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Removing Incentives for "Dumbing Down" Through Curriculum Re-structure and Additional Study Time

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Abstract
Offering differentiated courses to cater for a wide range of ability can lead to "dumbing down" when brighter students choose easier courses, which they can handle well without undue effort. This occurred when differentiated English courses were introduced in the senior secondary certificate in the state of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia. To avoid this trend continuing, new differentiated courses reported on a common scale were developed. At the same time a new preparatory course was provided to support weaker students to achieve the minimal standard in English. The resulting reform has led to stronger outcomes in English and increasing numbers of students taking more demanding courses. Defining clear standards on a common scale has led to better achievement for all students without having an adverse effect on participation in the senior secondary certificate.

Introduction

Recent reforms to the offerings of English courses in the senior secondary certificate in the State of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia were designed to avoid 'dumbing down' and to increase student performance. English is a compulsory subject in the senior secondary school certificate, the Higher School Certificate (HSC), awarded at the end of Year 12. The HSC is examined through a series of state-wide external subject examinations set by the NSW Board of Studies.

To meet the wide range of student ability in English a number of courses had been offered for some years. From 1989 English was differentiated into four courses ranging in difficulty level from the Contemporary English course which had been introduced to cater for weaker students to the most demanding extension 3 Unit course. To meet the mandatory requirements students could select one of three courses: Contemporary, General or Related English. One step up in average ability level from Contemporary English was the General English course, intended for the majority of students. Higher ability students who enrolled in the more demanding Related English course were eligible to take 3 Unit English as an optional extension course.

As can be seen in Table 1, the experience of introducing the differentiated course structure led over time to a decline in the numbers of students taking the more challenging courses. This "dumbing down" was the subject of attention during a major review of the HSC (McGaw, 1997) and the State Minister for Education in outlining his proposals for reform stated "This is the archetypal example of differentiated courses within a subject without a common reporting scale, leading to a lowering of expectations and outcomes of students." (Aquilina, 1997, p 12).

Table 1
The Decline of Enrolments in Demanding English Courses

Courses	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
English 3 Unit	3603	3546	3270	2876	2173	1732
Related English	11428	10103	8856	7475	6820	6031
General English	32319	33625	32186	30910	29720	29741
Contemporary English	8127	11901	14519	16639	17796	18224
Total Enrolments	55477	59175	58831	57900	56509	55728

To counter this "dumbing down" the NSW Board of Studies developed two new courses, Standard and Advanced English, with some overlapping content to allow for reporting on a common scale. Standard English was designed to be more rigorous than Contemporary English and to be comparable in demand to the General English course. Advanced English replaced the earlier Related English course. By placing Standard and Advanced English on a common reporting scale, it was hoped that there would be less incentive for capable students to take the less demanding course if they could demonstrate higher outcomes more readily by taking the more demanding course.

In addition, two optional extension courses, English Extension 1 and 2 were developed as higher-level courses which could only be undertaken by students who had enrolled for the Advanced English course. Extension 1 replaced the old 3 Unit English and Extension 2 is a new high-level option with an extended composition in either the print, sound, visual or multimedia medium as the outcome. Extension 2 is only available as an add-on option for students enrolled in Extension 1. The first Year 12 cohort taking these new courses was examined in 2001.

McGaw (1997) outlines the concerns raised about the effect of the highly differentiated course structure that had existed in the one compulsory HSC subject – English. He observes that teachers were more likely to encourage perceived low ability students to enrol in the lowest level course, where they might be denied the challenge to intellectual development that could

come from enrolling in a higher level course. There is a large body of research, (e.g. Douglass, 1964; Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968); Mackler; 1969; Chaiken, Sigler and Derlega, 1974; Cooper, Burger and Seymour, 1979; Cooper, Hinkel and Good, 1980; Cooper and Good, 1983) on how teachers' expectations can influence student interactions and academic development in the classroom. Having high expectations for students has been shown to have an impact on student performance (Bamburg and Andrews, 1989).

At one end of the spectrum are schools where teachers may take the easy way out by 'dumbing down' the local curriculum to a bare minimum in order to make matters as comfortable as possible for themselves and their students, and the students have little sense of accomplishment (Powell, Farrer and Cohen, 1985; Sedlak et al., 1986). At the other end are programs such as those run by Jaime Escalante at Garfield High school in Los Angeles (Mathews, 1988) which emphasise perseverance and practice. Of interest is the international comparative research of Stevenson and Stigler (1992), which attributes much of the high performance of Japanese and Chinese students in mathematics to high expectations being set for the students by teachers, parents and the students themselves. This research compared Japanese and Chinese educational practices with those in American schools. One important difference was the emphasis placed on innate ability compared to hard work. In comparison to the US, the Asian countries tended to emphasise the latter more than the former and to not necessarily regard low scores as an indicator of low ability, but as evidence that the student had not yet applied sufficient effort and hard work.

The Government reform required a way to address the needs of students who would be challenged by the increased demands of the Standard course relative to the former Contemporary course and addressed this by introducing a special voluntary course that supplied extra work and practice in English—Fundamentals of English (FE):

> The government recognises the need to support students with a history of low achievement in English to meet the requirements for the Higher School Certificate in English, not only because it is the sole compulsory subject, but because literacy in English underpins success for students across the curriculum. The Government's strategy is based on a desire to raise the achievement level of students to Higher School Certificate standard rather than to lower the standard that the Higher School Certificate should demand of them. Accordingly, the Government will authorise the development of further strategies for students of lower achievement in English, including a *Fundamentals of English* course in Year 11, to be studied in addition to and complementary with the Year 11 English course. This Board-developed course will enable students to spend more time on, and receive more intensive tuition in, the Preliminary course (Year 11) in English. It will equip them to participate in more satisfying learning and to achieve more successful outcomes across all subject areas in both years 11 and 12. (Aquilina, 1997, p13).

The Fundamentals of English course, which would not be directly examined by the central authority, was developed as either a one or two Unit course with a prime purpose to assist performance in Standard English and hopefully with spill over benefits to other subjects. It was designed to help students struggling with the basics of English to improve their fundamental skills.

For students for whom English is a second language, a new English as a Second Language (ESL) course was developed as an alternative to Standard or Advanced English in meeting the

compulsory English requirement for the HSC. Strict eligibility requirements were introduced for this course to discourage students from enrolling in it inappropriately.

The new English courses were introduced in 2001 at the same time as a number of other reforms to curriculum and reporting. The most significant of these reforms was to move from a norm-referenced reporting of marks to a standards-referencing approach for all subjects in the HSC.

Results of the Reforms

Participation

As can be seen in Table 2, the effects of the reform on enrolments in the demanding English courses was to reverse the previous trends for students to "dumb down." Not only did larger numbers of students take the Advanced course than was the case with the previous Related English course, the numbers in the optional extension courses have risen substantially in each year since the reform.

Table 2
The increase in enrolments in demanding English courses

Courses	2001	2002	2003
English Extn 2	1435	1727	2289
English Extn 1	3815	4227	5174
English Advanced	20126	20869	24583
English Standard	36300	37278	33098
Total Enrolments	61676	64101	65144

The above statistics are for the entire statewide candidatures. An examination of enrolment trends in schools containing generally low ability students was also performed for the mandatory English courses. For this purpose, schools were defined as "low ability" if at least 75% of the school candidature in English were enrolled in Contemporary English in 2000. The pattern of enrolments for these schools from 2000 to 2003 is shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Enrolment pattern for schools with predominantly low ability students

Courses	2000	2001	2002	2003
Contemporary English	1516			
General English	331			
Related English	8			
ESL		47	61	53
Standard English		1537	1510	1420
Advanced English		226	260	369
Total enrolments	1855	1810	1831	1842

The total enrolments row indicates that the total candidature of schools in this group did not vary greatly over the time period. In 2000, only 8 students in the group took a demanding English course, whereas in 2001 this had risen to 226 and by 2003 had increased to 369. Apart from a small group of students that went into ESL, it appears that most of the students who formerly would have done Contemporary English now enrolled in Standard English, a much more difficult course. While the majority of students are in this course, this is dropping slightly over time as more students are entering Advanced English.

Performance

The results of students in Standard English and Advanced English are reported with reference to six bands defined as common performance standards. In this reporting framework Band 2 represents the minimum standard expected. Bands 2-6 have performance content descriptor statements. Table 3 shows the percentage of students achieving each band level across the two courses.

Table 4
Percentage of students in each performance band in Standard and Advanced English from 2001-2003

	Standard English			Advanced English		
Band	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**	**2001**	**2002**	**2003**
6	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.37	6.97	6.85
5	0.35	1.14	1.92	33.24	48.67	34.85
4	15.02	29.72	32.27	51.48	37.26	46.58
3	56.77	43.15	47.32	10.58	6.72	11.14
2	23.57	23.09	17.58	0.31	0.37	0.55
1	4.29	2.90	0.91	0.02	0.02	0.03

These results show that students with the ability to demonstrate the more advanced skills reflected in bands 5 and 6 tend to take the Advanced English course, a result in line with the purpose of the reform to encourage students to aim for higher outcomes.

Over the three years fewer students in Band 1 in Standard English indicate that more of the weaker students are achieving the minimum expected standard (Band 2) or above.

The Effect of the Fundamentals of English Course

A central question is: how do candidates who take the Fundamentals of English course compare with candidates who do not? Consider the situation where low achieving students are measured before a treatment, the treatment is given, and the students are measured after the treatment (termed a 'pre-experimental design' in Campbell and Stanley, 1966). It is important to note that the selection of these low achieving students in this study was not determined by the pretest measure. If it were, then statistical regression would ensure an improvement in the posttest. The groups were self selected through their decision to take the Fundamentals of English course. In our case, the 'before' measurement is a raw score on the

School Certificate (SC) English external test in Year 10, the treatment is the extra work undertaken in the FE course in Years 11/12 and the 'after' measurement is the scaled mark in the appropriate Higher School Certificate (HSC) English course at the end of Year 12. For the purposes of analysis, students with non missing values on all relevant measures were selected. To facilitate comparisons, the mean scores of the FE taking groups are expressed as Z scores relative to the majority groups, the non FE taking groups. Analyses were performed for two consecutive HSC cohorts, for the years 2001 (Table 5, Table 6) and 2002 (Table 7, Table 8).

Table 5 below shows the summary statistics in the 2001 Standard English scaled examination marks for the groups of students who varied in the number of units of FE studied.

Table 5
2001 Standard English and SC English Statistics for FE categories

Measure	FE units	N	Mean	SD	Z score
'Before'	2	1741	54.4	13.22	-0.55
SC raw	1	1203	57.2	13.53	-0.33
	none	30942	61.3	12.49	
'After'	2	1741	30.2	4.47	-0.26
HSC Scaled	1	1203	30.7	4.46	-0.12
	none	30942	31.2	3.93	

The 'pretest' measures suggest that the students taking 2 units of FE on average were slightly weaker than the students taking 1 unit of FE who were slightly weaker than the students not taking FE. On the 'posttest' the groups retained the same rank order of the means but the means were closer together. On the HSC measure, the 2U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.55 to –0.26. Similarly, the 1U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.33 to –0.12.

Table 6 below shows the summary statistics in the 2001 ESL scaled examination marks for the groups of students who varied in the number of units of FE studied.

Table 6
2001 ESL and SC English Statistics for FE categories

Measure	FE units	N	Mean	SD	Z score
'Before'	2	194	36.4	13.25	-0.23
SC raw	1	153	38.6	14.50	-0.07
	none	488	39.6	14.18	
'After'	2	194	34.9	5.41	-0.03
HSC Scaled	1	153	35.8	5.69	0.12
	none	488	35.1	5.93	

A similar result occurred in ESL. Those students taking 2 units of FE (Z = –0.23) were weaker than those taking 1 unit of FE (–0.07) and both groups were weaker than the majority group not taking FE. On the HSC measure, however, the 2U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.23 to –0.03 and the 1U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.07 to 0.12, the latter result being slightly *above* the majority group.

Tables 7 and 8 reproduce the same analyses for the 2002 HSC cohort.

Table 7
2002 Standard English and SC English Statistics for FE Categories

Measure	FE units	N	Mean	SD	Z score
'Before'	2	2003	54.03	11.43	-0.25
SC raw	1	1160	49.54	12.23	-0.65
	none	31587	56.77	11.17	
'After'	2	2003	32.32	4.26	0.02
HSC Scaled	1	1160	30.82	5.01	-0.33
	none	31587	32.22	4.26	

Table 8
2002 ESL and SC English Statistics for FE Categories

Measure	FE units	N	Mean	SD	Z score
'Before'	2	195	40.35	12.50	0.18
SC raw	1	165	33.79	12.48	-0.36
	none	507	38.19	12.31	
'After'	2	195	37.38	4.83	0.35
HSC Scaled	1	165	34.16	6.54	-0.20
	none	507	35.35	5.79	

The mean results show that in Standard English, the 2U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.25 to 0.02, moving from below the reference group mean to slightly above it. Similarly, the 1U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.65 to –0.33.

A similar result occurred in ESL. This time, however, the 2 Unit FE group was above the mean on the SC 'pretest'. It improved its Z score position from 0.18 to 0.35 and the 1U FE group improved its Z score position from –0.36 to –0.20.

Discussion

From a policy perspective the data presented in this report show the importance of setting high standards for all students. Providing differentiated courses to cater for a wide range of ability can lead to students being contented with lower performance than they are capable of achieving. Placing differentiated courses on a common reporting scale can be seen to remove the incentive to 'dumb-down' and leads to better outcomes for all students. In the present case the expectation of higher standards for all does not appear to have had an adverse effect on participation and retention of weaker students. Most likely this result is due to the provision of an enabling course, Fundamentals of English, assisting in achieving better outcomes for weaker students.

However the limitations of the 'pre-experimental design' for measuring the effectiveness of the Fundamentals of English course suggest caution should be employed in interpreting the effect of this course too strongly. Although selection of the groups was not based on the 'pretest' (SC English), it is theoretically possible that indirect selection effects could have taken place. The choice of whether to take Fundamentals of English may be a complex matter involving many factors, which are not easily measured or even identified. If a theoretical selection variable could be hypothesised, comprising a composite of these factors, then it is possible that it may correlate more strongly with the 'pretest' measure than the 'posttest' measure. If so, then upward regression would occur less on the 'pretest' than the 'postest', producing a result that mimics improvement. Of the four data sets analysed here, however, this possibility seems unlikely given that the improvement noted has sometimes crossed the mean of zero, going from a negative Z score to a positive one. Another rival explanation could hypothesise possible maturational factors that would have allowed the weaker students to improve, regardless of whether they did the extra work in Fundamentals of English. While it is not possible to claim that the improvement in each of the four groups is due solely to their taking Fundamentals of English, these results are encouraging for the implementation of Fundamentals of English.

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