

An international perspective on additional assessment components: Considerations for Senior Cycle redevelopment in Ireland

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Abstract

This paper examines the implications of introducing Additional Assessment Components (AAC), as part of school-based assessment, within the ongoing redevelopment of Senior Cycle (SC) education in Ireland. Guided by the Government's vision of equity and excellence for all, current reform seeks to diversify curriculum pathways, broaden assessment approaches, and reduce pressure associated with the traditional high-stakes Leaving Certificate (LC) examination. Although AAC were envisaged initially as comprising teacher-designed, school-based components contributing at least 40% of final LC grades, responsibility for their administration has since been transferred to the State Examinations Commission, underscoring the challenges of enacting reform within a system historically dominated by external terminal examination.

Drawing on international evidence, the paper explores how jurisdictions including Hong Kong, New Zealand, Ontario, and Queensland have integrated AAC alongside external examinations. Although these jurisdictions differ substantially in governance structures, moderation arrangements, and levels of trust in teacher professional judgement, all provide insights into the opportunities and tensions associated with hybrid assessment systems.

The analysis is informed by semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders in late 2022/early 2023. Three broad questions guided the research: how AAC are experienced in schools and classrooms, the extent to which they are viewed as authentic and appropriate approaches to assessing learners, and what lessons may be drawn for Irish SC reform.

Findings indicate that, while AAC can support broader construct representation, flexibility, and authenticity in assessment, they also generate challenges relating to workload, moderation, public confidence, equity, curriculum fragmentation, and assessment literacy. Across jurisdictions, tensions persist between formative and summative purposes, particularly where AAC contribute directly to high-stakes

certification outcomes. The paper concludes that successful implementation of AAC in Ireland will depend not only on technical design, but also on coherent governance, sustained professional learning, clarity regarding teachers' roles, and careful balancing of innovation with traditions associated with the LC and progression to higher education.

Keywords: Additional assessment components, Senior Cycle, Ireland

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Introduction

Significant reform of Senior Cycle (SC) education in Ireland is underway, guided by a vision of “equity and excellence for all” (Government of Ireland, 2025). Central to this reform is the revision of existing syllabi and the phased expansion and diversification of subject options across five tranches from 2025 to 2029 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2024). At the same time, the introduction of Additional Assessment Components (AAC), as part of School-Based Assessment (SBA), is being extended incrementally to all subjects. This development forms part of a broader ambition to enrich student experience and wellbeing by reducing examination pressure associated with the traditional Leaving Certificate (LC). As detailed elsewhere (Lysaght, 2023), the LC is but one component of SC education; as such, it is a core, but not singular, aspect of the ongoing reform agenda.

Although AAC were envisaged initially as comprising teacher-designed, school-based components contributing at least 40% of final LC grades, responsibility for their administration has since been transferred to the State Examinations Commission (SEC). This revised arrangement underscores the complexity of assessment reform within a historically embedded system characterised by external, summative, terminal examination (the LC has existed for over 100 years). It also highlights how entrenched understandings of teachers' roles can be unsettled when reform includes expectations that teachers engage in SBA for high-stakes certification purposes (Hyland, 2025; Lysaght, 2023).

Ireland is notable as a relative outlier in its traditional reliance on a single terminal

examination such as the LC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2026). By contrast, jurisdictions including Hong Kong, New Zealand, Ontario, and Queensland have long combined terminal examinations with SBA, albeit not without challenge. This paper therefore examines the experiences of these jurisdictions to anticipate potential challenges and identify interventions that may support a smooth transition from a high-stakes LC examination model to a hybrid AAC/examination approach in Ireland. In this paper, the terms SBA and AAC are used interchangeably. Although it is acknowledged that they are not fully synonymous, both describe assessment components undertaken outside the traditional terminal examination to support broader and more diverse forms of certification. Although AAC is the term used within current Irish SC reform, its underlying purpose aligns closely with international SBA approaches.

The analysis draws on semi-structured individual and group interviews conducted with key stakeholders in the jurisdictions concerned in late 2022/early 2023, following the announcement of proposed SC reform by the then Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD, in March 2022 (DE, 2022). As such, it provides a “snapshot in time” account, addressing three central concerns:

- How AAC were experienced in schools and classrooms
- The extent to which AAC were considered appropriate and authentic approaches to assessing learners, and
- What policy advice might be offered to Ireland regarding the proposed SC assessment reform based on local experiences.

In a companion paper (Millar & Lysaght, 2026), a quantitative analysis examines the likely effects of introducing an AAC worth 40% of the LC grade.

Literature Review

Across OECD jurisdictions, upper secondary certification systems are being recalibrated as policymakers reconsider the dominance of terminal high-stakes examinations. Although external summative examinations remain central in many contexts, blended architectures incorporating SBA, coursework, and performance tasks are increasingly embedded within certification frameworks (OECD, 2023, 2026). This shift has been accelerated by Covid-19, which exposed structural vulnerabilities in single-sitting examinations and intensified longstanding tensions between reliability, equity, and student wellbeing (Hayward & O’Leary, 2022). More broadly, however, diversification reflects sustained evidentiary and equity-based scholarship, even as understanding of assessment quality continues to evolve.

From an evidentiary standpoint, assessment systems must adequately represent intended constructs and support defensible interpretations for consequential use

(Kane, 2013; Messick, 1989). Where curricula prioritise extended inquiry, applied reasoning, and transversal competencies, exclusive reliance on timed, terminal written examinations risks construct under-representation. Research on high-stakes testing further demonstrates that concentrated stakes reshape classroom pedagogy, narrowing curricula towards examinable formats and fostering “teaching to the test” (Au, 2007; Shepard, 2000). Certification design is therefore increasingly reconceptualised as an evidentiary architecture capable of assessing 21st century learning across contexts and over time, rather than as a simple choice between assessment instruments.

Such recalibration is not without challenge. Where assessment outcomes regulate access to scarce opportunities, incentive structures shape behaviour irrespective of whether evidence is externally or internally generated (Campbell, 1976; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In tightly coupled selection systems (exemplified by the direct translation of LC results into the Central Applications Office [CAO] points system, which determines access to higher education places in Ireland), the expanding SBA may broaden construct representation but also heighten school and teacher performativity (Ball, 2003). Recent OECD analyses (Foster & Piacentini, 2023; OECD, 2025) emphasise that diversification must be accompanied by coherent governance, alignment of standards, and strengthened professional capacity if implementation is to proceed with fidelity. Teacher assessment literacy – encompassing expertise in design, interpretation, and ethical judgement (DeLuca et al., 2016; Popham, 2009) – is therefore central. As argued by Pastore et al. (2025), expanding assessment roles without sustained professional investment risks destabilising comparability rather than strengthening validity.

Technological transformation adds further complexity. Bennett (2011) cautioned that changes in modality alter evidentiary bases, and more recently, Marcus-Quinn and McCoy (2025) have highlighted how rapid integration of GenAI challenges assumptions about authorship and authenticity in coursework-based assessment. Emerging international debate concerns not only the inappropriate use of GenAI, but also the extent to which assessment systems should seek to prohibit, accommodate, or redesign for its presence. While strict policing and surveillance-oriented approaches may support individual accountability and more defensible validity inferences, critics (Swiecki et al., 2022) argue that such approaches may simultaneously undermine trust, student agency, and authentic engagement with digital technologies increasingly embedded in learning environments. Conversely, greater acceptance of AI-assisted work risks blurring the extent to which assessment outcomes reflect students’ independent knowledge, skills, and competencies. In response, schools, jurisdictions, and awarding bodies are increasingly exploring design adaptations including staged submissions, supervised components, oral verification processes, process portfolios, and multimodal assessment approaches intended to strengthen confidence in the authenticity and interpretability of assessment evidence. Where SBA contributes directly to high-stakes grades, authenticity becomes a critical design consideration.

Equity research sharpens these concerns. Persistent grading differences in high-stakes contexts have demonstrable long-term distributional effects, influencing students' access to future educational and employment opportunities over time (Lavy & Megalokonomou, 2019). Reviews of equitable and inclusive assessment emphasise the importance of advocacy, flexibility, and intentional focus on students who fall outside normative categories (Townend et al., 2025), alongside contextual supports, shared interpretive standards, and assessment literacy across schools (Harlen, 2005). Work on standards-referenced judgement underscores that comparability depends on disciplined professional consensus rather than mechanical uniformity (Sadler, 1987). At the same time, diversified assessment architectures – involving combinations of examinations, coursework, performance tasks, and SBA – introduce both distributive and technical challenges (O'Neill & Padden, 2022). Distributive challenges concern how opportunities, supports, and outcomes are experienced unevenly across different student groups and school contexts, while technical challenges relate to issues such as comparability, consistency of judgement, moderation, and the validity of assessment inferences across varied assessment formats.

In Ireland, these international shifts intersect with a historically examination-centred SC. The LC functions simultaneously as certification and competitive selection within a points-based progression system. Recent Irish scholarship notes that reform presents opportunities for broader recognition of competencies while risking redistribution rather than reduction of pressure (O'Leary & Lysaght, 2024). Perceptions of fairness are closely linked to governance clarity and shared standards (McNamara & McCauley, 2025), and comparative research highlights the necessity of coherence across curriculum, assessment design, and standards frameworks to sustain consistency across diverse school contexts (Murchan et al., 2025).

It is against this backdrop that the research reported here was undertaken.

Research Strategy and Methodology

A dual research strategy and sequential design underpinned the methodology, comprising (a) the development of fact files through desk-based research followed by (b) semi-structured individual and group interviews. As noted previously, each stage was directed towards addressing three research questions relating to (1) how AAC were experienced in schools and classrooms; (2) the extent to which AAC were considered appropriate and authentic approaches to assessing learners and (3) what policy advice might be offered to Ireland regarding the proposed SC assessment reform. In Phase 1 of the research (September – December 2022), fact files were compiled from relevant publicly available primary, secondary, and tertiary sources across nine jurisdictions (Estonia, India, the Netherlands, Scotland, Wales, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Ontario, and Queensland). This phase sought to establish the extent to which SBA contributes to high-stakes assessment outcomes at the end of compulsory schooling.

In Phase 2, which is the focus of this paper, four jurisdictions, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Ontario, and Queensland, were purposively selected for complementary case study investigation based on two criteria: (a) the use of AAC alongside high-stakes, externally certified examinations in SC and (b) the ability to identify and recruit well-informed stakeholders to participate in remote semi-structured individual and group interviews. Publicly available lists of senior personnel in organisations equivalent to the DE, Education Research Centre, NCCA, and SEC in Ireland served as sampling frames. A combination of purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling strategies was employed to capture, where possible, the perspectives of school-based personnel as well as policy actors.

Despite these efforts, securing participation from school personnel in all semi-structured group interviews proved challenging, particularly given scheduling constraints across time zones within a limited timeframe. Nonetheless, many interviewees were current or former teachers and/or principals and were therefore well positioned to provide nuanced insights into the opportunities and challenges associated with combining SBA and terminal examinations in high-stakes contexts.

Following piloting of the interview schedule, nine interviews were conducted with 14 stakeholders: three in New Zealand and two in each of the remaining jurisdictions – Hong Kong, Ontario, and Queensland (see Table 1). To accommodate participants, both individual and group interviews were held over a six-week period (March - April 2023), with each interview typically lasting one hour.

TABLE 1

Overview of interviews by jurisdiction and interviewee roles

Jurisdiction	Number of interviews	Number of interviewees	Roles
Hong Kong	2	2	System level, Academic
New Zealand	3	4	System level, Academic, Teacher
Ontario	2	4	System level
Queensland	2	4	System level, Academic, Teacher

Note. Interviewee roles are presented in deliberately vague terms to protect identities.

Microsoft Teams was used to generate audio-visual recordings and transcripts of each interview. These materials, together with interviewers' notes and reflective memos produced during both the data collection and analysis phases, informed a primarily deductive approach to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase guide. Initial coding categories were derived from the study's research questions, interview schedule, and relevant literature on assessment reform, high-stakes terminal examinations and SBA, moderation, implementation, and teacher professional development. In addition to interview transcripts and interviewer notes, documentary evidence contained within the jurisdictional case-study files, including

policy documents, curriculum and assessment specifications, and publicly available guidance materials, was used to support contextual understanding and triangulation during analysis. This approach facilitated systematic cross-case comparison across jurisdictions while retaining sufficient flexibility to capture unexpected issues emerging from interviewees' accounts.

Trustworthiness – including credibility, transferability, and confirmability – is central to qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). In this study, particular emphasis was placed on credibility and on ensuring that findings represented accurate and fair accounts of participants' perspectives. Interviews therefore prioritised the development of insider understanding and the preservation of participants' voices in subsequent analysis and reporting. As agreed with interviewees, and to protect anonymity, unattributed short phrases, rather than direct quotations, were used very occasionally in the text for emphases purposes only. Two further points are noteworthy. First, where certain examples appear to be foregrounded in reporting individual case studies, this is directly attributable to the interviewees and what they elected to discuss. Second, the evident imbalance in the length and detail of some cases (e.g., Ontario vs Hong Kong) reflects the quantity and relevance of the data collected only.

Limitations of the Research

The design and execution of the research plan were proportionate to the time and budget available. Two aspects were affected: first, the number of interviews conducted was limited and second, student voice was not sought directly. In respect of the first, the limitations of self-reports, including social desirability, subjectivity, and selectivity biases, are acknowledged.

Despite these shortcomings, it is noteworthy that interviewees' reflections on students' attitudes and responses to different forms of assessment – particularly in relation to reported stress and anxiety – were highly informative. These perspectives are integrated throughout the findings presented in this paper.

Presentation of Cases and Findings

The remaining sections of this paper present the research findings. Given the quality and depth of insight generated through the interviews, each jurisdiction is examined in turn using a broadly consistent set of headings addressing: (a) the nature and historical development of SBA, (b) the design and organisation of SBA, (c) moderation, quality assurance, and manageability, (d) implications for teaching, learning, and equity, and (e) teacher considerations (including teacher professionalism, assessment literacy, and professional development). Given differences between jurisdictions, some themes are more prominent in particular cases than others. This is followed by a consideration of the findings in relation to the Irish context, highlighting a number of issues identified as particularly significant for the immediate redevelopment of SC education in Ireland.

Hong Kong: Nature and Historical Development of SBA

Interviewees described Hong Kong as having a long tradition of SBA, with components such as laboratory reports in chemistry, biology, and physics long embedded in practice. The broader policy thrust towards SBA emerged in the early 2000s, influenced by trends in Australia and motivated by a desire to break the cycle of examination preparation and its negative backwash effects on teachers and students. As part of the New Senior Secondary (NSS) reform, SBA was first introduced in 2007 in English Language and Chinese Language, which were intended to serve as the vanguard for wider implementation in the forthcoming Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE). Prior to the introduction of the HKDSE in 2012, Hong Kong operated a two-tier examination system in which students typically sat the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) followed by the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) for university entrance. Although the HKDSE replaced this two-tier system with a single unified senior secondary qualification in 2012, the expectation that SBA would be extended across all subjects was never realised. Ongoing delay was attributed largely to teachers' protestations and resistance to change based on objections that they were not professionally competent to judge students' work for high-stakes assessment purposes. Consequently, examination structures differ across subjects and some, such as mathematics, have no SBA component.

Design and Organisation of SBA

Interviewees acknowledged that mistakes were made in the design of the AAC in English Language, resulting in students taking two speaking examinations: one SBA for general secondary certification and one as part of the public examination for university entrance. In retrospect, introducing a speaking examination rather than a written portfolio was judged ill-advised. SBA was not intended to accommodate different students' abilities or capacities. In group oral assessments, wide variations in competence may be observed, with external moderators sometimes noting students forgetting lines or being prompted by peers without understanding what they are saying.

Interviewees reported considerable variation between schools in the support provided to students preparing for SBA. In some schools, particularly those whose students are not typically high performers in upper secondary examinations, students are encouraged to submit multiple iterations, with the best attempt selected for grading. In higher-performing schools, teachers are more stringent, standardising preparation, administration, and marking to resemble external examinations in order to minimise bias and enhance reliability. It was judged that the introduction of SBA invariably sacrifices some guarantees of equity in administration, something that must be accepted and acknowledged as inevitable.

Moderation, Quality Assurance, and Manageability

Interviewees described moderation arrangements designed to monitor fairness. Each school is allocated a district coordinator, and schools submit samples of student work for review. In the English-speaking component, six samples across achievement levels are submitted with grades and ranks. Where grading is deemed overly harsh or lenient, further review occurs, and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) research division statistically moderates grades up or down, though teacher rankings remain unchanged. In subjects with smaller numbers of candidates, second marking and double marking apply where discrepancies are identified. A proposal that schools within districts would mark one another's students was rejected because teachers trusted colleagues within their own schools but not those from neighbouring schools. Appeals are usually made at school level through principals, often by elite schools. It is formal practice that students see teacher-awarded SBA grades prior to submission; however, they have no access, subsequently, to their moderated marks, as these are incorporated into an overall composite grade. The impact on student motivation was considered difficult to determine without research, though reactions were thought likely to vary depending on weighting and personal ambition.

Finally, significant concern was expressed about generative software such as ChatGPT and its implications for academic integrity, particularly for essay-based assessments. While teachers reported trusting their own students, they expressed less confidence in assurances from other schools that similar standards of professional integrity would be upheld.

Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Equity

In a jurisdiction where summative, upper secondary, public examinations remain high stakes, formative assessment was described as falling victim to summative assessment. Despite rhetoric, SBA were seen as replicating rather than balancing public examinations, thereby limiting the potential to generate and use formative feedback in real time. In this sense, SBA were viewed as functioning less as a formative counterbalance to high-stakes examinations and more as an additional summative component operating within the same examination-oriented culture. Consequently, as students develop awareness of the relative stakes attached to different components, they focus on those contributing to overall awards. It was opined that formative assessment, or the formative use of SBA results, is unlikely to take hold in any meaningful way where grades contribute to final subject outcomes. From Christmas onwards in Form Six (the final year of secondary schooling, typically for students aged 17–18), teaching focuses almost exclusively on reviewing past papers. While stressful, students were said to expect this approach. Teaching to the test may be viewed as legitimate if SBA is deemed a valid measure of learning or if it measures elements not assessable through written examinations.

Teacher Considerations

Distinctive system features were highlighted. At school level, there is a “huge, huge emphasis” on anticipating grades likely to be awarded in terminal examinations. Because grading systems and cut scores used by the HKEAA are confidential, schools encourage students to submit data requests to obtain marks and comments, aggregating these data to determine grade boundaries. This informs their preparation strategies. Teachers’ motivation to access marking schemes contributes to some seeking employment as HKEAA markers, returning with “insider” knowledge and kudos. Engagement in external marking was also described as enhancing teachers’ assessment literacy and perceived self-efficacy, particularly among younger teachers.

Interviewees explained that the introduction of SBA was accompanied by nationwide professional development organised regionally and within schools. The extent of meaningful engagement varied. Given longstanding trust in public high-stakes examinations, teachers’ identities as assessors may have influenced their relative lack of participation in, and use of, professional development. Increased workload associated with SBA and professional development was highlighted, particularly as marking SBA does not necessarily bring financial reward. Teachers’ pay and, in some cases, contracts reflect value added to student performance, and university entry requirements based on final grades sustain pressure to secure high results, including through teaching to the test.

Summary

In sum, interviewees portrayed Hong Kong’s SBA as operating within a persistently high-stakes examination culture in which summative imperatives shape practice. Although SBA have contributed to enhanced assessment literacy and diversified modes of assessment, concerns remain regarding equity, workload, moderation, and academic integrity, particularly where SBA function as another high-stakes component rather than a formative counterbalance to public examinations.

New Zealand: Nature and Historical Development of SBA

Interviewees described New Zealand’s upper secondary assessment model as standards-based, with specified learning outcomes translated into distinct achievement standards comprising both internal (school-based) and external public terminal assessments. Each SBA task is linked to an analytic rubric specifying criteria (Non-Achievement, Achievement, Achievement with Merit, Achievement with Excellence) and associated credits. A key advantage of combining SBA with the option of public examinations was identified as the choice and flexibility afforded to teachers and students.

SBA have featured strongly in New Zealand for decades and form a central component of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA, the

national qualification typically undertaken during the final three years of secondary schooling. However, aspects of the system are currently under review for a number of reasons including three highlighted by the interviewees. First, the number of external examinations taken by students has reportedly declined by approximately 200,000 in the past decade, raising concerns about curriculum fragmentation amid the proliferation of “mini SBA”. In response, work is underway to revise achievement standards so that, at each level and in each subject, there will be no more than four standards (two internal and two external). Students seeking an Achievement Endorsement, an additional award recognising consistently strong performance across a combination of internal and external assessments within a subject, will be required to complete at least three standards combining internal and external assessments. Second, longstanding under-achievement among Māori and Pacific students was acknowledged, prompting reform efforts to embed universal design in curriculum and assessment. Third, high teacher attrition, linked anecdotally to workload and stress associated with moderation and judgement, was identified as a pressing issue.

Design and Organisation of SBA

Interviewees emphasised that SBA offer flexibility and authenticity, enabling students to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and competencies beyond time-pressured examination conditions. Examples referenced by interviewees included oral language tasks, performances, practical investigations, portfolios, research projects, and classroom-based assessments completed over extended periods of time. Students can accumulate sufficient SBA credits to secure a full NCEA qualification without sitting end-of-year public examinations, if permitted by their school. The decline in external examination uptake was attributed to perceptions that SBA are less stressful and offer greater teacher control over preparation and support. However, it was also acknowledged (as noted elsewhere by O’Leary et al., 2022), that SBA marks may reflect teachers’ perceptions of students’ potential rather than strictly the submitted work judged against rubrics.

The potential for curriculum fragmentation was emphasised. When standards are atomised into multiple small components, schools may select subsets across subjects, potentially omitting key knowledge areas, such as statistics in mathematics. While students may still accumulate sufficient credits, gaps may emerge upon entry to university. Consideration is being given to making certain standards compulsory. Interviewees cautioned that SBA must be designed to contribute to learning, not merely assess it. Reference was made to the planned introduction of compulsory externally assessed literacy and numeracy standards, with three opportunities annually for students to sit the examinations.

Schools reportedly limit the number of senior subjects taught by individual teachers where possible and timetable SBA to avoid clustering. While students ultimately select

standards, schools typically register them in blocks. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) permits considerable flexibility: unregistered students may sit examinations retrospectively; registered students may opt out on the day; and derived grades may be awarded if absence is supported by evidence, often based on repeated “practice exams”.

Moderation, Quality Assurance, and Manageability

Interviewees stressed the importance of guarding against subjectivity in applying analytic rubric criteria, particularly where distinctions between achievement levels are subtle. Moderation aims to ensure consistency in teachers’ judgements rather than evaluate the intrinsic quality of student work. Moderators include full-time NZQA staff and Contract for Service Moderators. Random samples of eight pieces of work are typically selected, with purposive sampling where prior concerns exist. Schools receive reports indicating Agreement Rates between teacher and moderator judgements and are expected to intervene where discrepancies arise. Although schools may appeal moderation decisions, ultimate responsibility for SBA decisions rests with schools, reflecting New Zealand’s devolved, self-directing system.

Students may appeal public examination results through a free review for mechanical errors or a reconsideration involving full reassessment for a refundable fee. Approximately 8,000 reconsiderations are requested annually, with around 25% adjusted upwards and no deductions applied. High-achieving students with Merit endorsements may also appeal. SBA awards may be appealed; however, going forward, only students initially marked Not Achieved will be permitted to resubmit work. There is no re-sit option for public examinations. Interviewees also highlighted challenges relating to subject choice, university eligibility requirements, and credit accumulation, with examples of Māori and Pacific students missing university entry by small credit margins.

Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Equity

Concerns were raised about tendencies to “teach to” rather than “for” the test, with anecdotal reference to schools commencing SBA early in the school year before substantial teaching and learning has occurred. This was described as symptomatic of assessment-driven teaching. At the same time, interviewees provided examples of integrated practice where SBA’s formative potential is realised, such as in language classes where multiple ability levels are accommodated and students are invited to submit classwork aligned to standards when criteria are met.

Interviewees noted, albeit as a generalisation, that students in more socio-economically advantaged schools tend to favour public examinations, while those in less advantaged schools favour SBA. NCEA certificates record credits from both internal and external assessments without distinction, though students completing combinations of

assessments at consistently high levels may receive Merit or Excellence Endorsements recognising strong performance across a subject or qualification. Interviewees suggested that some universities may implicitly attribute greater value to external credits amid concerns about the level of teacher support provided in SBA, although this was presented as a perception rather than a formal admissions policy. Such support may be viewed positively as “closing the gap” feedback or critically in comparison to unseen high-stakes examinations, which some regard as fairer.

Teacher Considerations

Interviewees acknowledged that moderation and SBA implementation increase workload, particularly as full-time teachers undertake moderation roles. Formal professional development is provided for moderators and when standards change. Participation in communities of practice, national professional bodies, and subject groups was highlighted as enhancing teacher assessment literacy through sustained teacher learning, though external input was considered important for quality assurance.

Summary

Overall, interviewees characterised New Zealand’s standards-based model as offering significant flexibility and choice, while simultaneously generating concerns about curriculum fragmentation, workload, consistency in judgement, and equity of outcomes. While SBA is embedded and valued for its authenticity and formative potential, ongoing review reflects continuing tension between autonomy, accountability, public confidence, and the integrity of national standards.

Ontario: Nature and Historical Development of SBA

Interviewees explained that in Ontario the Ministry of Education sets curriculum and assessment policy, while local management of schools is devolved to school boards, teachers, and parents. Reference was made early in interviews to *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) as the foundational policy document guiding assessment and evaluation. Within this document, teacher professionalism is described as informed by professional knowledge of curriculum expectations, context, evidence of learning, instruction, and assessment methods, and criteria and standards indicating success. Teacher judgement is conceptualised as a purposeful and systematic thinking process evolving through reflection and self-correction. Consistent with this framing, interviewees highlighted the evident level of trust placed in teachers’ professional judgements in relation to SBA. Teachers’ assessment competence and literacy were described as assumed, and reliance on professional judgement for high-stakes accreditation was characterised as the status quo.

Design and Organisation of SBA

Assessment at second level incorporates both province-wide standardised testing and teacher-led SBA. Students sit Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests in Grade 9 (numeracy) and Grade 10 (literacy: Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test [OSSLT]), the latter being a requirement for award of the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). These standardised assessments operate alongside students' regular subject-based courses and assessments, rather than replacing traditional subject certification requirements. Interviews indicated that EQAO testing performs important monitoring functions by tracking aggregate achievement year-on-year. However, controversy surrounds the tests. Some stakeholders question their value, particularly for students from marginalised communities, arguing that resources might be better directed elsewhere. Concerns were expressed about digitalisation, potential disadvantage for low-income minority students, the predominance of multiple-choice and "drag and drop" items that do not award partial credit, and the introduction of adaptive testing limiting students' opportunity to demonstrate strengths across domains.

Teacher unions' opposition to EQAO was noted, particularly regarding the interpretation of "accountability" as judgement of classroom performance. The snapshot, summative "assessment of learning" dimension of the tests was described as controversial in a system prioritising equity, culturally responsive pedagogy, indigenous ways of learning, and student voice and choice. The delayed provision of results was viewed as limiting formative use. Ironically, teachers may allocate between 10% and 30% of the standardised numeracy test result to the overall mathematics grade awarded to students.

In contrast, there was little professional contention regarding the OSSD, even though student results are based entirely on teachers' professional judgements. SBA contribute 70% of the overall grade, with 30% awarded at the end of a course; in all cases, assessment is undertaken by the teacher. While some might view the absence of a provincial moderation system as unusual, interviewees suggested that standardised test results may offer a useful point of comparison. Guidance counsellors and school success educators track students' progress towards accumulating the credits required for graduation.

In making judgements in upper secondary, teachers are guided by the Provincial Achievement Chart outlining discipline-specific performance standards. Teachers often develop their own SBA and rubrics based on *Growing Success* and sample achievement charts, and collaboration across schools is common to promote some consistency. The achievement charts specify categories of knowledge and skills and four levels of achievement, underlining consistent characteristics of performance standards across subjects.

Moderation, Quality Assurance, and Manageability

Moderation is not mandated in Ontario secondary schools. While some teachers engage in local moderation, usually through informal conversations, there is no external component. School boards may encourage moderation, but it remains voluntary. Interviewees indicated greater resistance to moderation among secondary teachers than elementary teachers. Although school boards may determine weighting of SBA, teachers retain control over the nature and timing of assessments, and decisions are highly localised and individual to school boards.

Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Equity

Interviewees described traditional streaming into applied and academic pathways, with movement more common from academic to applied streams. Concerns were raised regarding bias in advising and disproportionate discrimination based on race, ethnicity, English as an Additional Language and special educational needs. De-streaming has begun in Grade 9 mathematics and extended to English and Geography, with plans to extend further, in order to afford students greater opportunity to determine appropriate courses of study. Streaming was described as negatively affecting life opportunities for black, indigenous, and Latino students.

University enrolment is contingent on achievement of the OSSD, with universities reviewing students' top six Grade 12 courses (university or "m" level) to determine Grade Point Averages (GPA) for entry to their degree programmes. Colleges, which generally provide applied, career-focused diplomas and certificate programmes, consider achievement in Grades 11 and 12. In all cases, grades are determined by teachers. Because responsibility for post-secondary education in Canada lies with the provinces and territories rather than the federal government, GPA are calculated and awarded in accordance with the approved academic and transcript policies operating within provincial legislative frameworks.

Teacher Considerations

Despite resistance to EQAO in some quarters, interviewees suggested that its establishment and ongoing work have opened and sustained conversations about assessment and evaluation both locally and provincially. It was noted that teachers who participate in provincial-level professional development associated with EQAO marking may disseminate expertise locally. Further, the development of assessments aligned with the curriculum and publication of results were described as contributing to ongoing dialogue about assessment and evaluation in Ontario.

Summary

Interviewees portrayed Ontario as a jurisdiction characterised by strong trust in teacher professional judgement and highly localised control of SBA, operating

alongside province-wide standardised testing that performs monitoring functions but remains contested. While moderation is voluntary and decisions about assessment are largely devolved, the system is shaped by ongoing debates about equity, streaming, accountability, and the balance between professional autonomy and standardised oversight.

Queensland: Nature and Historical Development of SBA

Interviewees explained that Queensland has undergone significant educational reform, resulting in the introduction, for the first time in 50 years of a high-stakes external terminal examination contributing to the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). While Internal Assessment (IA), previously known as SBA, is not new in Queensland, reviews of the pre-2019 system identified room for improvement. The current model combines three school-based IAs with an external assessment component administered by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA). Central to this reform is unprecedented attention to developing teachers' assessment literacy.

Design and Organisation of SBA

Interviewees described how, following agreement on the number and weighting of QCE assessment components, the QCAA engaged teachers in designing, developing, administering, and marking the three IAs. Conversations during curriculum redesign focused on identifying knowledge, skills, and competences to be assessed and ensuring that IAs were authentic to subjects and assessed elements not achievable through external examinations, such as collaborative problem solving. IAs were intentionally highly specified to prevent them becoming "external assessments by proxy" and to avoid teaching to the test.

A comprehensive professional development programme prepared teachers to participate in a robust state-wide moderation system. Teachers were described as linchpins in the IA process and central to the reform's success, requiring sustained professional learning and resources. Materials available via the QCAA portal include guides to assessment, examples of IA components, and sample student responses. Teachers must review and update IAs annually and submit them through the "Endorsement Application", adhering to syllabus parameters and agreed protocols. External moderation determines whether assessments are endorsed for use. Interviewees stressed that streamlined processes are essential to ensure comparability and equity across the State.

Submission involves an editor (teacher), approver (e.g., Head of Department), and submitter (delegated by the principal). Flexibility is required to reflect Queensland's diversity, but this must be balanced with deep understanding of assessment principles to ensure fairness. QCAA guidance on item difficulty and discrimination supports

teacher learning. Over time, teachers internalise feedback and develop banks of endorsed assessments. However, strong opposition was voiced to routine reuse of banked tasks not aligned with current teaching, emphasising that “context matters”. Adjustments are required annually, and repeated use of “complex unfamiliar” items is discouraged. At the same time, teacher workload concerns have prompted exploration of AI to digitise assessments and reduce marking demands.

Moderation, Quality Assurance, and Manageability

Following marking using instrument-specific marking guides and analytic rubrics, teachers submit work for confirmation to the QCAA. Percentages are used to communicate achievement. Twice annually, state-wide endorsement meetings bring together trained teachers to quality assure large samples of student work. Previously, teachers selected samples, which sometimes led to “gamesmanship”; now, QCAA selects extensive samples to ensure issues such as plagiarism or inappropriate practices are not missed.

Equity and fairness in teacher judgements were described as driving moderation. The shift from the term SBA to IA was intended to signal robustness and impartiality. Feedback from endorsement events is captured in “subject reports” to consolidate learning. Large-scale moderation meetings involve thousands of trained teachers, with expertise cascading to local schools and informing professional assessment practices. Grade averages for IAs and external assessments are reportedly similar when assessing comparable knowledge and skills, though negative skews may occur in performance assessments where preparation is intensive. QCAA monitors distributions and designs external components to distinguish levels of performance. Introduction of external examinations has increased QCAA workload and created year-round pressure points. Perceived ease of achieving high grades in certain subjects has influenced subject selection and increased demand for endorsement and moderation.

Implications for Teaching, Learning, and Equity

Interviewees offered differing perspectives on stress and workload. Under the previous system, students submitted multiple portfolio pieces and sat the Queensland Core Skills (QCS) test. With the cessation of QCS in 2019, students face fewer assessment requirements. However, the former principle of “fullest and latest” and selective updating, which emphasised continuous improvement, has been replaced by a focus on measurement, analytic rubrics, and percentage marks. Some interviewees suggested this has generated a preoccupation with scores and increased performance pressure. Teachers reported continued over-assessment to avoid missing evidence, and preparation for external examinations beginning in Year 11 was said to create a backwash effect, eroding teaching time.

Concerns were expressed about confirmation processes and possible grade

adjustments, with school reviews available where reductions are contested. While the system may have enhanced declarative knowledge about validity and equity, some felt teacher professionalism and agency are less visible in a more regulated and mechanised environment. Nonetheless, Queensland's long tradition of IA has fostered deep professional conversations and a shared language about student assessment, described as critical to sustaining teacher agency and adaptability in the face of reform.

Teacher Considerations

Trust in teacher professional judgement and commitment to assessment literacy underpin the system. Interviewees were unequivocal that teachers must be assessment literate. Significant funding supported face-to-face professional development when the QCE was introduced, later delivered online during Covid-19 without interruption. Ongoing funding supports teachers employed by the QCAA in moderation roles. A suite of seven assessment literacy modules is freely available to registered teachers, focusing on quality assessment principles, accessible IA design, and reliable data to inform valid decisions. Teachers may apply for designated assessor roles linked to endorsement, confirmation, external assessment writing, and marking, with additional training provided.

Summary

Interviewees portrayed Queensland's IA model as a highly specified, equity-driven system combining internal and external assessment, underpinned by significant investment in teacher assessment literacy and structured moderation. While reform has strengthened comparability and professional learning, tensions remain regarding workload, regulation, performance pressure, and the balance between measurement and continuous improvement.

Discussion and Conclusion

Many efforts at public examination reform over the years that were directed at reducing the burden on students, while improving the validity of assessments, have involved proposals regarding SBA (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019, p. 254).

In the social sciences, there are no simple answers, even when, as Kellaghan and Greaney (2019) observe, the questions posed are neither entirely new nor novel. Examination of the jurisdictions case-studied for this research (Hong Kong, New Zealand, Ontario, and Queensland) reveals a spectrum of assessment purposes and practices operating at the end of upper secondary education. Unlike Ireland, all incorporate SBA as a substantial component of high-stakes certification. With the possible exception of Hong Kong, teacher assessment of their own students appears

to enjoy broad support among students, parents, and teachers.

Taken together, the cases illustrate varied configurations of school-based and external assessment: from high-trust, devolved professional judgement (Ontario), to flexibility within national standards (New Zealand), to tightly regulated moderation systems designed to secure comparability (Queensland), and to SBA embedded within an enduring examination culture (Hong Kong). Across all four, common themes include workload, equity, consistency of judgement, public confidence, and the challenge of realising formative potential where certification stakes remain high. Nonetheless, no system emerges as unproblematic or wholly satisfactory. Within each jurisdiction, interviewees' perceptions of what is and is not working well vary considerably. These differences appear to reflect individuals' professional experiences, preferences and allegiances to their employing organisations, and associated professional bodies.

The limitations of the research that informed this paper notwithstanding, several findings were identified as having particular relevance for the redevelopment of SC education in Ireland. In considering them, it is important to recall that these findings are not derived from comprehensive jurisdiction-level research; rather, they reflect the perceptions of a modest number of purposively selected stakeholders working in four distinct contexts whose accounts were explicated by fact files and published documentation.

First, across the jurisdictions examined, the proportion of marks allocated to SBA appears closely related to its wider systemic impact. In New Zealand, for example, students may accumulate sufficient credits to secure an NCEA qualification without sitting end-of-year public examinations, while in Ontario university entry decisions are based primarily on teacher-awarded course grades. In Queensland, extensive endorsement and moderation structures have evolved to support confidence in high-stakes IA components while, in Hong Kong, SBA ranges from 50% in Visual Arts to 0% in Mathematics. Against this backdrop, the decision announced in March 2022 (DE, 2022) to allocate 40% of marks to internal, teacher-based SBA components, moderated externally by the SEC, is notable. The relative ease or difficulty of proposed SBA components, their likely mark distributions, and the extent to which they will measure underlying constructs remain unknown. These factors are likely to influence grade distributions (Millar & Lysaght, 2026), potentially increasing average marks and clustering. Although the precise effects cannot be predicted in advance, it is clear that the greater the contribution of SBA to overall marks, the greater its systemic impact – irrespective of whether additional components are internally or externally marked.

Second, experiences reported in Hong Kong and New Zealand suggest that whether the introduction of SBA will succeed in spreading “the assessment load for students” and maintaining “positive student wellbeing” (DE, 2022) remains uncertain. While reducing the number or nature of assessments may result in fewer tasks and greater internal staggering, all SBA components are, by design, high stakes. It does not

therefore follow that students will experience reduced pressure or stress. Moreover, assessing students' perceptions of wellbeing is complicated by the fact that, outside exceptional circumstances, they have experienced only one assessment system.

Third, evidence from Hong Kong, Queensland, and Ontario suggests that teachers play a decisive role in determining whether policy reform is implemented as intended. Their response to increased involvement in SBA will likely depend on several interrelated factors: whether they feel adequately prepared to undertake the work competently and withstand public scrutiny in terms of fairness, reliability, and validity; whether they identify with the roles envisaged for them; and whether they judge that their views have been appropriately sought and considered.

Fourth, advances in AI and content-generating software such as ChatGPT have overtaken the reform process. Although GenAI emerged only towards the end of the data collection period for this study (early 2023), concerns relating to authenticity and academic integrity were already evident in some jurisdictions, particularly Hong Kong, where interviewees expressed concern regarding essay-based assessments and uneven confidence in professional integrity across schools. More recent developments in Ireland suggest that these concerns are likely to intensify. In 2025, for example, the SEC commissioned research examining the implications of GenAI for teacher-based and externally administered assessment within SC redevelopment. This has clear implications for the design of AAC and reinforces the need to ensure that SBA is reliable, fair, and complementary to traditional paper-and-pencil examinations in the knowledge, skills, and competences assessed. Questions relating to verification processes, supervised components, authenticity of student work, validity of inferences, and the extent to which AI may appropriately support or undermine AAC are therefore likely to become increasingly significant in the immediate redevelopment of SC assessment in Ireland.

Fifth, decisions regarding external moderation must balance system-wide efficiency with teacher agency. Developments in Queensland, particularly endorsement and confirmation processes, warrant further exploration in this regard.

Taken together, these findings underscore two important considerations: first, that assessment reform involves cultural and systemic change as much as technical redesign; and second, that examination reform is neither context nor tradition free. Hence, while valuable lessons can be drawn from jurisdictions that combine SBA with external examinations, caution is required to avoid inappropriate policy borrowing. Across the jurisdictions examined, the findings suggest that resistance to SBA cannot be reduced simply to questions of teacher capacity or assessment literacy. Rather, interviewees' accounts point to an interaction between professional confidence, public trust, governance arrangements, workload, and the consequences of linking internal assessment directly to high-stakes certification. Teachers appeared more willing to engage in SBA where expectations, moderation arrangements, and professional

roles were clearly defined and publicly legitimised. Conversely, concerns emerged where teachers perceived heightened exposure to public scrutiny, intensified workload, threats to professional autonomy, or uncertainty regarding the fairness and comparability of judgements. In the Irish context, these issues may carry particular significance given the legacy of the 2020 calculated grades process and its reported impact on teachers' trust in the system and perceptions of their role in high-stakes assessment (Lysaght, 2023). Considerable learning can nevertheless be derived from international experience across the continuum between exclusive reliance on SBA and high-stakes public examinations. For Ireland, the challenge lies in identifying what is relevant, building judiciously on established practice elsewhere, and allowing sufficient time to secure collective endorsement and support for the reforms ultimately adopted. In practical terms, the immediate priority is likely to involve building public and professional confidence in AAC through gradual implementation, clear definition of teachers' roles, sustained investment in assessment literacy, and transparent moderation arrangements before further expanding the scale or stakes of school-based components.

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