task and how will we apply the assessment criteria? Within our school, at this stage, it is a fair assessment that as teachers we assume far too much that students understand what we mean by research, and that students also understand the language in which we convey our assessment tasks.

### **What are the problems for students and teachers?**

Initially our project revolved around the problem of the ‘big leap’ between the SACE at Stage 1 and at Stage 2. Students and staff interviewed in the first phase of the project acknowledged that Stage 1 does not adequately prepare students for what is required at Stage 2. Teachers commented that the current structure of assessment at Stage 1 means that students can complete very little work but still achieve a result of SA and, as a result. As a result, they assume that they are prepared for Stage 2 subjects. Unfortunately, many of our students struggle and do not succeed at Stage 2 because of the increased workload and differences in the way work is assessed. We hope that by breaking down the jargon of assessment and learning for students, we can ensure that students are adequately equipped with an understanding of what is required of them within the various assessment tasks.

It was also interesting to note that many of the teachers interviewed over the course of this project felt that a Stage 1 Assessment Plan written for SSABSA was sufficient programming. Many felt that if they followed the plan the students would then have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge for the next level. This was a surprising disclosure and perhaps contributed to students not being fully equipped for the next stage of learning. An assessment plan is designed to outline assessment, but it does not explain the concepts, language, or knowledge that students need to attain to be able to complete the assessment tasks successfully. While we acknowledge that the increasing demands made on our staff see many processes go by the wayside, it is critical that staff realise the need for clear programming within their classes. This needs to once again become a focus of curriculum and overall school planning.

### **Where do we currently address the concepts and language within our curriculum?**

Three years ago the Year 10 Society and Environment course was rewritten as a full-year core course. It was previously a one-semester course, based on work done in the early 1990s. As a school ironically strong in the senior history areas, we realised that we needed to equip our students with particular skills and knowledge to be successful in their Stage 1 and Stage 2 subjects. As a faculty we examined the main skills and concepts that students need in the SACE Society and Environment areas and sought to design a program around these. Whereas the program contains very little that is new or innovative, it allows us to identify and teach Year 10 students the core skills that are required to build upon for Stage 1 and Stage 2, while also developing some context to the Stage 1 Australian Studies course.

However, the Skills/Knowledge component of the plan shows that although we are directing students towards a particular area of learning, we don’t adequately examine specific language as it appears at a SACE level. There are several possible reasons for this lapse:

1. Teachers used to delivering the Year 10 Society and Environment course may have little experience in the delivery of Stage 1 and Stage 2 Society and Environment courses, and may therefore not understand the specific way in which language can influence the nature of a task or assessment in the SACE.
2. Students’ literacy at Year 10 is at such a low level that it is necessary to modify tasks to their simplest form and, in doing so, ignore, and never really address those concepts that students cannot comprehend.

3. Such courses are often staffed by teachers from outside the area of Society and Environment, whose understanding of some of these core concepts may not be strong.

Thus, while the best intentions have been set down in the overall program of the Year 10 Society and Environment course, a number of variables make the consistent delivery and acquisition of skills for students a difficult task.

The same problems were evident in the Stage 1 Australian Studies course. In the demand for SACE completion we have had suggestions of running Australian Studies at Year 10 or even running short courses so that students can gain this compulsory SACE unit in less time than a semester. Neither of these options prepares students to understand the language of the SACE. Students who are already struggling with the literacy of Year 10 Society and Environment are not going to gain greater skill development just because they have completed an accelerated course of Stage 1 Australian Studies. Rather, students will feel even more overwhelmed by the range of language and concepts required at Stage 1 and 2.

### **How do we currently teach the concepts and language of the SACE?**

Ideally this should be occurring automatically throughout Year 10, Stage 1 and Stage 2, with concepts and language further refined at each level. In reality, this doesn't occur. In some cases there is little in Year 10 to build upon and in most cases we find we need to return to the basics. For instance, the term *research* is used frequently, but rarely do we explain to students what it is that we want. As teachers we assume that students know that when we say '*research the convicts*', we want to know about the conditions in Britain at the time, why Australia was chosen as a penal colony, what the voyage to Australia was like, and what the lifestyles of convicts were like once in Australia. To a student who is overwhelmed by sources of information, both written and electronic, and who struggles with language and literacy and needs clear direction for simple tasks, the concept of researching becomes confusing and overwhelming. As a result the teacher doesn't receive the work he or she envisioned and the assessment task fails to meet any particular learning or assessment outcomes.

Instead of relying on a broad concept such as *research*, we need to be explicit in what we want students to produce. We need to develop tasks that allow students to become familiar with what *explaining*, *comparing* or *analysing* means. They need to understand what such terms look like on the page and how to go about such tasks. Above all, teachers need to be clear in what they expect, through the use of examples and by directing students explicitly through each part of the task, ensuring students can identify particular language in relation to a particular task.

### **How do we know when students understand the language of the SACE at Stage 1 and Stage 2?**

At this stage we can only rely upon summative assessment to gauge whether or not students are competent in understanding the language of the SACE. However, this in itself is problematic as in most cases teachers are using prescribed assessment criteria but may not have used similar language or terminology as part of the task. Explicit instruction in what is actually required is crucial to students developing the confidence of knowing what the language means and how they should be approaching the task. Many students who struggle with language-rich tasks and activities have lower level critical thinking and analysis skills, and yet are being assessed against higher level thinking skills. Rather than have students produce work at a substandard level and not develop their skills in a gradual manner, we have tended to approach such lapses in skill development by either manipulating the assessment criteria to fit the student's work or making an intensive effort as problems arise. We need to change the way we introduce students to the skills, language, and terminology of different

subjects at different levels. Bloom's Taxonomy appears to be the most straightforward model to apply to our curriculum delivery.

In discussions with Stage 2 students this year as part of our investigation, one student commented regarding her essays for English Studies, "Why am I only learning this now?" She explained that learning about the way English essays should be written needs to happen long before students get to Stage 2 English Studies. Unfortunately, such learning is delayed in all subjects and for a number of reasons. There is a criticism that developing specific skills for certain Stage 2 subjects (i.e. those subjects that attract a TER) makes the subject content irrelevant for those students who do not wish to or cannot go to university. Thus, in a Stage 1 English class you may encounter students:

- who wish to have the necessary skills to be successful in Stage 2 English,
- who are completing English only to gain Stage 1 of the SACE so that they may go onto prevocational entry,
- whose literacy prevents them from completing the same work as other students and who therefore make use of oral assessment for their work and
- who are at school because of their parents insistence.

Where then should the complex language of the SACE be taught so as not to isolate the student who struggles with low-level tasks and resists attempting the work?

If we consider the current Year 10 Society and Environment program, it would appear that we have tended to assume, when programming, that most students can comprehend the content and tasks contained within the program. However, in reality many of the students over the past two years have struggled with the language-rich nature of the subject. In our urgency to ensure that students understand the content, we overlook the skills, and vice versa. The need to accommodate a range of student abilities has also seen us overlook the students who are ready to learn the next level of language, and in turn these students are held back in their comprehension of a broader range of skills and concepts; hence the Stage 2 student's question, "Why am I only learning this now?"

The other problem with trying to incorporate the language of the SACE into Year 10, and even into Stage 1 courses in preparation for Stage 2, is the discrepancy with what is required as part of assessment at Stage 2. As an example, the rewritten Stage 2 Tourism course refers to the term *evaluate* twelve times within its learning outcomes and assessment criteria. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, this is a high level critical thinking skill. Where then should the skill of *evaluating* occur, and in what form? Students in Stage 2 Tourism in 2003 struggled to meet assessment criteria that made reference to *evaluate/evaluating/evaluation*. Despite designing tasks that specifically asked students to make an *evaluation*, their responses were low level or, at the very least, simply described the very material they needed to evaluate. If students don't have the necessary understanding of the lower-level skills and language, then it would be putting them at a distinct disadvantage in their final year of study to suddenly weight, significantly, a term such as *evaluate* as part of their assessment criteria. As teachers we need to be aware of the significance of such key terms and language when programming in the lower levels of secondary education, to ensure that students are familiar with the necessary language and know what such responses would *look* like.

## Recommendations for our School and Curriculum Practices

Our investigation into the language of the SACE revealed some significant criticisms of the way in which curriculum statements and their learning outcomes and assessment criteria have been presented to both staff and students. In short, the language associated with the SACE is ambiguous, open to interpretation by the individual teacher and students. In order to cater for all abilities and backgrounds, learning outcomes and assessment criteria have become so

broad that a clear definition of what is required in teaching and learning is often difficult to find. While we acknowledge that there is little we can do to overhaul the way in which such documents and information is written we can, as one faculty within one school, revise the way in which we prepare students for Stage 1 and 2.

We hope that our investigation will make teachers and schools more aware of how difficult it can be for students to understand exactly what is required of them in any given learning area and why it is necessary to teach not only the content of subjects, but also the language of specific learning areas. Making students familiar with and aware of what specific words mean builds confidence in their ability to attempt the work presented to them.

Within our faculty area we intend to apply what we have discovered over the course of the project by implementing the following strategies in 2004:

### **1. Rewrite Curriculum to Incorporate Bloom's Taxonomy**

Incorporating Bloom's Taxonomy into our curriculum planning is not spectacular in itself. However, the process encourages staff to look beyond what is considered curriculum and begin to look at how they develop skills in students and then build upon those skills throughout their teaching.

Using the Year 10 Society and Environment course as the basis for a trial, each task (whether formative or summative) will include a breakdown of what is expected and the way in which it will be assessed. The revised program identifies key terms or language that should be the focus for that particular task or component. Teachers can be flexible in the way they deliver the curriculum, but it is essential that they make students aware of what they expect the final product to look like. By doing so we can hope to reduce the content of the Year 10 Society and Environment course and instead concentrate on developing specific skills that ideally will equip students for success at Stage 1. Ideally, as a long-term plan, we can apply the same principles to Society and Environment courses offered at Stage 1. By being explicit in what we expect from students, we can hope to build confidence in their own ability and thus encourage them to further develop their own learning.

### **2. Investigate and Revise Student Assessment**

Essentially we need to consider how we will use 'common' assessment tasks to accurately assess whether or not students are meeting the learning outcomes, and to recognise the different language and terms required for different tasks.

In our delivery of Stage 1 curriculum we need to be far more vigorous in our use of formative tasks that teach toward the skills required in the next summative task. A similar formula for teaching and learning needs to be established in Year 10 to ensure that students understand the nature of those forms of assessment. More importantly, we need to focus on raising students' expectations. Rather than accept that there are too many extenuating circumstances for us to be able to equip our students with the necessary skills and understanding, we need to ensure that the learning that does occur applies not only to their school-based studies, but also to post-school options. As a school we need to refocus on the strength of learning by making curriculum a focus and an instrument for initiating change in how we teach and how students learn.

At the same time, however, we believe that SSABSA needs to address the way in which it presents the curriculum materials to teachers and students. As one staff member noted, 'these documents are for the students and should be geared towards this'. It appears that a teacher's role has become translator and interpreter for documents such as these and, more recently, the SACSA Framework. We have found that, especially in a school with high turnover, we

cannot assume that all teachers have these skills in all subjects, especially when teaching outside their area of specialisation.

The curriculum statements and their contents are not written for critical analysis or academic interpretation. They are written for teachers to design their curriculum around and to allow students to understand how their learning will be measured and assessed. They must be straightforward, clear, unambiguous, and direct. They should not be open to interpretation according to socio-economics, values, or cultural background. We need to ask ourselves how useful such content is as an accurate tool in assessing student learning.

Our aim for 2004 is to implement the revised Year 10 Society and Environment program, giving the faculty staff appropriate training and development in the necessary areas and ensure that they are aware of the specific language that needs to be introduced to students in Year 10. Ideally, common assessment tasks that reflect the language introduced in each topic will be used to gauge the effectiveness of the program and provide future direction for our faculty. If we can be successful in this endeavour, then we hope to encourage other faculty areas with our findings. In 2004 we will also develop a similar program for the compulsory Australian Studies unit.

## **Conclusion**

While our project has not yet given us solid evidence that taking this approach will improve student learning outcomes in the SACE, we hope that it will, at the very least, promote discussion of the issue of the language of the SACE and make teachers more aware of the need to be explicit in their teaching and assessment of students. This will be an ongoing process that will require regular meetings of Society and Environment teachers and sharing of work examples and teaching practices, both positive steps for student learning and vital in a school with such high staff turnover. At the very least, this project has provided us with the opportunity to reflect on the way we deliver senior curriculum and has made us more aware of the difficulties that students face when attempting assessment tasks. Teaching students the language of learning and making teachers aware of the need to teach it can only assist us in gaining improved student learning outcomes in the future.

**Using Multiple Outcomes in Stage 1 Assessment Tasks to  
Prepare Students for Stage 2**

**St Joseph's School, Port Lincoln**

**Mrs Sue Berry**

**Ms Anna De Guglielmo**

## Context

St Joseph's School, Port Lincoln is an R–12 school of approximately 730 students. Student numbers in Years 11 and 12 vary between 140 and 150. A boarding house provides accommodation for 45 students, many of whom come from very isolated areas of Eyre Peninsula to complete their SACE. In meeting the significant challenge of catering for the needs of a diverse range of students, a broad offering of academic subjects enabling access to university has been maintained and VET pathways have been established through links with Spencer TAFE. In the spirit of Mary MacKillop, we aspire to 'education for all', evident in a strong commitment to an inclusive curriculum that encourages all students to access our curriculum and to be successful. Thus, mindful of 'students at risk of not completing Stage 2 of SACE', we became involved in the STAR 3 project in mid-2002.

We began by seeking a response from students to the question,

*What makes it difficult to complete the SACE in Year 12?*

A wide variety of issues originating both within the school and external to the school were explored in a group discussion with eleven Year 12 students. Six Year 12 subject teachers were also interviewed. The students identified issues within the school setting that could be broadly grouped under headings of 'pressure', 'structure of the curriculum', and 'previous experiences'. Our attention was drawn to this last category. Students made comments such as '*The jump from Year 11 to Year 12 is too great*'; '*We should do harder work before Year 12*'; '*We didn't know how hard this subject would be*' and '*Work is marked in a different way in Year 12*'. (See summary of student information in Appendix A.)

A decision was made to investigate further the previous academic experiences of Year 12 students. In November 2002, teachers of Year 12 subjects were asked to complete surveys asking about the kinds of skills or knowledge that students didn't have at the beginning of their course, the types of assignments they had most trouble with and the kind of assistance students needed early in the year. (See Appendix B.) While the responses were subject-specific, a common thread identified difficulties with more complex skills such as analysing, critiquing, lateral thinking, formulating, and explaining their own opinions and research skills. In focus group interviews students reiterated the need for better preparation before Year 12, mentioning difficulties they experienced with tasks that they had never tackled before. They did not know what was required in, for example, writing subject-specific essays or a field study, case study or major individual study.

From this data we considered the possibility that some students were ill-prepared for Year 12 because the assessment tasks they complete in Year 11 do not target to an appropriate depth some of the skills that are required to successfully tackle Year 12 subjects. If students were encouraged to further develop these prerequisite skills in Year 11, subject choices might be made more wisely and students would be better equipped to cope with the demands of their chosen subject. The transition to Year 12 might be less traumatic, with correspondingly less pressure. The situation results from catering to a large range of abilities and interests in the regular Year 11 classroom in a school with only one class for most specialist subjects. One assessment plan is used that meets the needs of the hypothetical middle or lower. We needed to provide the opportunity for students to better develop those skills that are necessary for Year 12, but which are under-emphasised in Year 11.

## Strategy

Specifically, our goals were:

- to inform Stage 1 students of the academic demands of Stage 2 subjects;

- to inform students of the skills they need to develop to achieve the academic demands of particular subjects
- to help teachers provide better information on the learning requirements of their subject.

The focus that evolved was to explore the potential role for multiple outcomes in Stage 1 assessment tasks by providing more challenging tasks and developing higher level skills for students within the same classroom at Year 11.

The original plan was to trial modifications to assessment tasks and plans in at least three Stage 1 subject areas. Data was to be collected from interviews with focus groups of Year 11 students and subject teachers.

## **Trial**

### **Developing the strategy**

To develop the strategy into a form suitable to trial, teachers were required who were willing to commit to the project, who had taught the same subject in Year 11 and Year 12, or who had recent experience at both levels. This limited the number of suitable staff. At the end of the school year, in December 2002, teachers of Accounting, Economics, and Chemistry indicated they were prepared to make a commitment. A timeline was devised, and revised in May 2003. (See Appendix C.)

Considerable discussion took place with the intent of devising an approach to modifying tasks to achieve the goals we had set. In consultation with Edna Casagrande, SSABSA's Equity Officer, we drew on material from Paul Weedon, Jan Winter, and Patricia Broadfoot's recent book, *Assessment: What's in it for schools?* In particular, we drew upon the principles 'promoting commitment to learning goals and assessment criteria' and 'helping learners know how to improve'. We developed criteria-based assessment tasks that provided explicit information about the skills or knowledge required in a task, and linked the performance criteria directly to a grading system. We quickly recognised that the nature of this task would vary considerably between subjects.

Unfortunately, owing to unforeseen staff changes, after the initial planning stage, the Accounting and Economics teachers were unable to follow through with their involvement in the project. However, the Chemistry teacher was able to follow through and it is on this work that the following discussion is based.

In the process of moving from idea to practice, the original conceptualisation of 'multiple outcomes' was modified. Instead what evolved was an assessment task with an explicit breakdown of the task requirements, to enable students to better focus on the academic skills it demanded. Criteria were linked to grades. As the assessment plan used for Stage 1 Chemistry does not require detail at the level at which the task was modified, it became apparent that there was no need to intervene at this level. The project became a trial of an alternative approach to the format and style of assessment of the research report task for Stage 1 Chemistry. (See Appendix D.)

### **The Stage 1 Chemistry Modified Task: 'Research Report — Atmospheric Chemistry'**

(See Appendix D for a copy of the task sheet.)

First, the aim was to assist students to gain an understanding of what is implied in the specialised use of language in Chemistry. For example, it was hoped that the students gained

in their understanding of the terms '**Identify and explain** chemical concepts clearly' and 'use relevant chemical terms to communicate'. Second, it was intended that students learn to distinguish between different levels of analysis and recognise the way this related to the grade that was achieved. For example, a student could use a graph to communicate information. Criteria would be met for grading as follows:

- C
  - If the student writes '*The graph shows the trend of emission of sulphur dioxide*'.
  - **Graph used.**
- B
  - If the student writes '*From the graph you can see that the emission of sulphur dioxide increased and the level of sulphur dioxide is higher than that of ...*'
  - **Graph used and referred to in text.**
- A
  - If the student writes '*From the graph you can see that the emission of sulphur dioxide increased*' and '*The level of sulphur dioxide is higher than that of ...*' and '*This would be expected because the area was becoming increasingly industrialised*'.
  - **Graph used and referred to in text and information is evaluated.**

### **Monitoring the effectiveness of the strategy**

Student responses were obtained from a taped interview with five Year 11 Chemistry students after they had responded to this research task, and an interview with the teacher to gain her perspective. The student responses were grouped to relate them to the goals of the project.

#### *First goal: to inform Stage 1 students of the academic demands of Stage 2 subjects*

The task was designed to ensure the provision of explicit criteria for achieving an 'A', 'B', or 'C', showing that requirements of a task can be met at different levels. Students reported, '*making sure that they had all the things you need for an A*', and using the information to edit a first draft. Students said they had never before seen a task written in such a way.

The Chemistry teacher reported that feedback on a draft was easily provided to students by ticking off areas addressed (or not) on the task sheet. It enabled students to '*... know more specifically where they are falling down. They know what they have to do to fix it.*'

#### *Second goal: to inform Stage 1 students of the skills required to achieve the academic demands of particular subjects*

Students commented that they understood more about the types of skills required in Stage 2 Chemistry. For example, they knew they needed skills in providing evidence for their opinions and using the chemical concepts to explain everyday phenomena. Students understood that each subject area had its own particular rules for essay writing.

The teacher felt that because the task was more explicit, students understood it better. The format formalised the various aspects of the task.

#### *Third goal: to help teachers provide better information on the learning requirements of their subject*

Students reported that they had more idea what to look for when doing their research. They were more informed about what information to find and how to choose what was relevant for the task. Students definitely thought that a similar format would be useful in other subjects.

The teacher believed that using this format for the task helped students gain greater awareness of the academic demands and learn specific terminology for the subject. She became more aware of the student's point of view, commenting, '*You realise they live in a fog*'. The teacher stated that the critical elements of the task format were a list of criteria and explicit detail about what depth of treatment was required for each criterion in order to achieve an A, B, or C.

An additional benefit identified by the teacher was that she felt encouraged to think about the way task requirements were communicated and assessed in other subjects and year levels. Note, however, that several students found that the language was difficult to understand. Examples of their comments are provided in Appendix E.

## Review and Implications

As detailed above, student and teacher feedback on the strategy was very positive. However, it is acknowledged that our planned trial was scaled down considerably from the initial proposal and further trials would be needed to assess the effectiveness in other subject areas and with other cohorts of students. It would be informative to follow through a group of students into Year 12 for further feedback.

The original assumptions upon which this strategy was based appear to be appropriate after considering the students' feedback

Some creativity and experience on the part of the teacher is required to develop each task. The teacher needed considerable specialised knowledge of both the subject and the demands of studying it at Year 12. SSABSA would have access to people with this kind of expertise. The Chemistry teacher used guidelines from the Year 12 Chemistry curriculum statement and fitted them into the format of the task she designed. Initial effort and learning was required from the teacher, but this led to a different mindset in relation to setting assessment tasks. It would be interesting to know whether other teachers following a similar strategy change their approach in other teaching areas.

The Chemistry teacher recommended that SSABSA could devise guidelines for developing a variety of tasks in Year 11 along the lines of those provided for Year 12 HESS (General) subjects.

The research raised a number of questions on a school level and wider. On a school level we were prompted to consider:

- the ways in which staff can be encouraged to consider responding to some of the difficulties identified in the initial survey;
- whether our teachers needed some updated in-service on assessment and flexibility in the SACE. We responded to this by booking with SSABSA:
  - an in-service session with Sue Walker, entitled 'Flexibility in SACE' (for 2004);
  - a workshop with Edna Casagrande, entitled 'Assessment for Learning' (conducted term three 2003);

The trial of this strategy invited us to identify the critical elements of the way the task was modified, to imagine the ways this can be applied in other subject areas and at other year levels, and to consider the potential benefits.

## **Conclusion**

The experience of both the teacher and students involved in this trial of criteria-based assessment affirmed that it encouraged understanding of the task and delineated required skills and knowledge. Students appear to have gained in their knowledge of the academic requirements of the subject and thus achieved some insight into the demands of that subject for Year 12. Students themselves indicated the potential for this approach to be used more extensively across the curriculum.

## **References**

Weedon, P, Winter, J. & Broadfoot, P. 2002, *Assessment: What's in it for schools?*, Routledge Falmer, 2002.

## Appendix A. Summary of Student and Staff Information from Initial Interviews

### Student Response

#### Setting

Eleven volunteer Year 12 students were interviewed in a group setting, focusing mainly on the following question:

*What makes it difficult to complete SACE in Year 12?*

The three male and eight female students represented a cross section of students who are of struggling with the demands of Year 12. At least two were considered at risk of not completing SACE.

The discussion lasted 45 minutes. Students were keenly interested in contributing, and in listening to each other's comments.

#### Findings Within the School / Curriculum

##### *Pressure:*

- Learning to prioritise work to be done.
- Making a commitment to study:
  - laziness
  - attitudes
  - lots of other things we want to do
  - need an incentive to do it (can't see long term purpose).
- Many tests in same day/ week.
- Too much all at once: essays/ assignments set at same time *'leads to feeling overwhelmed and 'put off' by everything'*.
- Focusing on one subject's load means you get behind in other subjects.
- Teachers don't communicate with each other about assignment dates.
- Too much pressure — can't find balance.

##### *Previous experiences:*

- Jump from Year 11 is too great.
- Year 11 — Concern is about meeting SACE requirements — not challenged.
- — Need to have 'frees' so learn how to use them.
  - Year 12 — Work is marked in a different way.
  - Maybe do more SACE Stage 1 subjects in Year 10, e.g. Australian Studies, so that there is study time in Year 11.
  - In Year 10 & Year 11 smarter students need more challenges — do harder work before Year 12.
  - Year 12 is first year of 'frees'. Need time to get used to making use of them.

### *Structure of curriculum*

- Class sizes — 25 too many. Hard to listen. Can't get one-on-one help.
- Need more information about what is involved in each Year 12 subject so realistic choices can be made (PES v. PAS v. SAS requirements).
- Different workload in different subjects.
- If you get behind in one subject you feel like giving up because you know you can't complete the requirements for the year.
- By the time you realise the subject is too hard it's too late to drop out. So you might as well leave school.
- Year 12s should have priority access to IT.
- Problems with computers. Losing work.
- Need more access to tutors. Teachers too busy to help after school.
- Open Access subjects are expensive. Country disadvantage for Catholic schools.
- Subject choices — can't choose subjects you are suited to from subject lines.
- 'Knowing what you want to be' — if you don't have a goal, it's hard to keep making the effort.
- Tension in class between students who want high TER and those who don't need it.
- Doing subjects after school is difficult with part-time work.

### **Findings: Issues originating outside the school curriculum**

#### *Social*

- Finding the balance
- We want to enjoy our last year of school. We don't want to give up anything. 'Have fun with friends'.
- Dropping down to four subjects gives more time for social life as well as relieves stress.

#### *Personal*

- Turning 18
- If you have health or family problems and you get behind then you might lose the whole year.
- Stress causes illness, which causes difficulty completing work.
- Personal problems and relationship problems are a barrier. It stops you from focusing on work but teachers might not know and just see it as another 'excuse'.
- Need more freedom at school so that you're not being told off and treated like a younger person.

## Staff Response

### Setting

Six staff members who are currently teaching Year 12 were interviewed in a group setting for 45 minutes. Discussion was focused on the same question:

*What makes it difficult for students to complete the SACE in Year 12?*

### Findings Within School / Curriculum

- Stage 1 & Stage 2 run differently:
  - Stage 2 is content driven. Influence of TER scores. Limited negotiation possible.
  - No negotiation to content.
  - Need to be aware of 'quantum leap' from Year 11 to Year 12.
  - Students may not be realistic/ aware of this 'quantum leap'.
  - Assessment expectations are different. SACE is 'achievable by all' fits Stage 1.
  - Flexibility but Year 12 has 'standards'.
  - Year 11 needs to be more rigorous to prepare students to cope in Year 12.
- Year 11 'We don't let them fail'. Year 12 'Here is the BAR you've got to jump!'
- Technology has changed the skills that are expected.
- Assessment tasks have diversified in Stage 2.
- Students do not have skill for revising for tests. There is a need to memorise. 'A test? Is it open book?' Do we teach revision skills?
- PES — PAS/SAS. The styles of learning are too different. Revision skills are issue for PES. No flexibility in PES subjects.
- Honesty in reporting in earlier secondary years is an issue. The ease of obtaining SAs in Year 11 gives a false sense of security so student may not be ready for Year 12.
- Students select subjects they are not suited to. Do we give them enough information?
- Focus missing — no goal.
- STAR students are easily identified:
  - Attendance.
  - Teacher identification and other well-established indicators.
  - The student cohort influences individuals, especially the 'fringe dwellers'. Factors such as absenteeism and leaving school during the day influence others.

### Findings: Influences Originating Outside School Curriculum:

Affluence — 'Why do I need this? I can get a job.'

- Family attitudes are not supportive to students — time/ place to study, and routine. Crises and problems in family. Family culture vs. school culture.
- Students have lots of freedom, home study, driving licenses, part-time work, and more social life than in the past.

- Student stay away from school for minor reasons or to catch up on work or avoidance.
- In Year 12 life changes — boundaries between areas of students' lives change.

## **Appendix B. Further exploring our project topic through interviews with students and Year 12 staff surveys**

### **Questions for Student Reflection in Subject Focus Groups**

1. At the beginning of Year 12 what did you find most surprised you in this subject?  
What concerned you?
2. What types of assignments did you have most trouble with?
3. Helping others benefit from your experience: *If you had known in Year 11 what you know now* about this subject would you:
  - do anything different yourself in Year 11?
  - want teachers in Year 11 to do anything differently?

### **Staff Survey Questions**

1. What were the kinds of skills or knowledge that you noticed that the students didn't have at the commencement of your course?
2. What kinds of assignments did students have most trouble with?
3. What kind of help or assistance did students need early in the year?

## Appendix C. Timeline for the Trial

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Data gathered</b>
Nov 2002	Year 12 Teacher surveys <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview Year 12 students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• interviews</li> </ul>
Dec 2002	Decision about which teachers will be involved <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview these teachers</li> <li>• Present plan at Staff meeting in Week 9</li> </ul>	
Feb 2003	Attend meeting at SSABSA <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform students of project</li> </ul>	Pre-project Stage 1 Assessment plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey of students' understanding of own needs (three groups of four or five students)</li> </ul>
March 2003	Draft assessment plans and tasks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawn up by teachers of Chemistry and Accounting</li> <li>• Presented at a visit by SSABSA Project Officer</li> </ul>	The plans
June 2003 (towards end of Semester 1)	Preliminary feedback from students and teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review assessment plans and report back to staff</li> <li>• New assessment plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three interviews with teachers</li> <li>• Reflection session with the three groups of students</li> <li>• New assessment plans</li> </ul>
October 2003	Review Semester 2 (repeat interviews with teacher and reflection session with student groups)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 3 interviews</li> <li>• Reflection session with students</li> </ul>
November 2003	Write up the project, addressing the 3 research questions	

### Alterations to this timeline

The project was scaled down considerably as time progressed. Due to the withdrawal of the Economics and Accounting teachers, only one group of students and one teacher were interviewed in response to the Chemistry task. Only one task was trialled. The modification of the task did not entail modifying the assessment plans.

## Appendix D. Modified Research Report Task Sheet Used in the Trial

### YEAR 11 CHEMISTRY

### RESEARCH REPORT — ATMOSPHERIC CHEMISTRY

Your assignment is to research an aspect of atmospheric chemistry and its impact on the organisms found on earth. You will need to present a synthesised report about the topic of your choice.

Suggested topics include: acid rain, photochemical smog, enhanced greenhouse effect or ozone depletion.

Marks are allocated using the criteria shown in the table below. However, students must be aware that the number of marks awarded for each criterion will depend on how well each criterion is completed. (See assessment guidelines overleaf.)

CRITERIA	MARK	COMMENT
CHEMISTRY • Identify and explain chemical concepts clearly	9	
SOCIAL RELEVANCE • Identify relevance to society/environment • Informed decisions/comments • Management of problem, future directions	9	
CHEMICAL TERMINOLOGY • Chemical terms, formulae, equations, structural formulae	4	
SOURCES OF INFORMATION • One to five relevant/suitable sources (books, journals, internet) • Evaluate (discuss/compare) information for bias • Accuracy of interpretation	6	
COMMUNICATION • Clear and concise • Refer to diagrams and equations in text • 500 to 1000 words • Bibliography appropriately presented	2	
TOTAL	30	

## YEAR 11 CHEMISTRY

### ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH REPORT

#### **A GRADE**

Demonstrate a thorough knowledge and understanding of the chemical concepts by evaluating chemical information.

Identify some chemical problems and develop possible alternative solutions.

Describe the impact of the chemical problem on the society/environment and make decisions about it based on sound reasoning.

Use relevant chemical terms (including equations and diagrams) to communicate information. Evaluate this information and refer to it in the text.

#### **B GRADE**

Demonstrate a sound knowledge and understanding of the chemical concepts.

Identify some chemical problems and suggest some solutions.

Describe the impact of the chemical problem on the society/environment and make decisions about it.

Use relevant chemical terms (including equations and diagrams) to communicate information and refer to these in the text.

#### **C GRADE**

Demonstrate some knowledge and understanding of the chemical concepts.

Identify some chemical problems.

Describe the impact of the chemical problem on the society/environment.

Use relevant chemical terms (including equations and diagrams) to communicate information.

## Appendix E. Selected Feedback from Year 11 Chemistry Students

*'I knew it had to have a fair bit of Chemistry in it.'*

*'When you have a research assignment there's too much information and it's hard to narrow it down into 500 or 1000 words. It gives an idea of exactly what you need and what to leave out.'*

*'First we just got a sheet and we like, weren't sure what was needed. Then when we got this sheet it helped.'*

*'Yes it definitely would help with other subjects. Anything with a research assignment. In [subject name] we have no idea what to look for. And he doesn't tell us how he's marking it.'*

*'You can double check — make sure you've got everything for an A.'*

*'If you do a second draft you can put things in that you left out.'*

*'Some of the words were a bit hard to understand like "accuracy of interpretation", "evaluating information for bias", "informed decisions".'*



**St Michael's College**

**STAR #3 Project Report**

**Integrating Stage 1 and Stage 2: Building Momentum and  
Spreading the Load**

**Tony McCulkin**

## **1. Context**

St Michael's College is a Catholic College (R–12) located on two campuses in the Western suburbs of Adelaide. The secondary campus at Henley Beach (Years 8–12) caters for 940 students, boys only in Years 8–10 and coeducational in Years 11 and 12. The students are mainly (94%) drawn from the City of Charles Sturt. Australian Bureau of Statistics demographic data for this statistical district indicate that 30% of households are in the lowest quartile on the socio-economic index, and 25% of families speak a language other than English at home (c.f. 15% for the Adelaide District).

Although the St Michael's profile does not match Western suburbs statistics, the college population is drawn from the breadth indicated by the ABS data. The college offers a broad curriculum to cater for the diverse aspirations of students and families, including a comprehensive Vocational Education and Training (VET) program that caters for 110 students who combine vocational studies with SSABSA subjects.

## **2. Preliminary Considerations — Lessons from Phases 2 and 3**

The aim of Phases 2 and 3 of the STAR 3 project was to collect and analyse responses of current and recent participants in the education of Stage 2 students to questions about why students do not complete the SACE, and their perceptions about what policies and strategies might encourage the successful completion of the SACE. At St Michael's College the informants were identified as:

- 2001 SACE graduates from St Michael's College;
- 2002 currently enrolled Stage 2 students;
- Curriculum Leaders in the Mathematics and Religious Education Faculties and Years 11 and 12 Year Level Directors.

### **2.1 Phase 2/3 Data Gathering**

Directed group discussion (focus groups) was used to elicit qualitative data about the subtlety and complexity of informants' underlying attitudes, values, and beliefs concerning the SACE. It should be noted that the value of the information from these sessions depended on the quality of the interactions between the participants and the directions taken in the questioning. In some groups the viewpoints of a few individuals dominated but in others a broader survey of views was achieved. We conducted three focus group sessions made up of the following categories of students:

- 2001 Year 12 cohort (post-school)      n = 8
- 2002 Year 12 cohort      n = 8
- Teaching staff

The data from these focus groups were analysed in two ways:

1. Factors that the participants identified as significant for completion or non-completion were recorded using the labels they provided. We recorded both positive and negative factors related to completion, depending on they ways they were framed by the participants.
2. We identified any supplementary or alternative, goals for students staying to the end of Year 12, other than SACE completion.

## **2.2 Results of Phase 2 and 3 Investigations**

This phase of the research project identified a number of reasons why students do not complete SACE and some practices and strategies that support students in completing it. Statements by respondents could be organised into three broad areas:

- meeting individual student needs, interests, and abilities;
- supporting students and families;
- providing a positive and caring learning community.

We also compared the findings with the discussions of these issues with college Administrators and Counsellors, which were conducted in Phase 1 and 2 of the project.

The most critical factors in successful SACE completion were:

- appropriate subject selection;
- access to a broad range of subject offerings in PES, PAS, SAS ,and VET studies;
- flexible curriculum delivery structures, small classes and study lessons in Year 12;
- caring and committed teaching staff;
- strong friendships with peers;
- counselling services;
- work experience;
- college celebrations;
- stability and support at home.

The most significant source of information for students selecting subjects was older students who were able to reflect upon their own experiences and choices.

One significant factor relating to a positive and caring learning community was the group identification enjoyed by Year 12 students. Students believed that the Year 12 Retreat experience was the major factor in developing this environment.

These respondents believed that the main reasons for students leaving school without completing SACE were:

- to take up apprenticeships;
- to move into the workforce fulltime;
- to seek more independence from parents and/or college regulations;
- to pursue options considered more appropriate;
- inability to cope with the workload as a result of poor subject selection or disorganisation;
- lacking long term or clear goals or motivation;
- difficulties at home;
- peer pressure;
- downward moderation;

- poor relationships with staff and/or peers.

There was also a strongly held belief among student respondents that the SACE was irrelevant and that it was overlooked in the pursuit of a TER, or a belief that the qualification was irrelevant to their goals. All student respondents considered finishing Year 12 an immediate goal, with or without successful SACE completion.

There was considerable overlap in beliefs held by the respondents from each of three focus groups. However, there were some clear differences between the focus group responses overall and some responses from staff in earlier phases of the project. For example, staff respondents believed that a significant contributing factor was the lack of congruence between expectations at Stage 1 and Stage 2.

This was however, reinforced in student responses that indicated a categorical difference between Stage 1 and Stage 2 years of study, that were qualitatively and quantitatively dissimilar. The evolving thought on the strategy was based around the idea of building greater coherence between the two stages and altering structures to encourage less distinction between the stages. Lessening the significance of the calendar year seemed a possible strategy. The beliefs underpinning this strategy included the existence of pervasive social knowledge about the difficulty of the successful completion of Year 12 by all stakeholders and the belief that teachers perceived a lack of congruence between Stages 1 & 2 of the SACE.

### **3. Trialling a Strategy for Supporting Completion at Stage 2 (Phase 4 of the Project)**

The strategy for Phase 4 of the project proposed by St Michael's College related to building greater coherence between Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the SACE and encouraging students at risk to actively engage in determining pathways to successful completion by creating more flexible study programs and arranging to spread Stage 2 assessment requirements across 18 months. The strategy allowed students to complete a 2-unit sequence in a Stage 2 subject over two consecutive calendar years rather than within the one calendar year that is SSABSA Curriculum and Assessment policy. The goals of the strategy were to:

1. support STAR students to complete the SACE by completing studies in one curriculum area over eighteen months. Stage 2 studies were to begin in July of Year 11;
2. increase the likelihood of students returning in Year 12 to complete Stage 2 subjects rather than seeing the end of Year 11 as a possible exit point;
3. support students by spreading the culminations of 2-unit Stage 2 subjects over six months;
4. provide flexible delivery structures for students pursuing VET modules, school-based traineeships/apprenticeships, and other industry-based studies, concurrently with the SACE;
5. blend Stage 1 and Stage 2 studies into more manageable workloads.

We asked the following research questions in relation to these goals:

1. Will carefully planned hybrid Stage 1 and Stage 2 courses encourage and assist STAR students to complete SACE?
2. Are results due July, 2-unit Stage 2 subjects feasible?
3. Will immediate uptake of Stage 2 studies upon the completion of Stage 1 studies improve completion rates and success?

### **3.1 The Students at Risk Involved in the Phase 4 Investigation**

Students were identified by consultation with the Year 10 Director, Adaptive Education Coordinator, Student Counsellors, Careers Counsellor, ESL Support Teacher, and subject teachers through comments on term reports and consequent conversations. Students identified demonstrated characteristics that could put them at risk of not completing the SACE. The group selected was composed of the students who could reasonably be expected to complete the SACE at the end of the 2004 academic year, provided appropriate support was given.

The selected students also needed some room for flexibility with pattern completion by attaining Stage 1 units in 2003 through VET programs or by enrolment in Stage 1 subjects in 2002. Students would also need to have aspirations to study the Stage 2 subjects offered in the trial and such enrolment would need to be consistent with anticipated future pathways. The students would also be supported with existing and expanded programs, including Community Studies offerings, Work Education, VET programs, work placements, and combinations of traineeships and SSABSA studies.

### **3.2 Conduct of the Phase 4 Research**

The trial commenced with efforts to check data already analysed against three different groups. Three cohorts of students, shown in Table 3.2.a, were researched and monitored in the lead-up to the initial action plan for the trial on 2004 Year 12 cohort STAR students.

**Table 3.2.a. Cohorts of student at risk considered in the research**

<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Action</b>
Year 12, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comparison of data from report on school-based research with students and teachers conducted at St Michael's College, June 2002, from Exit Survey, November 2002.</li> <li>• Destination survey of Year 12, 2002 cohort.</li> <li>• Establishment of key issues in subject teacher reflection upon 2002 Year 12 SACE results.</li> </ul>
Year 12, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of students at risk of not completing the SACE.</li> <li>• Re-counselling, monitoring progress, interviews, alternative provisions.</li> <li>• Analysis of Term 1, 2003 Report data.</li> </ul>
Year 12, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of students at risk of not completing the SACE.</li> <li>• Monitoring students at risk, re-counselling and exploration of alternative programs.</li> <li>• Expansion of ESL curriculum offerings; VET on-campus and off-line provision.</li> <li>• Development of possibilities in beginning Stage 2 subjects in July 2003.</li> </ul>

The following timeline was followed for generating and analysing data about the students considered at risk, and acting on this analysis.

**Table 3.2.b. Timeline for the conduct of the trial**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Action</b>
Term IV, 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish identities of at risk (Year 12 2004) students through evidence of formal reports, discussions with teachers and Year Level Directors.</li> <li>• Counsel students to examine possible learning pathways, career aspirations and subject choices for 2003–2004. (Conducted by Careers Counsellor and VET Co-ordinator).</li> <li>• Establish possible pathways for students over 2 years, incorporating July 2003 starts to Stage 2 Studies in areas critical to their learning needs.</li> <li>• Establish possibilities with staff in Group 1 and Group 2 (HESS Restricted) Subjects.</li> <li>• Re-examine, after analysis of final Term IV reports data.</li> </ul>
Term I, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liaise with Indigenous Support Officer, ESL Teacher, Adaptive Education Coordinator, and VET Co-ordinator to identify the most appropriate STAR students for the project.</li> <li>• Conduct interviews with parents and students, record views, hopes, predictions.</li> <li>• Monitor student progress, re-counsel as required.</li> </ul>
Term II, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirm proposed participants and identify additions from evidence of Term I reports, discussions with teachers and Year Level Directors.</li> <li>• Re-counsel on subject selections for Semester 2 and 2004.</li> <li>• Establish class groups and timetable for Semester 2.</li> <li>• Finalise plans with subject teachers in Technical Photography (2TPT2), Furniture Construction (2TCF2), Art Practical (2APL2) and Design Practical (2DSP2).</li> <li>• Advise students and parents of possible mid-year start to some Stage 2 subjects.</li> </ul>
Term III, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor student progress closely.</li> <li>• Formal check in Week 3 in case conversion to Stage 1 subject is necessary.</li> <li>• Formal check in Week 6 for conversion to Community Studies if necessary.</li> </ul>
Term IV, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Monitor student progress.</li> <li>• Mid-Year moderation?</li> <li>• Re-counsel for 2004 subject selections.</li> <li>• Conduct focus group discussion with students and with staff (teaching and support).</li> <li>• Analyse focus group data.</li> </ul>
Term I, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students commence final semester of Stage 2 subject.</li> <li>• Students commence studies in remaining Stage 2 subjects and Stage 1 subjects as necessary.</li> </ul>
Term II, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students complete first Stage 2 subjects.</li> <li>• Conduct focus group evaluation.</li> <li>• Analyse focus groups data.</li> </ul>
Term IV, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct final focus group evaluations.</li> <li>• Analyse SACE results.</li> <li>• Compare with expectations collected Term I, 2003.</li> <li>• Report to STAR #3 project.</li> </ul>

**3.2.1 Data collected**

During the trial we collected data from:

- records of interviews — students, parents, teaching staff, support staff;
- focus group notes;
- report comments;
- school and SACE results.

## **4. Findings from the trial and review**

The following findings are based on the four major data-gathering processes employed.

### **4.1 Review of 2002 cohort**

#### *4.1.1 Focus groups*

The major findings from the research into data initially collected from Focus Group discussions with 2001 and 2002 Year 12 students are:

- St Michael's College offers a broad range of subjects in HESS General, HESS Restricted, and VET studies.
- St Michael's College has a flexible curriculum with sufficient choice.
- St Michael's College has small classes in Year 12, which support a better learning environment.
- Study lessons are useful.
- St Michael's College staff are caring and committed.
- My friends at St Michael's College have helped me achieve my best this year
- Counselling services were easily accessible and of a high quality.
- Work Experience was a useful experience.
- The desire to attend the graduation ceremonies has motivated me to complete Year 12.
- Stability and support at home have been important to me in terms of completing Year 12.

Graduating Year 12 (2002) students were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with each of these statements. These questions were asked as part of a larger exit survey issued to all 169 students then enrolled. There were 167 responses to most questions. See the interim report for student responses, illustrated in graphic form.

The strongest agreement from students is evident in statements pertaining to the breadth and flexibility of the curriculum and the caring and commitment of the teaching staff.

While students agreed strongly with each of the statements, 36% of respondents disagreed with the statement 'The desire to attend the graduation ceremonies has motivated me to complete Year 12'. The power of this motivator may have been exaggerated in the initial findings.

#### *4.1.2 Post-school destination survey*

Data for these analyses were gathered from SATAC reports of tertiary offers, indications from students on the Exit Survey, first-hand reports from students, phone calls to parents and students, and word of mouth from friends. The data is unlikely to be completely accurate, as the uptake of tertiary offers is not 100%. Unless other information is provided, deferments are

not known, and changes to situations over the three months may not be known. The data were analysed to indicate immediate post-school destinations and were broken into tertiary institutions, employment with training, other employment, and other. There were 210 responses.

The university sector accounted for eighty-nine students (53%). The University of South Australia attracted 45% of university-bound students, Adelaide University 31%, and Flinders University 24%. This reflects the distance from Flinders University and is consistent with data on the number of students who will be first generation university-educated.

Thirty-seven students (22%) were bound for certificate, diploma, and advanced diploma courses at TAFE Colleges. Twenty-three students had gained apprenticeships, one a traineeship, and thirty-eight were in other employment situations that did not combine further study with the position. One student undertook Year 13 at St Michael's. The remaining twenty-two students were untraceable or unresponsive, travelling, pursuing professional sporting ambitions, or seeking employment.

The most popular areas of further study were Science and Technology, Commerce, Business and Finance, and the Arts.

The most popular employment category destinations were in clerical, retail, building, hospitality, and family business.

#### *4.1.3 Subject Teacher Reflections on Year 12, 2002 SACE results*

The Year 12 teachers gave the following perspectives on why students may have been at risk, or on what might be done to support them:

- Some students have not performed well in some subjects and that conditions of access to subjects should be considered. The tensions around this concern include:
  - the academically non-selective enrolment policy;
  - College policy, including the need for the curriculum to be inclusive and student-centred;
  - the need for principles and practices to agree.
- Staff need to:
  - improve their understanding about SSABSA statistical moderation and scaling practices;
  - communicate with moderators and curriculum officers as necessary;
  - apply consistent standards, including addressing the incongruence between Stage 1 and Stage 2;
  - provide individual assistance as required.
- Positive student behaviours should be encouraged, including:
  - enthusiasm;
  - interest;
  - better organisational practices;
  - submission of drafts.
- Subject selection, counselling and pre-requisite practices need to be reviewed.
- Examination preparation should be reviewed. Swat-vac?
- Instruction programs should be adapted to meet the needs of students.

- Students have other priorities/goals that are not congruent with 3 x 10/20 or SACE completion.

#### **4.2 The 2003 Year 12 cohort**

Twelve students who completed Year 11 studies in 2002 did not recommence in January 2003. Three students enrolled for Year 12 at the University Senior College (USC); one student may have enrolled at another school but at an unknown level; three students gained apprenticeships and another enrolled in a pre-vocational TAFE course; one student withdrew due to a medical condition; and three to unknown or no training or employment destination.

**Table 4.2.a: Students leaving school at the end of Year 11, 2002**

<b>Student</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Destination/reason</b>
	M	Continuing Stage 1 at another school
	M	Another school
	M	Apprenticeship
	M	Another (school?) educational path
	M	Apprenticeship
	M	Withdrawn — destination unknown
	M	Withdrawn — destination unknown
	M	Medical condition
	F	TAFE
	M	Seeking employment
	M	Another school
	M	Apprenticeship

Of the students who left school during 2003, seven gained apprenticeships; one a traineeship; three had employment opportunities; one went to another school; one to a pre-vocational course at TAFE; one left due to an injury; one completed SACE in Semester 1 and decided against the need for a TER in Semester 2; and one went to an unknown destination.

**Table 4.2.b: Students leaving during 2003**

Student	Gender	Date	Destination/reason
	F		Another school
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		Withdrawn- destination unknown
	M		Gained employment
	M		TAFE
	F		Gained employment
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		Gained employment
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		Injury
	F		SACE completed
	M		Traineeship
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		Apprenticeship
	M		

Students were monitored and counselled as necessary. Case managers were appointed to students as necessary. This cohort of students was not the subject of this project, but the experience of supporting these students informed processes developed with the 2004 cohort in preparation for their Stage 2 studies.

### 4.3 The 2004 Year 12 Cohort

By February 2003, 23 Stage 1 students were identified as at risk of not completing in the following year. Three more students were added to the list by April after learning of previously undetected or unreported conditions or conditions that developed over that period. These three students encountered abrupt changes to home life or were diagnosed with conditions during that period. A significantly larger number of students were identified individually by informants to the process, but only those students whose academic transcripts verified their at risk status were included.

Another category of students was identified as being at risk of not completing SACE, but these were not included as their aspirations were more directed towards gaining apprenticeships or full-time work in preference to SACE completion. For these students, schooling was a stop-gap measure until their aspirations were met. Consideration was given, however, to their ability to meet the demands of their studies and their success to date. Students in this category were included if their performance did not indicate likely success in the pursuit of such aspirations.

A letter was sent to all students identified as at risk of not completing, and their parents, in Year 11 in May 2003. The letter advised parents and students of the trial strategy (see Section 3), including the possibility of starting Stage 2 subjects in July, and invited expressions of interest. Technology Studies — Furniture Construction, Design Practical, Art Practical, and Technical Photography were offered on the grounds of the students' previous experiences and

aspirations of the identified students. This invitation coincided with subject re-selection procedures for Semester 2, 2003.

Overall, twenty-three applications were received from students expressing interest in beginning Stage 2 studies. None of the nominating students had previously been identified as at risk, and upon investigation none appeared to be substantially at risk. An interesting observation about the nominating students was that they tended to be the students who were already enrolled in hybrid courses or who were intent upon fast-tracking to University pathways. These students demonstrated considerable understanding of SACE requirements and were creative in suggesting options.

Without interest from STAR students, the resources required to trial the strategy could not be diverted from supporting the enrolled students in their chosen pathways. The project then moved into collecting data about what actually happened to the twenty-six students who were identified as at risk and establishing the reasons they did not elect to participate in the trial.

#### **4.4 The Fate of the Students at Risk**

Some of these students did not complete their studies at St Michael's College in 2003. One student enrolled at the University Senior College; four students began pre-vocational courses at TAFE; one student departed for medical treatment; and six students left for undetermined prospects. Five of these students plus the student with the medical problem, reduced the target group to twenty.

By November 2003, parents indicated that some students would not be returning for Stage 2 studies and some other students continued to experience difficulties in negotiating return in 2004. Five of these students were members of the target group, reducing the number of at risk students for the purposes of this project to 15.

##### *4.4.1 Alternative strategies developed for the at-risk students*

Students in the at-risk cohort had been identified since mid-year 2002. While these students were identified for the strategy at the centre of this project, July start to Stage 2 subjects, other solutions were found:

- Trial through SSABSA for a group of ten students (five at risk) of a VET Mechanical Engineering Course, offered on-campus with some off-line work and on-line lessons. These students are joined by 5 students currently enrolled in Stage 2.
- Expand VET offerings to meet individual student needs.
- Encourage Community Studies enrolments.
- Offer 2 units of Technical Maths, rather than one Semester.
- Offer ESL at Stage 1 for the first time (11 enrolled at Stage 1).

##### *4.4.2 Follow-up interviews with at-risk cohort*

A focus group of Year 12 students at risk from the 2004 cohort was organised and a student counsellor currently on leave was engaged to lead the focus group discussion. Students were initially invited to share their understandings of the requirements of SACE completion and contrast this goal with Year 12 completion. The respondents were generally unable to distinguish between the two achievements. They were unable to articulate future pathways made possible with SACE completion that would not be possible by completing Year 12 without attaining the SACE. They identified three benefits of completing Year 12:

- It helps you to get a job.
- There is a satisfaction in finishing school.

- It keeps doors open and allows a better choice for the future.

The respondents also believed that SACE achievement was relatively easy, especially with the benefit of VET units. VET units not only provided qualifications for future possible jobs but also provided units towards SACE completion. All respondents indicated that they were currently undertaking some VET course.

Students were questioned about why they had not taken up the opportunity to begin Stage 2 subjects in the strategy we had developed. None of the respondents indicated that they had been offered that option (although we know that they had). The respondents indicated that if they had been aware they would most likely have considered participating, but they would have preferred to be studying Work Studies (Stage 2). When asked what would have been a more appropriate means of informing them of such options, the students indicated that personal interviews were the best approach; that letters and distributed information is rarely read, usually lost, and most likely to never reach home.

There is too much written information in school already; teachers don't have enough time to explain things.

The respondents realised that they were considered to be 'students at risk' and became defensive about concerns that they may not be on track to complete SACE. All respondents indicated that they would prefer to be working, preferably with an apprenticeship, and if such an opportunity arose they would not hesitate to leave school without the SACE. Students were asked to indicate how relevant the SACE would be in gaining an apprenticeship and gave three main responses:

- SACE was not relevant.
- There was a strong belief that an employer would accept as an apprentice Year 12 completion over a lower level of schooling;
- It was considered 'important to get Year 11 SACE units in case you can't get an apprenticeship and need to come back to do Year 12'.

The respondents were asked to comment upon how they were currently achieving and to indicate the cause of any performance about which they were not happy. All students indicated that they were achieving mostly at a recorded achievement (RA) level and that this was generally due to 'slackness'. Respondents indicated that they needed to do 'more homework'; to try harder to complete work by due dates; and that perhaps they should have made 'better' subject choices.

Respondents believed that part-time jobs had a detrimental impact on school performance. Two students worked 'most' weeknights while all students worked on weekends. Financial demands of social lives and the need to save to purchase a car were the main reasons given for long work hours. One student had two part-time jobs.

Students also indicated that they struggled with 'difficult' subjects; that some subjects 'are just boring'. If a subject was too easy there was no motivation. 'School stresses me out', especially when too many assignments fall due at about the same time. 'Six hours of school work plus homework is too much'. 'At the end of the school day you need time to relax on the couch for a couple of hours.' Social life impacted on school work, especially at special times like birthdays and after holidays. 'Teachers should not schedule tests on Mondays.'

The respondents were then asked to comment on their personal goals of completing Year 12 given that the careers they were pursuing did not require this. All students were positive about this goal, provided there was no offer of an apprenticeship, because of, for instance, the community perception about the desirability of completing Year 12, and because they were 'with mates'.

All respondents thought that teachers could help them to stay on track. These were some of their comments:

- ‘Reduce the amount of assignments, if you fall behind it just keeps getting worse.’
- There needs to be ‘more flexibility in negotiating extensions’.
- ‘[We needed] more information and assistance in Year 10 when selecting subjects.’
- ‘If you’re failing, teachers should tell you, not wait until it hits you.’
- ‘When I’m struggling with a subject I make just enough effort to get an 11 and then concentrate more on the subjects I like.’

The criteria that students used in selecting subjects ranged from parental influence, interest in subjects in Year 10, or because they related to part-time work. Which subject teachers were involved was seen as both an influence and as no influence at all. Criteria for choosing Stage 2 subjects included workload issues, parents’ preferences, career preference, and friends’ choices. Subjects in which they enjoyed success were English, Community Studies, subjects in which they were capable (eg. Tech Wood) and in VET studies, without which ‘I’d lose the plot’.

Advice they would offer to Year 10 students included: keep up-to-date, choose subjects carefully, see counsellors regularly, and convince them that SACE completion is important.

These data were checked against confidential counselling notes and case manager notes for each student. These notes indicate that the requirements of SACE completion absorb much discussion time in subject selection processes and in managing workloads when difficulties arise. The major problems tend to be around minimum performances (16 satisfactory achievements (SAs), three SAs in Stage 2 subjects), WBLA, ‘Groupness requirements’, and the avoidance of requirements not met (RNMs). All students had been extensively counselled both in Year 10 (especially because of their involvement in VET programs) and in Year 11, because of ‘at risk’ performances in Stage 1 subjects and in some cases, problematic circumstances and behaviours.

## **5 Review and Implications**

The research questions posed by this project remain largely unanswered. No evidence was gathered to suggest that integrating Stage 1 and Stage 2 studies through commencing Stage 2 subjects in July of Year 11 would assist students to complete the SACE. In the following sections we canvass what we did learn and the implications for students at risk of not completing Stage 2.

### **5.1 Why the Strategy Wasn’t Taken Up**

Our assumptions about students remaining ready to take up the strategy on offer simply didn’t hold for a significant number of students. With some students, commitment to studies and course completion is tenuous at best. Parents can also intervene when they perceive expectations are not being met, establishing ultimatums or even withdrawing support for continued school attendance. Arrangements and plans needed to be flexible to account for changes in students’ and parents’ aspirations.

Secondly, for many STAR students SACE completion, or completion of some aspect of the SACE (e.g. 12 Stage 1 units) is of secondary importance. The offer of an apprenticeship can be a much more attractive alternative.

Some difficulties that students encounter cannot be solved by school strategy. Homelessness and mental health issues have both affected student enrolments, and efforts towards SACE completion have had to be delayed as other problems are given attention.

Finally, an obstacle to the completion of this project, but not to the completion of SACE for students, is there are many ways that student learning programs can be adapted to increase chances of successful completion. For many students this had meant solutions alternative to those proposed by this project. Examples include:

- VET Mechanical Engineering was trialled for the first time on-campus, but off-line to a group of 2003 and 2004 Year 12 cohort students. Experience has shown that VET courses offered on-campus by existing subject teachers provide better opportunities to supervise student progress and attendance, and for students' ultimate achievement.
- VET programs were sourced off-campus as well as on-campus in areas of particular interest to students. In 2003 students undertook a total of 107 VET courses in Interactive Multimedia, Furniture Construction, Automotive, Plumbing, Building and Construction, Hospitality — Cooking, Mechanical Engineering, Hospitality — Food and Beverage Service, Hairdressing, Media Make-up, Electro-Technology, Sport and Recreation, Animal Attending, Aviation — Pilot Studies, Horticulture, Design and Construction Management, and Aviation — Engineering.
- Community Studies options have proven to be a more appropriate course. Enrolments in Community Studies have grown at Stage 1 and Stage 2.
- The number of students studying hybrid courses has increased. Year 12 students enrolled in combinations of Stage 2 and Stage 1, and one enrolled in two Year 10 subjects. A significant barrier has been broken, and we will continue to encourage this alternative.

## **5.2 Lessons from our review of outcomes for students at risk**

It has been clearly demonstrated that the individual monitoring of students at risk through case management arrangements improves decision-making, and hopefully also learning outcomes. Communications with the students need to be on an individual basis and by interview rather than in writing. It has also been demonstrated that team management of students is more effective as insights are shared and more appropriate advice can be provided with a fuller understanding of difficulties encountered by individual students.

Strong social knowledge supports students' beliefs that SACE completion is unrelated to their career aspirations. Students have garnered this information from fathers and older brothers in particular, but also from peers who have gained apprenticeships. From their perspectives, SACE completion is linked to school requirements and is unrelated to the goals they have set themselves. There is however, confusion between the meanings of Year 12 completion and SACE completion. Students perceive SACE requirements (SA in three Stage 2 subjects, a minimum of 16 SAs and 'groupness' restrictions), and an insistence that all enrolled students should be enrolled in courses where they could potentially complete their SACE over two years (or by negotiation, over three years), as obstacles placed in their path by the school.

One student's response in a follow-up interview was quite telling. 'Why start Year 12 this year? Next Year will be bad enough without making this year harder as well.' It would appear that students have only vague understandings of the complexity of the SACE, and draw distinct boundaries between Stage 1 and Stage 2. Without a clear focus upon SACE completion, SACE requirements remain an abstraction that they rely upon others to manage on their behalf. While SACE completion is generally taken for granted by the vast majority of students, for students at risk, completion requirements become critical. The demands become too great and students become overwhelmed by expectations. They daily confront a back load of work that continually grows, and finally surrender.

### **5.2.1 The implications for SSABSA**

For schools this identifies the need for close and frequent monitoring of student progress. For SSABSA, it begs several questions:

- Are completion requirements (especially Stage 2) too rigorous to be reasonably attainable by all students?
- Is the very complexity of SACE completion a hindrance to the understanding that is necessary for students and families to work purposefully towards successful completion?
- Is the concept of a completion certificate the only model appropriate to official certification in South Australia?
- The SACE is often equated with TER or going to University. How clear are these distinctions in SSABSA and SATAC promotional and information publications?
- Particularly at Stage 2, there is a requirement for constant assessment that is necessarily summative. Would a more reliable form of identifying student achievement be a system where the latest assessment was the best indicator of student learning over the course? In this model students would not find themselves in a position early in a course where they believed that early performances had made their success irredeemable.
- While acknowledging that there is considerable flexibility in the SACE, do students at risk of non-completion know how to exploit that flexibility? Further, are they willing to step outside the mainstream?

The final questions also raise concerns about exposing students by the processes used in this strategy. The spotlight fell upon a group of students and provided data that could be used to a number of ends. It would seem to be problematic to monitor students to this degree when this data could be used to enforce actions that are not supported by students and families.

### **5.3 Further questions arising from our study**

Apart from the original research questions (see Section 3), which appear to be still valid, another question arises about the notion of flexibility in breaking down categories like 'Year 11' and 'Year 12', and 'VET Student' in the minds of staff, students, and parents. Might breaking down such categories lead to more imaginative and customised learning programs for individual students?

A secondary question formed around the mid-year start of the Stage 2 subject. Would there be benefit in introducing flexibility for some students in a 3-unit study in a subject? For instance, Technical Photography could easily expand to include a semester of digital imaging through Adobe Photoshop, in addition to the two semesters that are currently based on the SLR camera and the darkroom.

How might moderation and results cycle procedures need to be changed to account for such changes and meet SSABSA requirements?

**Trinity College STAR 3 Project**

**Year 12 by Design**

**by Claire Goble and Michael Liddle**

## Context

Trinity College applied to join the STAR project with the aim of improving student outcomes at Stage 2. The Trinity College project was named 'Year 12 By Design'.

The project evolved due to observations by the Director of Studies, who was disturbed to find that there was a 'tail' of Year 12 students who were not achieving successful outcomes from their Stage 2 experience. In particular, it was noted that while the majority of the Stage 2 2002 student cohort achieved SACE successfully, 24% of Year 12 students in the mainstream of Trinity College achieved a TER score of less than 50. That is, while most students gained SACE, a large number did not get a useful TER score. Of those students, 80% did not apply for a further course of study at TAFE or university. Of great concern was that these students seemed to have no particular career goals for the future and/or lacked study skills. It had also been noted that these students often selected inappropriate or unrealistic subjects for a variety of reasons. Often these students were just 'hanging out and hanging in', that is, passively remaining in the regular mainstream school system to be 'with my friends'.

In 2001, Trinity College had opened a new campus called the Open Learning Centre (OLC) that is separate to the mainstream campuses. The OLC caters for students requiring a vocational plus SACE pathway. In 2003, there were fifty-seven Year 12 students enrolled at the OLC, drawn from the campuses of Trinity College and local high schools. The OLC has proved to be a very successful concept and has assisted students to achieve success in the SACE. However, as most OLC students are not aiming for a tertiary entrance rank (TER), this is not a valid option for mainstream Trinity College students.

The Trinity College STAR 3 Project therefore aimed to develop a variety of options to improve success for these Trinity College mainstream students who comprised the 'tail' described above, based on some of the lessons from the operation of the OLC. Students varied from those who needed help to improve their TER scores to those who would benefit from a variety of alternative options that were more realistic or relevant to their needs.

In essence, the STAR 3 Project at Trinity College aimed to develop a variety of senior pathways to supplement the existing academic pathway in the mainstream school and the vocational pathway through the Open Learning Centre.

The goal of the Trinity College STAR 3 Project was therefore:

*To assist all students at Trinity College to pass Stage 2 of the SACE successfully in ways that lead to identified, quality post-school options.*

The main findings of this report are grouped into two broad areas:

- Changes in organisation and delivery of curriculum and delivery in the College, including timetabling and staffing issues
- Reflections upon how SSABSA will need to change its Stage 2 focus in order to make the SACE more relevant to a wider range of students.

## Strategies Established for the Trinity College STAR 3 Project 'Year 12 by Design'

There were three essential project strategies at the time of the Interim Report:

1. Identification and selection of 'at risk' students
2. Interventions

- 2.1 Program design
  - 2.2 Extension studies
  - 2.3 Mentoring
  - 2.4 Teaching and assessment strategies
3. Monitoring and management of student progress.

## **1. Identification and Selection of 'At Risk' Students**

The first essential strategy for the project was to identify and select students who were at risk of not completing Year 12 or achieving a quality outcome in terms of their future.

Before the Interim Report, meetings were convened to inform key teaching staff of the project. These staff included the STAR 3 Project Team of Claire Goble and Michael Liddle, together with the SACE Coordinator; the School Counsellor, and the Year 12 Chaplain.

Trinity College Year 12 teaching staff were informed of the aims of the STAR 3 Project at a meeting of the Curriculum Group, which involved Heads of Faculties (many of whom were Year 12 teachers) and Senior Staff, including the Heads of the Senior School on the North and South Campuses. All indicated their support for the project and promised to assist in identifying and/or selecting students at risk.

Following the meetings with key staff, a core group of approximately forty students with varying needs were identified. The students were identified by:

- chaplains, in particular the chaplain who works with Year 12 students. Students voluntarily approached the chaplain for counselling because of difficulty coping with Year 12 subjects, for a variety of reasons;
- the Director of Studies and/or the SACE Coordinator, who identified students who were struggling with one or more Year 12 subjects;
- the School Counsellor, who identified students at risk for a variety of reasons (personal, coping with school study, illness, etc.);
- Year 12 teachers. A checklist with key factors for identifying 'at risk' students was prepared by the SACE Coordinator and sent to all Year 12 teachers;
- Term 1 school reports.

The forty students were monitored and differing interventions decided upon, ranging from keeping up with classroom teachers to redesigning their program. A number of these students no longer presented as continuing problems after initial counselling with chaplains and subject teachers.

Ten students from this group finally emerged as the target group for close monitoring, which led to significant course changes at Stage 2.

## **2. Interventions**

### *2.1 Program Design*

Once students were identified, other strategies for Year 12 By Design were developed to assist students to achieve successful outcomes at Year 12. These strategies included:

- adjusting or reducing the current subject load from the traditional five to four or even three subjects;

- replacing current subjects with alternatives such as VET courses;
- replacing more difficult subjects with easier to manage subjects, e.g. Vocational Studies A and B, and/or Community Studies;
- developing a range of Stage 1 subjects as extras to replace some Year 12 subjects e.g. off-line Work Education unit, off-line Integrated Studies units (Duke of Edinburgh), Stage 1 Business Studies (Young Achiever);
- encouraging students to reduce their subject load and complete Year 12 over two years;
- assisting students to cope with personal problems through counselling and support;
- assisting students with study skills and organisational skills through one-to-one counselling and study skills seminars. Approximately seventy students participated in extra tuition in the areas of history and geography, maths and biology. This tuition was made available to all students, not simply the target at-risk group;
- offering an extended day, one day each week for catch-up time. On that day the Open Learning Centre is open until 9.30 p.m., with full use of computer facilities and supervision. Teachers can be contacted after hours, rostered by subject (e.g. for mathematics or physics queries);
- improving career guidance and support. All Year 12 students completed the computer program Career Voyage to determine and/or verify career options and pathways;
- trialling Extension Studies in 2003 with a view to offering it as an off-line option in 2004 to students at risk or students who need more flexibility in subject offerings. The fact that this subject offers a TER score makes it an attractive option to a range of students.

## *2.2 Extension Studies*

One of the initial aims of the STAR 3 Project was to trial Extension Studies with a view to offering the subject as an alternative to students in 2004. (The idea for Year 12 By Design evolved from this.)

One student was selected to study 2 units of Extension Studies in Term 1. This student attended the Open Learning Centre and was identified as a student who was capable and would benefit by studying a more self-directed course. As the subject was not yet SSABSA-approved, the subject was placed under the framework of Vocational Studies B. This fitted well with the student's Stage 2 course as the student's project involved a combination of VET study, an independent study, and work placement.

The student used Extension Studies to further his knowledge and skills in multimedia and Web page design. This involved VET study once a week for the year, and the development of a new Web page for the Open Learning Centre. The student was mentored by a person from the University of South Australia, who worked in the field of Web page design. Mentoring occurred mainly via email, with two or three meetings throughout the year.

## *2.3 Mentoring*

Mentoring played a significant role in Year 12 By Design, in providing support and monitoring student progress.

Once students had been identified and agreed to participate, they were encouraged to link with a mentor who would support and offer guidance to the student to keep them on track to a successful outcome in Year 12. The mentor was usually the person who referred the student to the project. Mentors included:

- House Directors
- Chaplains
- SACE Coordinator
- Year 12 Counsellor
- Director of Studies (Trinity College)
- Director of Studies (Open Learning Centre)
- Career Counsellor
- Favourite Year 12 teacher.

#### **2.4 Teaching and Assessment Strategies**

Trinity College is currently reviewing curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, with the ultimate aim of improving student outcomes.

The strategies to be implemented for Year 12 By Design are aimed at bringing about major change to the traditional structure of Year 12 at Trinity College. For example:

- on-line delivery of some components of Year 12 subjects;
- off-line delivery of some subjects, with teachers as facilitators;
- teachers and/or mentors as facilitators of subjects;
- flexibility to ensure students can access relevant, achievable Stage 2 subjects.

### **3. Monitoring and Management of Student Progress**

Monitoring and management of students proved to be difficult to coordinate, although it was originally planned to manage and monitor students through a combination of:

- self-reporting;
- feedback from Year 12 class teachers;
- feedback from mentors (chaplains, favourite teachers, Director of Studies (Trinity), Director of Studies (Open Learning Centre) or others.

Progress was to have been documented in relation to improvement to:

- subject results;
- students' self esteem and confidence;
- students' ability to cope with Year 12 study;
- the extent to which students report satisfaction with Year 12 course;
- teacher responses to the program;
- organisational and/or study skills.

## **The Trinity College STAR 3 Trial**

### *Extension Studies*

As mentioned, one student was targeted for the 2002 pilot of Extension Studies. He was aware that the subject would be resulted under the subject 'Vocational Studies', due to the fact that the subject Extension Studies had not been approved for 2003.

Assignment tasks were developed by the teacher, Claire Goble, from the February 2003 draft of the Extension Studies curriculum statement, with input from the student. The teacher was the facilitator.

Problems experienced during the course of the project included:

- During the trial the Stage 2 draft curriculum statement changed several times, with changes to learning outcomes and criteria for assessment.
- The original scope of assessment changed during the course of the trial from the choice of satisfactory achievement (SA) or TER score, to TER score only.
- The mentor from the University of South Australia changed jobs and lost contact with Trinity College in Semester 2.
- In Term 3 SSABSA ‘matched’ assessment criteria from Vocational Studies B to Extension Studies. This caused considerable stress to both the teacher and the student in the latter stages of the trial, causing the student to give up on the Extension Studies side of the trial, and the teacher to undergo considerable stress because Trinity College had been ‘left out of the loop’ regarding these decisions.

The student achieved a score of 19/20 for Extension Studies, which was comparable the score he would have achieved in Vocational Studies B.

### *3.2 Year 12 By Design*

In addition to the single male student involved in the Extension Studies Pilot, twelve students were recruited to the STAR 3 Project. They were eight female students and four male students, all of whom were identified using the Year 12 Student At Risk Checklist, which was distributed to all teachers of Year 12 in Term 1.

Students were identified as displaying one or more of the following:

- A Absences
- L Lack of application
- M Lacks motivation
- D Disruptive
- O Poor organisation
- S Struggling in general
- C Concentration problems
- E Lack of essay skills
- V Very careless
- W Work not handed in
- RV Need to revise work
- RG Requires guidance

Most of the students who joined the STAR 3 trial were assessed by teachers as S (struggling in general) and M (lacks motivation).

## **4 Review and Implications (From the Trial)**

### *Evaluation of the Trial*

It should be noted that the STAR 3 Project was taking place at the same time that major changes for secondary education within the school were being considered. Another factor that influenced the project was the sheer size of the senior cohort of the school, with 220 Stage 1 students and 270 Stage 2 students contributing to the high workload of key staff (SACE

Coordinator, Counsellors, and STAR 3 Project Team members). This made monitoring and evaluation more difficult.

The STAR Checklist distributed to Year 12 teachers in Term 1 proved to be an extremely accurate tool for identifying students at risk of an unsuccessful Year 12 year. All students identified were followed up through counselling and monitoring by key Year 12 staff. Of the twelve students participating in the STAR 3 trial, at least ten achieved a successful SACE outcome.

The STAR 3 Project had two major impacts — a dramatic improvement in Year 12 results compared to those of 2002, and contribution to a new culture.

### *Improvement in Results*

A major problem in previous years has been the large ‘tail’ of students studying for a TER score but achieving very poor results. It was this that initiated participation in the STAR 3 Project.

The median TER had declined over a number of years, from 78 to 71. The counselling and re-counselling of students into more appropriate pathways resulted in a median score of 85.6 for the 2003 cohort, the highest in the history of Trinity College. We interpret this as more effectively providing courses that are appropriate to students’ interests and abilities. The students following a vocational pathway who did not achieve a score have all completed Certificate II to Certificate IV courses, plan to follow a tertiary pathway in the future through the TAFE system, or plan to return to school as a Stage 2 student with aim of achieving a TER score.

### *Effect on the School Culture*

The effect on the culture of the school has resulted in developments such as:

- A far more case-managed approach to student pathway planning at Stage 1 and Stage 2;
- A team approach to monitoring student progress, with initial key staff meetings and continued email contact;
- Staff willingness to entertain new roles (e.g. mentoring and facilitating);
- A re-evaluation of the breadth of secondary education, with a greater understanding of the need for more flexibility and creativity in Stage 2 courses for SACE completion, and a readiness to accept individual student arrangements that may conflict with the traditional schooling model;
- Professional development of teaching staff to assist them to adjust to these kinds of changes;
- The development of the role of Senior Pathways Coordinator.

A retreat for key curriculum staff in early January was planned to continue to address some of these points.

### *Effectiveness of the Strategies*

Without intervention, the targeted student cohort would have all left school and/or failed to complete the SACE. Most of the students in the trial successfully completed the SACE and had planned a pathway to TAFE or further Stage 2 study.

The teachers who monitored these students reported that all but one of the students showed greater engagement, maturity, and self-confidence. It is now accepted that a number of students will enter Year 12 in the future on a more diversified, hybrid program.

### *Lessons for the School*

Several lessons were learned from the STAR 3 Project. There is a need to:

- carefully monitor Year 12 students early in the year. The Year 12 Student At Risk Checklist was a valuable tool for this;
- build more flexibility in pathways for students, in a more diversified, hybrid program;
- make time for key Year 12 senior staff to meet regularly, and significantly increase teacher time in order to expand the Year 12 by Design concept;
- develop the role of a Senior Pathways Coordinator to meet regularly with the Director of Studies and the SACE Coordinator;
- ensure professional development of teachers in the senior school in adult pedagogies, mentoring, assessment, and reporting.

## **Recommendations for SSABSA Policy**

### **Moderation Demands of Certain Subjects Most Often Used as 'Rescue Subjects'**

The moderation requirements for Vocational Studies A and B and Community Studies are labour intensive and time-consuming for teachers, particularly when these are used as part of a rescue package on a rolling basis throughout the year, and particularly when students are at different stages of assessment or attendance at work placement. There is a build-up of a large amount of clerical work. We recommend a thorough review of the paper work for these subjects.

### **Inflexibility of Community Studies Requirements for Students with Learning Difficulties**

Despite developing rationales for some students who had sight or other problems, it was our experience that Community Studies moderation did not take this into account nearly enough. We would ask for some greater flexibility here.

### **Inflexibility of Certain Subject Deadline Requirements**

Many students emerge as 'at-risk' when major assessment tasks appear, often early in the year. In topic-based subjects like Mathematical Applications a student can be caught in a failure trap, since there is almost no room for redeeming poor performance once a topic has been completed.

We recommend a review of such subjects with the aim of providing a more gradual assessment regime that allows students to maintain a positive involvement without wiping out large proportions of a course too early.

### **Stage 2 Groupness**

Eight students in our targeted group initially came under our care because of difficulty in the subject they had chosen as their least preferred. Often too the subject was the compulsory

group 1 or 2 subject that had to be taken. Given the age of most Year 12s, we wonder whether students should not be able to focus more on subjects of interest without the concern for breadth that was the rationale for groupness.

We recommend that SSABSA remove the Group requirement for Stage 2.

### **Stage 2 and SACE Completion**

We have commented elsewhere on the successful trialling of Extension Studies. This subject promises to provide a flexible approach for a select few students. We acknowledge its worth, even if not a lot of students will be able take it up.

However, we would like to recommend that SSABSA seriously examine ways of structurally increasing SACE completion flexibility by allowing schools to apply for a waiving of the three subject rule (together with the 10/20 requirement) *if* it can be shown that a student has completed extra SACE stage one units and also has completed certain certificates at TAFE or elsewhere. For example, TAFE competency-based assessment should be able to be equated with the Stage 2 SA result

Clearly some guidelines would need to be established to ensure equity.

### **Developing Differing Levels Within Subjects**

The development of HESS general and restricted subjects could be further extended if SSABSA undertook to develop levels of attainment within a subject. Students would then have a wider choice of subjects which could be taken at HESS general level (public examination as a major component), HESS restricted (moderation), and SACE only (non-graded SA as for Community Studies). In other words, students would negotiate the level of difficulty of the subject. Students could, for example, begin a subject at a more demanding level and scale back to a 'HESS restricted' or 'SACE-only' level.

### **SACE Completion after Leaving School**

We would also recommend that students who leave for work reasons and who do not complete SACE, be eligible for recognition of that work in lieu of further SACE study — if it can be ascertained from an employer that they are progressing well. We grant block status for travel and so on, in Stage 1 and would like to see this concept extend to Stage 2.

### **Special Provisions in the SACE**

We recommend that, for SACE completion, there be an opening up of the grounds for special provisions for granting, say non-graded SAs on more than the (largely) medical grounds now in existence. The at-risk students often face a number of multiple stresses that are not easily captured in the existing Provisions.

### **Conclusion**

Trinity College has provided considerable resources in establishing a centre (the Open Learning Centre) that can offer flexible pathways to 20–25% of senior students who do not wish to follow a narrowly academic one. Approximately seventy students who would otherwise have followed unsuccessfully an academic pathway, are successfully completing a range of thirty different Vocational Education and Training Certificates through external Training Providers.

We realise that more students, including academic students, need to benefit from some of the offerings. Many university-bound students, for example, may face years before they enter full-time work and need to be made aware of the options for part-time work, and training in self-management and organisation. Too often, the academic year for such Year 12s does not allow for needed social and personal development.

The challenge will be to extend the OLC approach to more students with hybrid academic/vocational courses that allow students to explore options without foreclosing too early. This will probably mean a larger number of students electing to do a 3-year SACE.

The OLC has been successful in part because of smallness of scale and intimacy of student-teacher relationships (together with an adult business environment). We plan to develop tutor groups with about 22 students in each, in order to work towards such a close degree of monitoring to occur on a wider scale across all year 11s and 12s.

Trinity College is planning a major restructure with a separate Senior College that will incorporate the Open Learning Centre as a major focus for extending pathways for senior school students. This will provide a more economical and viable structure in which students can maximise pathway options.

# Tyndale Christian School

## STAR 3 Report — Extension Studies Trial 2003

### **Program Supervisors**

Louise Lycett — Director of Studies

Daphne Daniel — Coordinator, Extended Learning Centre

Lawrie Stevens — Subject Facilitator

## Context

Late in 2002 Tyndale Christian School decided to conduct a trial of the proposed Extension Studies<sup>1</sup> curriculum statement in 2003. In the original research proposal (November 2002) Catherine Green wrote: ‘This subject was proposed as an opportunity for students at risk of leaving school early to explore an area of particular interest to them and have it count as a scored subject within their SACE.’<sup>3</sup> At that time the curriculum statement was still in development, and the trial was undertaken with the knowledge that the subject would not have SSABSA Board approval until some time in 2003 at the earliest. The research proposal accepted this situation, as the school was ‘keen to continue with program development, adopting the fall back position that students can have their efforts embedded within Vocational Studies or Community Studies if necessary.’

Attractive features of the Extension Studies curriculum statement were seen to be:

- its broadly interdisciplinary approach;
- the opportunity for students to investigate a topic at depth, developing it in an individual way;
- a shift from teacher-directed to more independent student-directed learning;
- movement of the teacher role towards that of facilitator/mentor;
- the opportunity to engage mentors from outside the school in the learning process;
- a shift of the assessment focus from product only to include process;
- an emphasis on resource-based learning.

The research proposal explained the intended teaching–learning approach in the following way:

...the Extension Studies program should not be teacher directed but teacher facilitated. This may involve the student working closely with a mentor who is an expert in their chosen field of enquiry, under the supervision/coordination of the assessing teacher. Students will need the freedom and flexibility to access resources within and outside of the school, and will need support from the school community to learn how to do this effectively.

Catherine Green’s proposal also included material concerning theories of multiple intelligences, but this aspect was not pursued in the 2003 trial.

Two aspects that were not highlighted in the proposal, but which proved to be significant features of the trial, were the use of the school’s Extended Learning Centre (ELC) rather than a classroom as the subject base, and the conscious attempt to develop the group of students engaged in this subject as a supportive small learning community.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, the Stage 2 Extension Studies Curriculum Statement has been accredited by the SSABSA Board as a General entry subject. This trial operated using the Working Draft No 1 (February 2003) and later the Draft for Community Consultation (May 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Green, ‘Extension Studies Trial Subject: Program Development’, Tyndale Christian School, 2002.

## Strategy

The thesis for this research was that for some students it is not the perceived difficulty or actual intellectual rigour of subjects that raises barriers to successful completion, but factors relating to 'delivery' or the learning styles inherent in some aspects of the SACE curriculum.

This research aimed to find out if the more independent and flexible learning environments offered by Extension Studies, while presenting challenging intellectual demands, could motivate and assist students at risk to move towards successful completion.

The trial targetted:

- the demands and impact of the individualised and student-directed approach to learning;
- issues in implementating the facilitator, as opposed to teacher role;
- the feasibility and value of establishing mentors outside the school;
- the use of the ELC as the base for learning;
- outcomes relating to the establishment of the group as a learning community;
- the impact on student motivation and 'success' in SACE completion.

## The Trial

Six students enrolled in Extension Studies, five females and one male. Three were Year 11 students and three were Year 12 students.

These students were identified as capable of working independently and likely to benefit from being involved in studies of high intrinsic interest to them, delivered in a more individualised and supportive learning context. It was considered that these were very capable students who had, in various ways, demonstrated vulnerability to pressure in 'conventional' classroom settings and were at risk of not completing the SACE requirements.

A subject facilitator was employed by the school for one half-day a week. In most weeks the subject facilitator spent one hour in direct contact with the students and the remainder in preparation and assessment-related activities. The ELC Coordinator arranged a person for day-to-day contact with the students, and for activities outside the school.

Students met with the facilitator weekly in the ELC. By design, the facilitator brought the group together briefly at the beginning of sessions, and occasionally for longer meetings. These meetings were informal and designed to encourage a sense of community and mutual support in the group. The ELC Coordinator frequently provided refreshments, as these sessions were held during the school's lunch period. During these plenary sessions the curriculum statement requirements, assessment tasks, and assessment criteria were clarified.

The subject facilitator's contact time was predominantly used for interviews, called 'discussions', with individual students. These focused on:

- receiving students' reports on current activities and work in progress;
- assisting students to develop plans and strategies for proposed learning activities;
- giving feedback on drafts and assessed work;
- giving support and encouragement when students encountered or anticipated difficulties or obstacles;
- providing positive responses to initiatives and achievements of the student;

- re-negotiating, where appropriate, the focus and outcome of the proposed investigation.

The Extension Studies curriculum statement requires students to fully document their planning and learning in a journal, which becomes part of the folio submitted for assessment. The journals were read periodically by the facilitator, and sometimes raised issues for discussion in the sessions with the facilitator.

Three oral presentations were conducted during the year. The first was part of the presentation of the investigation proposal, near the end of Term 1. The second was a report of work in progress at the end of Term 2. The third related to the completed outcome and was conducted early in Term 4. The audience was composed of the other students in the group, the subject facilitator, the ELC Coordinator, and the Director of Studies. Two SSABSA moderators attended the second presentation and, at one student's request, a small number of friends were invited to two of her presentations, which involved a music performance.

Each student was asked to identify a mentor with subject expertise in the focus area, with whom they would maintain contact throughout the year.<sup>4</sup> It was anticipated that the mentors would be involved in the final assessment of the investigation outcome, as 'content' experts, and also report on the student's approach to working with them. The school formally contacted the nominated mentors, setting out its expectations of the role and seeking their consent to participate.

The students identified the following areas as the focuses for the independent investigations to be undertaken:

- Horse Training
- Film Making — Director Perspective
- Film Making — Actor Perspective
- Writing — Country and City Life
- Preparation for Overseas Voluntary Service
- Song Writing and Performance.

## Review and Implications

### Retention

All six participants completed the assessment requirements for Extension Studies, and scores (before moderation) ranged from 14 to 20 on the 20-point scale.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, the trial fulfilled its retention goal. Factors that may have contributed to this outcome include:

- the high intrinsic interest of the investigations to each of the individuals;
- flexibility to re-negotiate with the facilitator the focus, resources, and outcomes of the investigations during the year ( N.B. this did not include re-negotiation of key deadlines);

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<sup>4</sup> This was achieved for four of the students, but not for two. See 'Review and Implications' section.

<sup>5</sup> Because the Extension Studies curriculum statement was not accredited until late in the year, the students were enrolled for Vocational Studies B according to a formula for conversion of component scores that was negotiated with SSABSA staff as part of the protection offered through the school's involvement in the research project. Students were assessed in the requirements and by the criteria for Extension Studies, and the subject facilitator made the conversions prior to submission for moderation. Although the weightings for components were different, the overall scores on the 100-point scale were identical for each subject.

- actively seeking strategies, within the facilitator–student interaction, to work around or to manage obstacles;
- encouragement of individual initiative and reinforcement of good learning practices.
- reinforcement through regular contact with facilitator and peers.

### **Space for Learning**

The senior school ELC was an ideal base for students of this subject. It provided a contrast to a conventional classroom while enabling the necessary levels of supervision and accountability to be established and maintained. The students adapted well to this context. The participants clearly appreciated the opportunity to seek out and make use of a wide variety of resources available outside the school, both during and outside of school hours. Such resources included NIDA Short Courses, a church-based course in cross-cultural studies, a school exchange arrangement, and a range of work placements.

Part of the subject facilitator’s role was to encourage individual initiatives and, in some cases, to broaden the range of possibilities, but by far the greater number of extra-school activities came at the instigation of the students themselves.

For one student this was the only subject ‘successfully’ completed at Stage 2, suggesting that for this student at least, the mode of delivery was a factor which led to both continued attendance and positive learning outcomes.

### **Teacher Roles**

The subject facilitator adopted a ‘non-teacherly’ role. He chose to act as an encourager and adviser, taking on a role more like that of a mentor. Interactions were relaxed and informal wherever possible, both with the group and with individuals, at least to the extent that the significant age difference allowed this. Feedback suggests that the students valued and responded positively to this change. Certainly the regular discussions with individuals were open and candid and the students appeared to reflect honestly on progress, accepting advice and following it up. Our judgment is that such a facilitator role provides a very important monitoring and support structure for students to deal with the difficulties that inevitably arise when students are asked to work individually, as motivating as that may be. This would be even more the case with students at risk of not completing.

As noted earlier, the students were encouraged to establish mentor relationships outside the school with persons who had expertise in the specific areas of their investigations. This innovation worked moderately well in its first year, but some refinement of the process is needed to maximise the benefits of this extension of the teaching role, especially in setting up more effective liaison between mentors and the school. It is interesting to note that the only mentor arrangement to fail was one that attempted to engage a teacher at the school in this role. It soon became clear that the teacher was not able to adapt to this role easily and, as a teacher of the two students in another subject, was conscious of some conflict of interest. Following the termination of that arrangement, no suitable community-based replacement could be found, even with significant school intervention, and so these students completed the course without the obvious advantages that the others drew from their mentors. This episode demonstrates the essential differences between the roles of teacher and mentor, at least in perception.

### **Unexpected Outcomes**

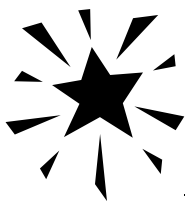
We were pleased to note that students reported learning in areas that neither we nor they had anticipated. Most often these related to personal confidence, communication skills, planning

and self-organisation, and consolidating future directions. In a sense these were incidental to the main topics of the individual investigations, but some students acknowledged them in hindsight as the most important kinds of learning that occurred because of their participation in this subject. One student moved from extreme stage fright to public performance during the year, and another greatly improved her oral language presentation skills, while all emerged with much clearer ideas about future directions. By the end of the year several students had made moves to take up educational or employment pathways in 2004 in areas related to their individual investigations.

### **Implications for SSABSA policy**

A central issue in this trial was determining the ideal balance between independent and 'guided' learning. The Extension Studies curriculum statement clearly places the emphasis on students' independence, as did the trial. We found that granting students a high level of independence resulted in increased motivation, commitment, and effort. We had argued that a re-conceptualising of subject delivery was important to setting up the conditions and maintaining support for independent learning. Both the staff and students engaged in this trial agreed that the move away from classroom structures, both in spatial and relational terms, was fundamental to the trial's perceived success. Several of the students said that they could not see Extension Studies working effectively from a conventional classroom base, and that adapting this subject to a classroom setting risked diminishing its value in essential ways. We think that SSABSA should note this in the early implementation of the Extension Studies curriculum statement and in the advice given to schools and teachers about its delivery.

Our experience has confirmed that this subject and others that may be designed on similar principles of independent learning have significant potential to motivate some 'at risk' students toward completion of their SACE studies.



*Star 3 Project Report*

*Windsor Gardens Vocational College 2002–2003*

**Keeping Year 12s Connected**

**Report compiled by Paulette Sargent and Sue Cracknell**

**with support from the Year 12 care group teachers**

**Rex Rehn, Matthew Schinkel, Dino Porcaro, Marie Shanahan, Franci  
Charlton, Ron Jones**

## **Statement of Intent**

The aim of the Windsor Gardens Vocational College STAR 3 Project, Keeping Year 12s Connected, was to better manage the Year 12 students and their study, with the aim of maintaining their connection with the school and raising retention rates.

The broad framework for this trial was provided by:

1. using the care group system already in place to strengthen the relationships between students, home, and the College and to provide a mentor system to support students in their learning throughout their Year 12 studies;
2. embedding these care groups within the eight 'pathways' to post-school destinations provided for students at Windsor Gardens, and provided support within these student pathway cohorts.
3. establishing a Year 12 management team to gather and monitor data about students at risk, and to manage the provision of support for these students.

## **The students**

The target students in 2003 were all Year 12s or Year 13s.

The care group teacher identified students at risk of leaving in 2003. They were provided with mentors, and extra care and support from the counsellor until the end of the year.

We used a variety of strategies, built upon:

1. Time management
  - SSABSA provided training and development for the Year 12 subject teachers for 2003, in the planning of time management techniques, setting up assessment plans, and identifying the SACE requirements for various groups.
  - Time management became a part of the course work. Teachers assisted students in planning assignments and reaching due dates successfully.
  - A tutorial program to allow pre-reading and preparation for Year 12 was established in the previous year.
  - Coordinators of learning areas were asked to identify the differences between the three courses (PES, PAS, SAS) and ensure that course expectations were clear to students.
2. A mentor program
  - A group of teachers committed to supporting Year 12s were selected as care group teachers for 2003. These care groups were aligned with student pathways. (See Appendix A.)
  - The care group teacher provided a strong mentor program to connect students to their studies.
  - Care group activities were provided throughout the year, in consultation with students, parents, and teachers.
3. Identification of, and extra support for students at risk (STAR)
  - Checking systems were provided to enable subject and care group teachers to identify students at risk of leaving or withdrawing.

- STAR group boys were taken on a motivational camp early in the year to get focused and build relationships.
- Clear data were kept of students who start Year 12 and their reasons for withdrawing from subjects.

### The Staffing Structure

The selected staff (the Senior School Team) worked as a team to plan and implement the project over the 2 years of the STAR 3 Project, 2002 and 2003:

- The Assistant Principal Senior School set up meetings and provided an overview for students, staff, and parents. Also managed the gathering and analysis of data on at-risk students
- The Senior School counsellor helped identify the students at risk.
- The Year 12 care group teachers provided student support.
- The Year 12 manager provided care teacher support.
- The CHIC Senior School coordinator provided student and teacher support.
- The learning area coordinators provided subject-based support for teachers.

The Senior School Team met regularly to discuss individual case management, as well as strategies and support structures to retain the Year 12 students.

**Table 1. Early Warning Signs of Students Not Engaged in Learning in Year 12**

THE SIGNS	THE STRATEGIES
<b>Physical</b>	
'Nick off' in cars or to cars	Roving teachers include car park in their rounds
Fall asleep	Sign In/Out books
Procrastination	Students carry timetables
Tiredness	Discuss issues with student/care group: Counsellor
Uniform and Appearance/Grooming	Extra tuition (after hours)
Indication of Drug use	Assistance/support organisation
Bored	Flexible timetabling (caters for part-time jobs)
Off task — no task	Teachers aware of student's commitments to work, etc.
Illness	Physical environment is pleasant/welcoming
Wanting to leave room	Encouragement
Unhealthy	Check subject matches with career choice
Physically pale	Contact home
	Provide water in class

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## THE SIGNS

## THE STRATEGIES

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### Psychological

They build relationships — failing in academic areas to justify selves with relationship jargon

Not 'here'

Avoidance — stalling tactics

Family issues

aggressive

depressed

withdrawn — non-communicative

submissive

Outbursts / stressed /give up

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Discuss issues with student/care group — counselling

Extra tuition (after hours)

Assistance/support organisation

Flexible timetabling (caters for part-time jobs)

Teachers aware of student's commitments to work, etc.

Check other commitments (work, family)

Teach — network of support people

e.g. 5–3 in school

2 outside school

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### Behavioural

Procrastination, e.g. toilet and drinks breaks

Play solitaire

Aggression

Lying

Drugs, etc.

SMS messages

Lack of interest, motivation

Easily distracted

Disruptive

Socially interactive

Don't care

Isolated

Everywhere except class

Asking for extensions

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Telephone calls home

Break tasks into smaller steps/tasks. (Even if not completed, can get some marks)

One-to-one conversations

Develop these in Yrs 8–10 (long-term process)

Discuss issues with student/care group — counselling

Extra tuition (after hours)

Assistance/support organisation

Flexible timetabling (caters for part-time jobs)

Teachers aware of student's commitments to work, etc.

Identify the issue

Raising responsibility to others in terms of behaviour

Change activities throughout doubles, give fun activities

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## THE SIGNS

## THE STRATEGIES

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### Work Study Habits

Come to library and say 'nothing to do'  
Ask for notes to go to computer room  
Waste study time  
Walkman glued to ears  
Assignments missed  
Deadlines missed  
Class work not attempted  
Low level organisation  
Lack of work  
Behind in tasks  
Confused  
Assignments not handed up  
Wrong books or NO books

Resource Centre note names and put into Year 12 Manager's pigeon hole  
Develop consequences for actions  
Be flexible with deadlines — stagger them throughout the term  
Assistance/support organisation  
Flexible timetabling (caters for part-time jobs)  
Teachers aware of student's commitments to work, etc.  
Teach how to study/time management  
Restructure study time  
Regular study schedule  
Break tasks into steps  
Encourage home support  
Check background and suitability for subject (pre-requisites)  
Sit down one-on-one  
Plot study planner  
See counsellor  
Give them books and folders

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### Attendance

Go into every possible event which takes them out of classroom  
Not here  
Lack of attendance  
Lateness to school/lessons  
Money requirements — reason for enrolling  
Rarely attends class

Camp for 14 'at risk' students  
Discuss issues with students/care group — counselling  
Extra tuition (after hours)  
Assistance/support organisation  
Flexible timetabling (cater for part-time jobs)  
Teachers aware of student's commitments to work, etc.  
Youth allowance — ring Centrelink  
Contact — care group teacher  
Year Level Coordinator  
SSOs  
Home  
Attendance check cards and consequences  
Ask students for their mobile number — if away and talk, touch base, even email  
Possible home study  
Provide social options

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## What we did

In 2003 students were kept in their care groups according to their pathway, and where possible were placed with the teachers they were most comfortable with. The staff who were selected to be Year 12 mentors/care group teachers were matched with the pathways, for instance, the hospitality teacher had the hospitality pathway students.

In 2003 students attended care group sessions to participate in goal-setting and work planning activities as a clear commitment to their studies and their future pathway.

All subject teachers attended training and development in:

- recognising early warning signs of students at risk of leaving;
- assessment tasks;
- workloads for students
- deadlines policy;
- weighting.

All subject teachers developed strategies to maximise students' success. (See Table 1 above)

Tutors were arranged for revision groups and paid from project funds. Students received support for study issues face-to-face, by phone, or by email with a tutor, parent, or teacher.

### **Senior School Care Group Strategies**

- Small care groups of students were composed according to the pathways focus on student case management. There were approximately 12 students in each care group.
- Students and parents signed Senior School Agreement contracts at the start of each year; stipulating the expectations of teachers and students in the workplace. ?
- Policies reflected the code of conduct and expectations within the workplace, especially the Workplace Learning Code.
- Roundtable conferences were arranged with parents, Student Counsellor, care group teacher and, if necessary, outside agencies, for students with behaviour issues because of not coping with study, home, or work; as well as for those who were disinclined to study.
- Care group teachers regularly monitored student progress via concern sheets to all subject teachers and referral sheets to the Year Level Manager.
- Care group teachers supported students to achieve the SACE by using time planner, assignment planner, student development plan, diaries, and study skill foci in care group sessions. (20 minutes every morning + 1 hour session)
- The Year Level Manager collected data on student achievement at the end of each term, and the Senior Management Team (the Year Level Manager, Assistant Principal and Counsellor) followed up concerns with parent and student interviews.
- A part-time study program was implemented for students struggling to cope with the workload. (See Appendix D)
- A school-to-work program was implemented for disinclined students. This was instigated and monitored by the Assistant Principal and/or the Counsellor.
- Courses were provided to meet the diverse needs of the cohort, as well as the SACE pattern and standards (e.g. Twilight School, six vocational patterns, electronics bus, Vintage Car and similar projects, community-based subjects).
- Senior school students attended orientation and career focus days at tertiary institutions.
- Standard letters were used to inform parents of attendance and failure to submit assessment tasks.
- Opportunities were provided to obtain WBLA across the year level.
- Year level care group teachers planned a term-by-term program for care group sessions, focusing mainly on achieving the SACE and developing study skills.

- Provision of a study hall whereby expectations are negotiated with students which is conducive to a sound study environment.
- Trained language support was provided for ESL and international students.
- Care group teachers assisted students to map their SACE pattern and achievements each semester.
- Conversations were ongoing amongst staff and students re their overall wellbeing.

### **Obstacles**

- During the development of early warning signs, staff still assumed that the Year 12 students were to blame for their non-attendance or underachievement. Changing teachers' assumptions and beliefs was probably the first hurdle to overcome.
- Students were going directly to the school counsellor and Assistant Principal to talk over changes to timetables and problems within their subjects instead of talking first to their care group teacher as case manager.
- Many students appeared to be reducing their workload for a variety of reasons.
- Year 12 subject teachers appeared to be reluctant to make allowances for students, even when a student was ill. In one case, the teachers would not use the Special Provisions forms as they believed the student should withdraw from the course, even though the student was in hospital and was expected to return.
- The training and development provided to Year 12 subject teachers had limited effect in changing assessment tasks or creating a positive environment for students.
- Year 12 assessment approaches had a flow-on effect to students. For example, in Term 2 a teacher told a student who was at risk of not completing that he would fail. The student gave up and said there was no point in going on, 'because the teacher says I've failed already'. Students thinking or being told they are failing is a huge hurdle.
- Subject teachers did not have the background or experience to teach students skills such as goal setting and time management.
- The content focus of Year 12 courses does not allow for more authentic learning and assessment tasks.
- Deciding what data to collate, use, and present was an issue in itself. We decided to focus on the big picture and look at the whole of the year level, and then focus on some case studies (see Appendix B).

### **Strategies Used to Overcome the Obstacles**

- Year 12 care group teachers agreed to undertake more intensive contact with students and their families.
- Care group teachers met to discuss being a mentor and what this means in practice.
- Tutors were employed to support Year 12 students who needed extra support.
- Study skills sessions were held within extended care group time over a number of weeks for all Year 12s.
- Excel spreadsheets were established to document the data collected. SSABSA advised how to do this.
- An SSO was employed to key in the data.
- Twelve PES students who felt they needed extra support attended holiday revision programs paid for by the College. Data on their results were to be documented at the end of the year.

- Most of the Year 12 students undertaking Community Studies had not completed the semester's work within the timeline. It was resolved to result their work for Semester 2 to give them greater flexibility to complete their 2-unit sequence and gain their SACE.
- Students who wanted to reduce their workload were counselled. Discussions were also held with their parents to ensure that everyone knew the consequences of reducing subjects.
- A session on varying assessment tasks was held for all staff.

## **The Outcomes**

### **Students**

- Students are more likely to come and ask for assistance at an early stage. They discuss matters with the Counsellor and Assistant Principal and have booked in for extra tutoring; which occurs in their own time.
- Students use their study hall with ownership.
- Students are more social and comfortable to talk to all, due to the social get-to-togethers arranged, e.g. Year 12/13 Breakfasts, Care Group Challenge trophy bowling competition, laser force team event.
- They are more aware of whom to trust and have identified those people who will act upon their concerns and issues.
- Students who are on full-time PES loads have realised staff and college are serious about giving support and have taken up offers of tutoring and talking through their concerns.
- Students in the university pathway have learnt to use their time more effectively by only being at school for lessons they have. Most year 12s have a study day at home and have appreciated having a block of time rather than small amounts of time in study lessons. [See Appendix E]
- Students in some vocational pathways reduced load as they had large numbers of SACE units and their focus has been to stay connected to their VET pathway, which they see as relevant to their futures. [See Appendix B]
- Students who were in the university pathway were focused, managed time well and did not reduce loads. [See Appendix E]

### **Community Reactions**

Staff who teach some Year 12s are being more supportive, such as adapting courses to Community Studies projects if it looks as if the students are not going to achieve a pass in Mathematics, Tourism or English Communications.

Parents were aware of what we were doing and particularly appreciated our financial assistance with tutors and the holiday revision programs.

### **Results of the Research**

The Year 12 retention rate for 2002 was 57%, with an 81% retention rate for 2003. There was an 85.3% retention rate for the university pathway students, and within the hospitality pathway, retention was almost 100%. Those who did leave during Year 12, went out to work. Many of those students within the community services, multimedia, and building and construction pathways, will not get their SACE, but will all have VET certificates. This is

because they do not see the relevance of the SACE and have dropped back to three subjects. Comments from students included: subjects were too hard; couldn't keep up with the work; couldn't do the paid work, and too many subjects. They did, however want to finish Year 12, and hoped to gain other VET certificates.

### **Evaluation of Strategies**

Using the data collected during the year (see Appendixes 3 and 5), we examined the retention in pathways. It became clear that retention was assisted by:

- clear, defined pathways
- strong connections to the College via care groups/supportive College culture; and
- achievement in their chosen subjects.

Those students who met these criteria were able to stay and complete their courses, even though many in the vocational pathways did not also complete the SACE.

Mentoring and case management in small care groups allows staff to become closely acquainted with each student. This makes it easier to monitor their progress and implement strategies.

The Senior School Team met fortnightly to discuss student-related issues, address concerns raised by staff, and oversee the management of all senior students. Strategies were evaluated, modified, and amended according to student needs.

### **Recommendations for Further Action**

#### **For the College**

- 1 Continue with the pathways care groups into Year 12 and, where possible, encourage students to continue their relevant vocational curriculum.
- 2 Plan care group activities for Year 12s/13s that keep the students morale high.
- 3 Develop support sessions for students to improve time management and study skills.
- 4 Year 12 care group teachers should be present at meetings with subject teachers to give the Year 12 teachers the bigger picture surrounding each of their students.
- 5 Facilitate the use of tutors for students to support them in their Year 12 studies.
- 6 Release and support Year 12 subject teachers to map due dates for assessment tasks, to minimise clashes.
- 7 Maintain the Senior School Team as the focal point for gathering and analysing data about students at risk of not completing, and for managing appropriate responses.

#### **Recommendations for SSABSA for 2004**

- 1 Support the trial of a '3 Subject Year 12 one semester course' for those students who have more than 16 SACE Stage 1 units to complete their SACE and be accredited on completion. [See Appendix E]
- 2 Move the focus of the SACE to becoming a certificate of achievement that would involve, for example:
  - allowing students to gain their SACE by including a VET certificate (of 6 or more VET units) plus 16 units of SACE;
  - removing the compulsory group 1 and group 2 subjects at Stage 2 so that students can align subjects with their chosen pathway.

- 3 Recognise a range of flexible forms of assessment at Stage 2, in line with Stage 1.

**Further recommendations**

- 1 More training and development is needed for all staff on school policies regarding deadlines, assessment plans, and resulting.
- 2 SSABSA's enrolment, assessment, and resulting deadlines should be removed to allow for more flexibility.

## Appendix A. Data of the Year 12 Cohort 2003 at Windsor Gardens Vocational College

The following data was collected and used throughout the year to inform our practice of trialling and evaluating strategies.

<b>Began 2003</b>	<b>94</b>
Total No. of students who left	22
No. males who left	13
No. females who left	9

### Care group Numbers

		<b>FEB</b>	<b>JULY</b>	<b>SEPT</b>
University	12CG01	13	11	10
		5 Male	4 Male	3 Male
		8 Female	7 Female	7 Female
University	12CG02	14	14	13
		8 Male	8 Male	7 Male
		6 Female	6 Female	6 Female
	12CG03	17	16	12
		9 Male	9 Male	6 Male
		8 Female	7 Female	6 Female
Hospitality	12CG04	12	11	11
		6 Male	5 Male	5 Male
		6 Female	6 Female	6 Female
University	12CG05	14	13	12
		7 Male	6 Male	6 Male
		7 Female	7 Female	6 Female
	12CG06	14	11	9
		8 Male	6 Male	5 Male
		6 Female	5 Female	4 Female
CHIC	12CG07	4	4	2
		3 Male	3 Male	1 Male
		1 Female	1 Female	1 Female
Twilight		5	2	2
		2 Male	2 Male	2 Male
		3 Female	0 Female	0 Female
Repeating Student		1	1	1
		Female	Female	Female
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>94</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>72</b>
		48 Males	43 Males	35 Males
		46 Females	40 Females	37 Females

## Profile of the Students who Left

Of the twenty-two students who left, five were at-risk boys who were identified in Term 1. This is their profile.

<b>Leavers</b>	<b>No.</b>
Full-time work	4
Traineeships	1
Apprenticeships	2
TAFE	1
Seeking employment	12
Moved interstate	1
Serious illness	1
Twilight	2

## Retention

<b>Pathway</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Retention rate</b>
Overall	Feb	94	
	July	83	100%
	Sept	72	88.2%
			76.6%
University	Feb	41	
	Sept	35	85.3%
Community Services and Health			
Multimedia	Feb	31	68.4%
Building and Construction	Sept	21	
CHIC	Feb	2	100%
	Sept	2	
Hospitality	Feb	12	91.7%
	Sept	11	

## Appendix B. Case Study — Retention or Rejection? Does the SSABSA System Work Against Retention?

The following examples are of two Year 12 [2003] students who we are trying to retain. Both have valid pathways and both require full-time support in case management, mentoring, teaching, care group time, and career and futures counselling. One is considered to be a full-time Year 12 student by the Department according to the staffing formula. The other does not meet the same guidelines and is therefore considered a 'part-time' student at Year 12. We have retained both of these students and both will complete their SACE and their Year 12 studies.

For the past 3 years we have attempted to use all the flexibility that SACE gives us, as well as some creativity around our VET programs, curriculum design, case management and mentoring. The resource allocation to the school, however, acts as a disincentive to the school planning a student's pathway in line with their needs, because the rules are set to the pattern of a 'Tidy SACE' student. The guidelines take no account of the fact that so many of our students work part-time at Year 12 and accommodating them in ways that support them to complete their SACE often means there will be no staffing allocation for them.

### Student A: Vet and SACE — 'untidy SACE'. Student considered to be part-time at Year 12

Year level	Subjects	Units of SACE
2001, Year 10	Completed Peer Support and Australian Studies as SACE units.	2
2002, Year 11	Completed VET Certificate I Hospitality (3 units) as well as 10 SACE units	13
2003, Year 12	Completed VET Certificate II Hospitality (3 units)	3
	Completed 3 X 2-unit subjects at Stage 2 This student also works part-time in the hospitality industry under an industry partnership agreement that we have set up.	6
		24 units and SACE pattern complete

### Student B: 'Tidy SACE'. Student considered to be full-time at Year 12

Year level	Subjects	Units of SACE
2001, Year 10	No SACE units studied	0
2002, Year 11	Completed university pathway	12 units
2003, Year 12	Completed 5 X 2-unit subjects at Stage 2	10
		22 units and SACE pattern complete

**Questions that have Staffing Implications, that Should be Considered to Support Retention in DECS Sites**

1. Will schools be able to plan pathways that engage students and provide real pathways planning if they are inadequately resourced?
2. Will students continue to be pushed into 'tidy' SACE pathways so that DECS schools can get staffing, but not necessarily results and retention?
3. If part-time work and part-time study are such a large part of the landscape for Year 12s, how are 'normal' high schools accommodating them to be successful if they are not resourced in the same way as adult re-entry schools?
4. Can part-time work be better valued by providing Year 12 subjects that program all assignments to be done in class time? (This would mean no homework and therefore more, not less contact time with students.)

## Appendix C. Work Loads for Year 12s — Whole Year Level

Of the 94 students who began:

- 22 students left throughout the year;
- 42 students had five subjects all year and finished their courses;
- 11 students had four subjects all year and finished their courses;
- 4 students had three subjects all year and finished their courses.

### Reduction in Subjects

Term	No. students	Reduction in No. subjects
Term 1	10	5 → 4
	11	4 → 3
	1	3 → 2
Term 2	3	5 → 4
	1	4 → 3
	1	3 → 2
Term 3	1	5 → 4
	5	4 → 3
	4	3 → 2
	2	3 → 2
Term 4	2	5 → 4
	4	4 → 3

Student anecdotes when reducing their workload:

- ‘Subjects too hard.’
- ‘Assessments too hard.’
- ‘Can’t keep up.’
- ‘Can’t do paid work and so many subjects.’
- ‘The teacher says I’ve failed because I missed a test.’
- ‘I don’t need to do that many subjects.’
- ‘I’d rather focus on the Hospitality ‘cos that will get me a job.’
- ‘It’s just too much and I don’t need that much pressure.’
- ‘The teacher says that because I missed that deadline I can’t pass.’

## Appendix D. Survey Report, Windsor Gardens Vocational College

### Focus Questions

*What do you believe are the reasons for students not continuing their studies in Stage 2 or not completing Stage 2?*

*What do you believe are the reasons students manage to stay on and complete Stage 2 successfully?*

### Process

Miriam and Sue met twice to set up the process, and identified staff and students to participate in the survey.

They chose to survey:

- staff who had experience and knowledge of the senior school years and the student cohort at Windsor Gardens;
- students from Year 11, to get feedback about their assumptions and ideas;
- students who were studying at Stage 2 level;
- students who were in Year 13 to get their perceptions from experience/hindsight, and to ask why they were continuing for another year;
- School to Work and Twilight students who had already experienced difficulties/failure and had lost focus on their study.

The survey was designed and collated, along with consent forms.

A former student was employed to ring up students who had left, gain consent from current students, hand out surveys, explain the project, and answer any questions.

Miriam and Sue met with this person beforehand to explain the purpose and tasks.

### Findings

Reasons why students do not continue their studies into Stage 2 or do not complete Stage 2 successfully:

- part-time work commitments (10)  
*'Not being able to juggle commitments correctly will end up with students bogged down in their work.'*
- too much school work (8)  
*'An overwhelming amount of assignments are sometimes due in the same week.'*
- bad influence on behaviour (8)

Students counted this, but not one comment was given.

- family reasons (7)

Reasons included; separation of parents, illness, death, leaving home.

- school was too difficult (7)
- fear of failing (7)

*'Getting a 'D' can be very discouraging and cause students to quit rather than stay and fail.'*

The main reasons given as to why students manage to stay on and complete Stage 2 successfully were:

- determined (12)
- a supportive family or adult (11)
- realistic goals (10)

*'If you have a good idea of your future goals then you can work towards them, but if you don't it would be much harder.'*

## Appendix E. Draft Proposal, STAR 3 Next Step: Windsor Accelerated SACE completion 2004

A 6-month course to meet the needs of students who need a 3 x 2 unit sequence to complete the SACE for employment and TAFE.

Key incentives to the College will be:

- Higher retention of students who are keen to work;
- A real VET pathway into Year 12;
- Promotion of creative methodology for Year 12;
- Higher enrolments at Senior School.

Key incentives to students will be:

- No home work (allows for work commitments);
- Block times for three subjects over six months;
- Completed and certificate issued by the end of Semester 1;
- Can continue with certificates in pathways while doing Vocational Studies.

What would it look like?

Course Title Subject	Units for SACE
Certificates 1 or 2 in Hospitality, Retail, Practice Firm, Community Services and Health, Multimedia, Thursday VET day	Various, depending on competencies achieved
Vocational Studies A and B <i>and</i> Work Education Double line	2 or 4 SAS units Group 1 or 2, depending on the competencies for the certificates
Vocational Mathematics <i>or</i> 2 units of Community Studies Double line	2 SAS units Group 2
Community Studies Language and the Community Lifestyles and the Community Double line	2 SAS units Group 1

Any student who has completed 16 units of SACE as well as the pattern for Stage 1 could complete their SACE for Semester 1.

All students who are in VET pathways would be eligible.

There is also the possibility that we could repeat the same in Semester 2 and advertise for enrolments (if prerequisites were met).

### **Obstacles**

Staffing — costs?

Timetable — Could work if you match 2 lines together eg. 1 and 5 / 2 and 3 / 4 and 6

SSABSA — Will SSABSA support the trial, moderate, and issue accreditation mid-year?