

# IMPROVING THE VCAA FOR VICTORIAN STUDENTS

Submission to the Independent Review on the Victorian Curriculum and  
Assessment Authority

June 2025

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body and leading advocate representing school-aged students in Victoria. We were created by students to be a voice for all primary and secondary school students at the highest levels of decision making in Victorian education. Our vision is an education system that is student-led, student driven and student-focused.



VicSRC respectfully acknowledges and recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the custodians of this land. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria and across the wider continent.

# INTRODUCTION

## Background

Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Independent Review on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA).

As the peak body for primary and secondary school-aged students in Victoria, VicSRC believes all students deserve the opportunity to engage in education that is meaningful, flexible and relevant to their needs. This ensures the best possible outcomes for students and the broader community.

This submission draws on and amplifies the lived experience of Victorian students through VicSRC's existing research including engagements with our Senior Secondary Pathways Student Advisory Panel. By centring their voices in this submission, VicSRC hopes to highlight the unique perspective students bring to education reform and emphasise the value of embedding student-led practices in policy-making processes.

The submission aims to focus on how the VCAA can more effectively deliver its critical functions for students. The submission provides VicSRC's views and recommendations relating to student voice, the ATAR, assessments and external communications.

## Recommendations

The VCAA must:

1. Establish a central and permanent student voice mechanism within its governance structures. Students bring valuable insight and lived experience into how curriculum and assessment are experienced in real time. Our involvement must be consistent, supported, and influential, not symbolic or sporadic.
2. Commit to reforms of the senior secondary certificates to ensure all pathways are equally valued and accessible, with flexibility to recognise students' diverse strengths and ambitions. Students have been clear that the current VCE model does not reflect their diverse strengths or future pathways, instead reinforcing outdated hierarchies that place academic pathways above vocational ones, which can lead to stigma, disengagement and inequality.
3. Commit to breaking the over-reliance on traditional examinations and high-stakes testing, including additional resources to deliver (or support the delivery of) effective and far-reaching professional learning to support teachers with modern, effective, engaging summative and formative assessment methods.
4. Improve external communications to ensure it is clear, timely, and co-designed with students to ensure it is accessible through mediums that students prefer to engage with information. Families also need accurate and accessible information to support students effectively.
5. Communicate with care, transparency and accountability towards students when errors occur, recognising the stress these issues cause and responding in ways that prioritise students' mental health and wellbeing.

## Student voice in governance and decision-making

Across all areas of VicSRC's work, it is clear that Victorian students want to be active collaborators in shaping reforms across all areas of education, including curriculum, assessments and pathways (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.7). As the largest stakeholder of education, students have thoughtful and valuable expertise to share. Bringing student voice into governance and decision-making leads to policy and organisational operations that are effective (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.13). When executed well, student voice consultative and governance bodies are highly successful, as demonstrated by the Department of Education's Senior Secondary Reform Student Advisory Panel, and VicSRC's own governance structure.

### Student voice in action for education reform

VicSRC's unique governance structure clearly demonstrates the effectiveness and practicality of embedding students in governance roles. Along with the Board of Trustees, VicSRC's Student Executive Advisory Committee advises on the organisation's strategic direction and advocacy. This ensures that VicSRC is student-led throughout all areas of its decision-making (VicSRC 2024 Policy Platform, p.4). By operating this governance structure, VicSRC has been successful in advocating for the issues students care about most, from fostering inclusivity to mandating student roles on all government school councils.

VicSRC is also partnering with the Department of Education and the VCAA to bring student voice into senior secondary education reform, through a panel of 14 students from diverse educational pathways and school backgrounds. The Senior Secondary Pathways Student Advisory Panel is clear evidence of the value and feasibility of such a mechanism. The panel has demonstrably improved both the relevance and credibility of reforms in this area, with resoundingly positive feedback from the department's Senior Secondary Pathways Reform Taskforce.

Throughout 2024 and into 2025, the panel has provided insightful, nuanced and actionable feedback on reform areas, from curriculum and vocational education stigma to communications (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 1; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 2; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4). Panellists have contributed to Vocational Education and Training Industry Area names, Senior Secondary Awards, VCAA communications and more (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 1; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 2; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4). The VCAA now has the opportunity to build on the success of this panel by establishing a central and permanent student voice mechanism within its governance and decision-making processes. Among other areas, student voice should be embedded in decision-making around curriculum development and assessment. Given the relationship between school stress and mental health (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.17), students should have a role in designing the structure and method of testing and assessments, to maintain their wellbeing while evaluating their learning. As part of its operation, this mechanism should commit to outcomes centred around meaningful student voice practice and continuous improvement.

**Recommendation 1:** *The VCAA must establish a central and permanent student voice mechanism within its governance structures. Students bring valuable insight and lived experience into how curriculum and assessment are experienced in real time. Student involvement must be consistent, supported and influential, not symbolic or sporadic.*

## Assessment and examinations

While assessment may be an important aspect of education, students consistently express frustration with high stakes testing and traditional assessments that do not meet diverse learning needs. Furthermore, these forms of assessment promote anxiety and are not accurate reflections of students' learning and progress. In response to this, students have called for tailored, formative assessments that are progress-focused and provide actionable feedback. Students have also shared

issues around accessibility and equity during exam periods, as well as a need to invest more in teacher training.

### **High-stakes testing does not serve students' learning**

Students have repeatedly made connections between academic stress and high stakes, traditional testing (VicSRC 2023 Congress Report, p.10; VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.17). Assessments through infrequent, timed, summative exams are consistently noted as a source of anxiety and frustration. This is a critical priority, as academic pressure was the top concern in a national study of over 4,000 students in 2024, where 50% felt “very stressed” and over 40% said it seriously harmed their mental health (Bartholomew et al. 2024, p. 1439).

Students engaged with VicSRC note that exam outcomes often reflect the students' circumstances at the time, such as stress and illness, rather than their learning capabilities (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 1, p.4). Beyond the importance of maintaining students' wellbeing to facilitate learning, students have also expressed issues with the rigidity of traditional assessments. Students have shared that traditional assessment forms do not suit diverse learning needs or reflect their actual growth (VicSRC 2023 Congress Report, p.10; VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.17). This also contributes to students' dissatisfaction with the ATAR system, which they describe as inequitable, non-holistic and a driver of competition and anxiety (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.18).

These issues are heightened for students who have concerns around equity and accessibility during exam periods, and is further worsened when errors occur. Students with accessibility needs expressed that they felt especially disadvantaged during the 2024 VCE exam errors (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4, p.2)

### **Students need further investment in innovative assessment models**

Given the clear issues with current assessment models, students have called for assessments that truly reflect their growth and capabilities (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 1, p.2) Rather than being single test events, tailored and formative assessments are necessary. Students see the need for assessment that is progress-focused and strengths-based, with feedback that is actionable (VicSRC 2023 Congress Report, p.11). Research is currently being progressed nationally around alternative assessment models. The University of Melbourne's “New Metrics for Success” pilot is currently working in 40 schools to assess emotional intelligence, active citizenship, and other holistic skills, demonstrating a viable alternative (University of Melbourne 2025).

Students have also highlighted the vital role teachers play in supporting alternative assessment models. As teachers are currently under-resourced to trial new models, students have spoken to the need for additional investment in teacher training and support (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.19).

**Recommendation 2:** *The VCAA must commit to reforms of the senior secondary certificates to ensure all pathways are equally valued and accessible, with flexibility to recognise students' diverse strengths and ambitions. Students have been clear that the current VCE model does not reflect their diverse strengths or future pathways, instead reinforcing outdated hierarchies that place academic pathways above vocational ones, which can lead to stigma, disengagement and inequality.*

**Recommendation 3:** *The VCAA must commit to breaking the over-reliance on traditional examinations and high-stakes testing, including additional resources to deliver (or support the delivery of) effective and far-reaching professional learning to support teachers with modern, effective, engaging summative and formative assessment methods.*

## **Student-focused communications**

External communications from the VCAA could be a highly valuable resource for students. However, students have shared that they are currently unsure about where to find official information, how to understand it and how to assess its reliability. This is of particular importance when errors occur relating to exams and assessments, as misinformation can quickly spread. Students expressed the

need for more accessible and responsive communications from the VCAA, and are eager to be partners in co-creating these communications.

### **Current communications from the VCAA are not accessible for students**

Students engaged with VicSRC repeatedly reported a lack of awareness and information about assessments and academic pathways from the VCAA. While this information may be available online through the VCAA website and social media page, students note that these sources of information are not currently accessible or engaging for them. This ineffective communication means that students remain without the intended guidance (VicSRC 2023 Congress Report, p.11; VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.18). VicSRC has heard directly from students about the inaccessibility of the VCAA's current website (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 3, p.3), which has impacted levels of trust as both students and carers are unsure about where to find reliable, official information and how to interpret it. During a period of major senior secondary reform, this is of particular importance. It is critical for the VCAA to communicate clearly with students, especially as students report a lack of guidance from schools around vocational pathways and senior secondary reform, which adds to their stress and feelings of being unsupported (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.17; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 2, p.2; VicSRC 2024, VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 3, p.2; VicSRC 2025 Meeting Analysis Term 1, p.2). Issues with communications also become highly apparent when errors occur around students' exams. Following the issues with VCE exams in 2024, students shared that their primary source of distress was around a lack of communication from the VCAA while misinformation was circulating.

### **Students need accessible and student-led communications**

Students have made it clear that the VCAA must reimagine the way it communicates with students. Noting the importance of clear and accessible communication from the VCAA, students proposed delivering more student-led communications via digital media and social platforms (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 3, p.3). It is necessary for the VCAA to be active on these platforms as misinformation spreads rapidly in digital media.

One panellist from the Senior Secondary Student Advisory Committee shared that they believe it is best to contact students through social media and news channels when an exam error occurs, to *"tackle [misinformation] from the source"*.

To ensure digital communications are engaging, students suggested that the VCAA invest in more student-led communications utilising popular trends. Students shared that these communications should be responsive and aligned to the school calendar to remain relevant. Importantly, students are eager to be involved in designing communications that resonate and inform platforms (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 3, p.3).

Students also felt strongly that the VCAA website should be updated for accessibility and were pleased to provide input towards early discussions regarding website updates (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 3, p.3).

To support this, students have recommended the establishment of a student decision-making or governing body specifically focused on communications, similar to advisory panels used elsewhere in education. This would allow students to co-design digital content, advise on accessibility improvements and ensure that official information from VCAA meets the needs of the diverse student community. Embedding student voice into communications strategy is a practical step to ensure VCAA content is accurate, timely and meaningful for students and their families.

### **Responding to errors with transparency, accountability and care**

Communication breakdowns during times of error or disruption can have serious impacts on students' mental health and wellbeing, especially during already stressful periods like VCE exams. Students have consistently highlighted that academic pressure significantly affects their wellbeing,

and this is often worsened when clear, timely communication is lacking (VicSRC 2024 Congress Report, p.17; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 1 p.8; VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4, p.2).

Following errors with the 2024 VCE exams, students described feeling confused, anxious and unsupported as misinformation spread and schools failed to provide accurate updates. This was especially distressing for students with accessibility needs, who felt further disadvantaged by the situation (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4, p.2).

These reflections underscore the need for the VCAA to recognise the mental health implications of miscommunication during critical academic periods. Students have emphasised that VCAA's response to such incidents must be grounded in care, transparency and accountability (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4, p.4). Communications during these moments must do more than relay information, they must acknowledge the emotional impact on students, provide honest explanations in language that makes sense to students, and offer reassurance. Students have called for communications to be responsive, empathetic, accessible and delivered through trusted, student-informed digital platforms (VicSRC 2024 Meeting Analysis Term 4, p.4).

Ultimately, what students are asking for is to be treated with dignity, especially when disruptions occur. Students want to feel seen and supported. Doing so would rebuild trust but model the care-centred communication students expect and deserve.

**Recommendation 4:** *The VCAA needs to improve external communications to ensure it is clear, timely, and co-designed with students to ensure it is accessible through mediums that students prefer to engage with information. Families also need accurate and accessible information to support students effectively.*

**Recommendation 5:** *The VCAA must communicate with care, transparency and accountability towards students when errors occur, recognising the stress these issues cause and responding in ways that prioritise students' mental health and wellbeing.*

# REFERENCES

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