

Queensland Government Response to the Evaluation of the Queensland Academies

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Executive Summary

Between 2005 and 2007, the Queensland Government established three purpose-built, state-of-the-art Queensland Academies (the Academies). These were the Queensland Academy for Science, Mathematics and Technology (QASMT), located in Toowong, the Queensland Academy for Creative Industries (QACI), located in Kelvin Grove, and the Queensland Academy for Health Sciences (QAHS), located at the Gold Coast.

Attendance at the Academies is selective, based on scores achieved in the Higher Ability Selection Test, an interview with Academy teachers and, in the case of QACI, an audition or presentation of a creative portfolio. Each Academy offers their students advantages associated with having relationships with industry and universities in their specialist areas. However, the academic pathways to tertiary education for Academy students are not confined to these specialist areas.

The Academies exclusively offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Program as their curriculum, providing their graduates with a highly-regarded, internationally recognised qualification. There have been three graduating Year 12 cohorts from QASMT and QACI (2008, 2009 and 2010) and two from QAHS (2009 and 2010).

In order to examine the effectiveness of the Academies and inform future developments, the Department of Education and Training commissioned the independent *Evaluation of the Queensland Academies* (the Evaluation). Associate Professor Bobby Harreveld and Professor Brian Caldwell were selected to lead the evaluation and were provided with a framework which outlined the scope, research questions and the terms of reference, to evaluate the Academies' ability to:

- effectively deliver strong outcomes for students;
- promote an image of excellence and responsiveness of state education programs;
- offer a unique model of education;
- provide exemplars of high quality teaching and other leading educational practices; and
- add value to the state education system through leading innovative practice.

A summary of the findings and recommendations is provided below.

Summary

Overall, the Evaluation findings regarding the effectiveness of the Academies were favourable, pointing to the excellent student outcomes, strong leadership, teaching excellence and the effective use of data to improve practice. The Evaluation highlighted some areas for further development, including increasing expertise in delivering the IB curriculum, building enrolments and increasing focus on partnerships with universities and industry.

A detailed description of the Queensland Government's response to the recommendations of the Evaluation, as well as the course of action to be taken, is outlined below. In brief, the Department of Education and Training will build on the strong foundations already established in the first four years of operation. This will include:

- continuing to operate the Queensland Academies as small specialist schools
- continuing to exclusively offer the IB curriculum, a highly regarded, internationally recognised curriculum

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- continuing the effective gathering and analysis of data to inform decision making and practice for schools across Queensland
- retaining personalised learning approaches in the Academies and seek opportunities to replicate this model in other state schools
- building on existing partnerships with universities and industry
- expanding the Academies Young Scholars program to share professional practice and expand the reach of the Academies.

The evaluation found “strong and consistent evidence of the success of the academy initiative in providing a new model of public education in Queensland”. The Queensland Government will continue to build strong state schools. In line with the evaluation’s findings, aspects that have led to success in the Academies will be considered in the future development of state schools in Queensland.

Queensland Government response to recommendations

Recommendation 1

The three Academies should continue as small specialist schools.

Supported

Response

The Academies were established in order to provide a new model of public education in Queensland.

They are unique compared to other Queensland state schools as they each have the capacity to accommodate only 450 students in Years 10 to 12. In comparison, some of the larger state schools have enrolments in Years 10 to 12 of over 2,000 students.

The Academies will continue to build on their strengths as small specialist schools. The good reputation of the Academies for providing a unique model of quality state school education continues to build year on year.

Recommendation 2

With the possible exception of QACI, the three Academies should maintain their exclusive offering of the IB Diploma.

Supported

Response

Academy graduates continue to achieve very high student outcomes in state, national and international comparisons, with other IB students.

The Government also notes the Evaluation findings indicating that while the IB is an extremely challenging program, it encouraged students to practice higher-order thinking and better prepared them for university, which is the chosen destination for the majority of Academy graduates.

All three Academies will continue to offer the IB curriculum and work to bed down the IB curriculum will continue. Academy teachers will have access to specialised professional development, including training to become IB examiners; access to IB examination reports and feedback for all subjects. Further, the Government will continue to monitor student enrolments and outcomes in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the IB Diploma in supporting long-term outcomes for students.

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Recommendation 3

The capacity to gather, analyse and act on survey data and learning outcomes should be maintained and extended to all schools across the state.

Supported

Response

Good systems for gathering and analysing student data has been identified as a hallmark of high achieving education systems across Australia and internationally. Evaluation findings suggest the Academies are at the forefront of this best practice.

Work is currently being undertaken by the Department of Education and Training to improve on the effective use of data to inform decision making and practice for schools across Queensland. This includes the Teaching and Learning Audits, which focus on better use of data to inform teaching excellence and the rollout of the OneSchool data system, which assists in the gathering of integrated student achievement data throughout state schools in Queensland.

Recommendation 4

Approaches to personalising learning in the three Academies should be maintained and strengthened and adopted as a model for all schools.

Supported

Response

These findings are a credit to Academy teaching staff and illustrate their commitment to providing high quality teaching for the benefit of their students. These findings are particularly impressive given that majority of Academy teachers had little or no experience in delivering the IB curriculum prior to their appointment in an Academy.

The Government, through the Department of Education and Training, will seek opportunities to replicate the Academies strengths in other State schools. There are widespread initiatives across the department to improve the ability of teachers to personalise learning. This includes promoting better use of data to inform individualised learning, development of eLearning resources that can be accessed to customise learning experiences for students and professional development that enables teachers to focus on individual learning needs.

The Education Queensland Principals' Capability and Leadership Framework is focussed on driving strong leadership and accountability for improving the quality of teaching practice and level of student achievement.

Recommendation 5

Partnerships of Academies with universities and other organisations and institutions should be supported and strengthened now that the early developmental work has been accomplished and there is understanding on all sides of the benefits.

Supported

Response

The Academies' engagement with universities has been extensive and is ongoing on a range of levels.

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The Department of Education and Training will ensure continued partnership building with universities and industry. This includes: the establishment of an advanced credit arrangement with partner universities; recognition of higher level subjects as prerequisites for tertiary entry; short course delivery; shared program delivery models; and involvement in a Young Scholars program partnership. Further, each Academy will implement its own engagement strategy, stemming from an overarching Academy Industry Engagement Strategy.

Recommendation 6

The Young Scholars program and the sharing of professional knowledge with staff in other schools should be supported and strengthened.

Supported

Response

The Young Scholars program is designed and administered by the Academies in order to provide highly capable primary school students in Years 5 to 9 with challenging educational enrichment opportunities. Its secondary purpose is to draw the attention of potential and future Academy students and secure their interest in enrolling.

Students enrolled in the Young Scholars program have opportunities to participate in online learning and Queensland Academies' workshops, including those run in partnership with the Gifted Education Research Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC). The Young Scholars' Associate Schools program also affords parents of gifted and talented students opportunities to attend lectures and professional development opportunities for teachers.

The Academies Young Scholars program has expanded every year, and the Academies will strive to build on this success. A particular focus will be placed on supporting teachers from other schools to participate in workshop activities and develop their skills in meeting the needs of high achieving students.

Recommendation 7

New arrangements for governance, leadership and support to strengthen partnerships and add further value to the system of state education should be located within and across the three Academies while maintaining a strong role for the centre and region.

Supported

Response

The Government encourages shared roles of decision making across regions, the centre and the Academies. Current governance arrangements reflect a balance between Academy-focused decision making and strategic alignment with whole of government policies.

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Recommendation 8

Further support for the Academies to ensure the setting and achievement of realistic expectations should be provided by commitments of time and money to ongoing professional development and extending the engagement of the International Baccalaureate Organisation and universities.

Supported

Response

The Academies are committed to ongoing professional development and are in the process of engaging the International Baccalaureate Organisation to aid in increasing expertise and knowledge in IB curriculum delivery.

The Academies are undertaking a wide range of activities to build teacher capacity and understanding of the IB curriculum, including:

- extensive and ongoing professional development for teachers;
- opportunities for teachers to complete higher level training and become IB examiners;
- access to IB examination reports and provision of feedback for all subjects, resulting in intensive analysis and response;
- the formation of a Queensland coalition of Heads of IB schools; and
- extensive networking across the Academies, including a dedicated IB moderation day with all Academies and other Queensland IB schools.

Documentation for parents and students wishing to enrol in an Academy which outlines the intensive level of work and commitment required to complete the IB, will be provided as part of a joint marketing plan currently being developed to ensure students commence their studies with a realistic understanding of what they can expect.

Recommendation 9

Education Queensland should work with universities in Queensland to reduce from 42 the score that secures entry to universities of students who graduate with the IB Diploma.

Supported

Response

The Academies have worked hard to develop their relationships with Queensland universities, who recognise the value of the IB through established special arrangements for graduating Academy students, including advanced credit and direct entry to some courses.

Discussions between departmental officers, Academy principals, Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (QTAC) representatives and senior officials from the three major universities entry requirements are ongoing.

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Recommendation 10

Consideration should be given to re-naming QACI and to re-designing its program to offer more than the single IB stream.

Not Supported

Response

The Government believes a two-stream program would detract from the current branding of the Academies. The IB is an important part of the Academy brand, which offers a depth and breadth of learning that has international credibility and status. Whilst there is a proportion of QACI students who do not choose to make a direct pathway to university, the IB Diploma provides them with a substantial credential in the workforce or for any further study they may seek to undertake in the future.

An action plan was implemented in 2011 comprising three key elements to support increased understanding of the core focus of QACI. They are: targeted promotional material that focuses on the broad range of learning and employment options in the creative industries; enhanced communications regarding QACI to the general public; and the continued partnership with QUT Creative Industries to raise the profile across the state more broadly.

The Government will continue to work closely with the Academies to ensure increased understanding amongst potential Academy students regarding the concept of 'creative industries'.

Recommendation 11

More specialist secondary schools should be created in Queensland, either among existing schools or in new schools in growth corridors.

Supported in principle

Response

This recommendation is consistent with the direction taken in many schools across Queensland.

In the Evaluation, the success of the Academies was attributed to a combination of their specialist nature, the methods of teaching used, the use of the IB curriculum, and use of data to inform practice.

The Queensland Government has established a variety of specialist schools, including the Queensland Dance School of Excellence, Aviation High and Palm Beach Currumbin State High School Excellence in Sport, etc.

Recommendation 12

The benefits of a small school that have been achieved in the three Academies should be secured in other schools in the system by purposely creating smaller schools-within-schools.

Supported in principle

Response

The Government will take care to ensure their establishment of schools-within-schools is carried out on a case-by-case basis, taking full account of the relevant local variables, such as the socio-economic status of the area, population size and geographic location.