Exams tested by Covid-19: An opportunity to rethink standardized senior secondary examinations

Rebecca Cairns[1]

Abstract The global Covid-19 pandemic is testing the responsiveness of school systems. Extensive discourse about disruptions to the standardized examinations students take in their final year of secondary school is symbolic of their high-stakes status worldwide. The interruptions provide an opportune moment to question the efficacy of exams as a measurement of achievement. To explore these issues, this article shares some on-the-ground illustrations from Australian teachers about how high-stakes exams shape their enactment of senior secondary history curriculum. The presence of a *discourse of exam alignment*, which places a disproportionate emphasis on preparing students for exams, has implications for teachers' curricular practices and wider equity issues. These issues resonate in other international settings, especially during the pandemic. The severity of the Covid-19 economic downturn means it is more important than ever to investigate the relationship between curricular practices and socio-economic structures, to ensure examinations do not compound educational disadvantage.

Keywords High-stakes examinations: standardized examinations · Curriculum enactment · Senior secondary education · Covid-19

School systems worldwide have cancelled or postponed senior secondary school examinations in the wake of the social distancing and lockdowns necessitated by the global Covid-19 pandemic. Headlines capture the sense of uncertainty: *Coronavirus: Stress over university entrance exams has skyrocketed amid Hong Kong school closures* (Ng 2020); *Covid-19 disruption to school year sparks call to axe exams* (Heaney 2020); *Scotland's exam result crisis: assessment and justice in a time of Covid-19* (McArthur 2020); and *Covid-19 has thrown year 12 students' lives into chaos* (Roberts 2020). As schools and education policy-makers scramble to respond, students in their final year of school are not only apprehensive

✉ Rebecca Cairns
r.cairns@deakin.edu.au

1   Deakin University, Pigdons Road, Waurn Ponds, Geelong, VIC 3220, Australia

about 2020, but about how the pandemic will impact their future education, employment, and quality of life.

The World Bank (2020) identified three common responses to high-stakes school exams around the world during Covid-19. First, examinations are cancelled, as was the case with General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams in Britain. Second, examinations are postponed, as with the delayed Diploma of Secondary Education exams in Hong Kong. Third, examinations continue to take place in a modified format, as with the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC) exams, which will be delivered using online formats in the Caribbean. Given this variance, the World Bank (2020) asked which approach was best, but we might instead ask whether exams are the right approach in the first place. The suspension of schooling and speculation about year 12 exams gives us pause. Why do we persist with a centuries-old model of assessment? Who benefits from these measures of achievement and who does not? What alternative assessments might be deployed? Would teachers make different choices about content and pedagogy without exams, and what benefits might those choices bring? What are the benefits of restoring the status of teachers' professional judgement through school-based assessment? And more fundamentally, what does the clash between exam-driven schooling and Covid-19 teach us about the purpose of education?

The global anxiety around the potential disruption of exam regimes underscores their inflexibility as a mode of assessment and problematizes their assumed indispensability. Contemplating how to recalibrate established curricular habits and assessment traditions in the post-Covid-19 paradigm provides us with an opportunity to rethink just how essential standardized senior school exams are as a measurement of senior secondary achievement. Although I cannot answer all of the questions listed above in this article, I explore several relevant issues by examining the relationship between high-stakes examinations and the enactment of curriculum. I illuminate this relationship by sharing some on-the-ground illustrations from teachers about how exams shape schooling and their work, in the context of senior secondary History classes in the state of Victoria, Australia. The issues raised resonate with broader concerns in other international jurisdictions. These illustrations highlight that teachers' curricular practices have become so skewed by the demands of accountability and performativity that a discourse of exam alignment pervades their teaching. This has implications for schoolwide assessment, exam anxiety, the positioning of the teaching profession, and broader equity issues. Covid-19 unsettles the status quo of high-stakes examinations and reanimates existing debates concerning their adverse effects. I argue that, while the alignment of assessment is an important principle, the overly rigid alignment of high-stakes assessment with curriculum engenders curricula and curricular practices that lack the responsiveness required to navigate globalized education systems and changeable times.

In this article, I will first situate the issue by looking at the increasing influence high-stakes testing has on education policy globally, before setting the scene in Australia. In the next section, I will outline the study's use of an enactment framework and discourse analysis. In the analysis section, I will demonstrate how the discourse of exam alignment operates and analyze its effects on the enactment of history curriculum, as well as its broader implications in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. By examining the relationship between standardized examinations and curriculum enactment, I attempt to develop more complex understandings of the interdiscursive intersection of policy and practice, for the purpose of moving towards more inclusive and equitable outcomes and learning experiences for young people in their final years of schooling.

A high-stakes assessment world

High-stakes assessment and standardized tests are prominent features of globally competitive educational systems. For the purposes of this article, I will employ UNESCO's (2020b, para. 1) definition of high-stake assessment:

> Assessments with important consequences for test takers, on the basis of their performance. Passing has important benefits, such as progressing to a higher grade, a high school diploma, a scholarship, entrance into the labor market or getting a license to practice a profession. Failing also has consequences, such as being forced to take remedial classes or not being able to practice a profession.

According to UNESCO (2020d), a standardized test is a "test in which items/tasks or questions, administration conditions, editing, scoring and interpretation of results are applied in a consistent and pre-determined manner for all test-takers". Around the world, examinations at the end of secondary schooling are commonly used to measure academic attainment for the purpose of certification, achieving subject scores, or establishing rankings for university entrance.

In their report published by the World Bank, *Public Examinations Examined*, Kellaghan and Greaney (2020) acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of high-stakes examinations. Historically, exams have been associated with equity and meritocracy, a means of opening up education to those who might have been excluded by discriminatory traditions. They also provide a relatively impartial means of assessment by providing student anonymity, which transcends student-teacher relationships, political and family influence, or socio-economic background (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020). On the other hand, groups such as Indigenous students and those lacking socio-economic resources have been marginalized by exam systems that may function to reproduce social structures. Exams are said to be of benefit for focusing teachers and students on key aspects of curriculum, but due to the artificial conditions and time constraints, they do not actually measure the diverse skills that curricula seek to develop (Kellaghan and Greaney 2020). Notwithstanding the potential advantages examinations might provide within specific contexts, the potentially damaging effects of comparative international testing (e.g., PISA) and national and state-based standardized testing on curriculum, pedagogy, and student and teacher well-being is well documented (e.g., Kelly 2019; Lingard et al. 2016; OECD 2017; Stobart 2008; Volante 2017).

Critiques of the assessment measures "through which central policymakers seek to steer local practice through various demands and structures of accountability" (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, p. 94) inform the critical approach taken in this article. Pressure on teachers and students to constantly improve normalizes a discourse of "teaching to the test". UNESCO Bangkok (2015) pointed to a growing culture of testing in the Asia-Pacific region and raised concerns about the disproportionate focus placed on tests and exams (at the expense of areas of the curriculum that are not tested), the oversimplification of teaching and learning, and the impact on the broader purposes of education. In Australia, calls from policymakers to learn from and emulate high-performing systems (see Zhang 2015) have been countered by warnings about the unintended consequences of testing, including the power they have over "what we learn and how we learn" (Klenowski 2012, p. 178). As Au (2011, p. 30) argued, "such testing is promoting the standardization of teaching that both disempowers and deskills teachers". Teachers and professional teaching bodies have largely been resistant to these increasingly constrictive regimes because they are perceived to have a

negative impact and reductive effect on curriculum and pedagogy, as well as on teacher professionalism (Rizvi and Lingard 2010). Under such conditions, the sudden interruption to exams worldwide creates further stress for teachers and students, highlighting the inflexibility of this mode of assessment.

The emphasis placed on performance contributes to a growing disparity between students and schools in terms of the socioeconomic resources needed to succeed in this performative paradigm. In the United States, students take the standardized SAT test for college entrance but in many states they are also required to complete a high school exit exam. These exit exams have been praised for setting the bar high for all students, but also criticized for the potentially negative impact they have on students at risk (Judy 2020). In Britain, students undertake their A-Level exams as part of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). In the 1990s it became law for British schools to publish their results as part of national league tables, so the emphasis originally placed on an individual student's results has "hardened to a full blown accountability system" (Stobart 2008, p. 15). In China, the highly competitive *gaokao,* or National College Entrance Examination, is seen to have a direct bearing on students' futures, which places immense pressure on them and their families. Within this examination-driven system, *gaokao* results are also used to measure school performance and are closely associated with principals' career progression and school reputation (Hu 2018). Despite equal opportunity policies in China, inequalities become heightened in this exam-oriented system, especially for rural migrant children in cities (Hu 2018). Although the positioning of senior secondary examinations varies between education systems and societies across the globe, exams often act as powerful tools for leveraging socio-economic advantage. Issues of equity and access will become even more pressing as societies and economies face the economic crises triggered by Covid-19.

The research context

This study investigated the complexities shaping history curriculum policy processes in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). Victoria has the second-largest state-based education system in Australia. The Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA) is responsible for the relatively new national curriculum framework. However, similarly to other federated countries such as the United States, Canada, and India, senior secondary certification and assessment remain the responsibility of the curriculum and assessment authorities in each state or territory. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) thus publishes the syllabus document, *History: VCE Study Design* (VCAA 2015a), and is responsible for the delivery and assessment of external exams. The content of the Year 12 units is prescribed in accordance with the requirements of the external exam, whereas the Year 11 units provide teachers much greater freedom to select topics since students are not assessed by a standardized exam.

Overall, exam results contribute 50% of a student's study score, while the four school-based assessment tasks undertaken throughout the year contribute the other 50%. Unlike in the northern hemisphere, in Australia the two-hour external exam is undertaken at the end of the school year in November. The study scores for each subject/unit are used to calculate a student's overall Australian Tertiary Admission Ranking (ATAR). The ranking was designed so universities can select students for competitive university places. An ATAR of 97.00, for example, would indicate the student is ranked in the top 3% of students.

However, since 2012 the number of university places has been uncapped, thereby reducing the competition for places and increasing the number of students entering tertiary education. For this reason, the ATAR is increasingly viewed as redundant (Bexley 2017). Still, high study scores and ATARs bring prestige: in Victoria, students with top study scores have their names and schools published in newspapers. Schools are not required to publish results although many, particularly private schools, publicize high results for promotional purposes.

When the VCE was introduced in the early 1990s, it was considered quite radical because it did not include external exams or study scores. These reforms were driven by an inclusive social agenda that aimed to increase participation and open up university, offering a pathway for those outside the social and economic elite (Teese 2014). At the time, the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association applauded the new model for challenging elitism, an over-emphasis on examinations, and university control over senior secondary curriculum and assessment (Barcan 2003). However, due to the election of a conservative state government and pressure from universities, traditional exams were reinstated only a few years later. Standardization renewed the emphasis on performance in external examinations. Since then, "a regime of competition had become inescapable" (Teese 2014, p. 198), in which a much larger and more diverse cohort of students is expected to succeed (Bexley 2017).

About the study

This qualitative study combines discourse analysis and critical policy analysis. By examining the ways in which curriculum gets made through the interplay of curricular and other discursive practices, this study contributes to the development of more complex renderings of curriculum as a social practice. Instead of conceptualizing curriculum as a syllabus to be implemented, this approach moves towards "more nuanced approaches that construe curriculum making as a multi-layered series of social practices, differentiated not by institutional boundaries (government, schools, etc.), but by their effects as social practices" (Priestley and Philippou 2018, p. 156). Although critical policy analysis has conventionally been interested in education policy *other* than curriculum policy (Lingard and Ozga 2007), applying critical policy analysis as a lens for curriculum inquiry can effectively conceptualize such complexities.

In particular, Ball, Braun, and Maguire's (2012) enactment framework is employed to conceptualize the positioning of teachers in curriculum policy practices. It reframes the role of teachers as policy actors, who *enact* rather than *implement* policy in schools. An enactments approach focuses on analysing the interpretive policy work of teachers within their specific contexts and recognizes that "policy is done by and done to teachers; they are actors and subjects, subjects to and objects of policy" (Ball, Braun, and Maguire 2012, p. 3). Examining the *discursive practices* that constitute curriculum enactment illuminates the sets of practices in knowledge formation—describing what is said—and the rules that govern or explain what is possible to say (Bacchi and Bonham 2014).

As I am seeking to examine how curriculum policy is enacted, "but in ways that are limited by the possibility of discourse" (Ball et al. 2012, p. 3), I have employed Foucauldian-style discourse analysis. The approach integrates steps from Le Greco and Tracy's (2009) discourse tracing method, in order to establish the discursive regularities or unities that emerge from the interview data (Foucault 1972). The first step, *a close reading of the ordered data* (LeGreco and Tracy 2009), identified what Foucault calls *statements,* which

constitute the key discourses but reveal more about what the statements *do* than what they say. The next step involved *reading the data through the conceptual frameworks and other literature* (Le Greco and Tracy 2009), which is demonstrated in this article by drawing on an enactment framework and other research. This resulted in the identification of four key discourses, including the discourse of exam alignment.

The policy actors interviewed included VCE History teachers—referred to here by pseudonyms—and representatives from key stakeholder organizations. Although the teachers are the focus in this article, I have also integrated data from interviews with one representative from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and one from the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV). The 15 VCE History teacher participants were selected using maximum variation sampling to ensure a range of voices was included from government, Catholic, and independent sectors. In Australia, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage value (ICSEA value) is the scale used to establish the level of a school's educational advantage, based on students' socio-economic backgrounds (ACARA 2014). Most teachers are speaking from the perspective of schools with average ICSEA values, but schools with low and very high ICSEA values were also included. Although this article touches on the issue of socio-economic dis/advantage, it does not provide statistical comparisons. Interviews were conducted in late 2015, as teachers were preparing to enact a new curriculum document in 2016. The interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes and included open-ended questions, which focused on the factors that influence teachers' curriculum planning and content selection. Overall, the study is illustrative rather than representative.

The logic of alignment

The alignment between curriculum and assessment is widely considered an important principle in a coherent education system (Ziebell, Ong, and Clarke 2017). Over the last decade, *backwards design* has become a common approach to curriculum planning among Australian educators, beginning with identifying the desired results, determining how the desired results will be assessed, and planning instruction accordingly (Wiggins and McTighe 2004). The perceived benefit of alignment is synchronicity between intent and assessment (Mercurio 2005). As "assessment is highly influential in communicating the knowledge and skills that are valued" (Ziebell et al. 2017, p. 190), it acts implicitly and explicitly on the enactment of curriculum.

The logic of assessment alignment was recognized by all of the VCE history teachers interviewed and signaled by the statements they made about the important role summative assessment has in relation to their curriculum decision-making. More specifically, the participants rationalized their content selection and pedagogical approach in accordance with the requirements of the external exam. For example, Michael explained, "everything you do is aimed at the exam, in terms of building knowledge and skill and that's clear to me and to the students, so there is that heavy focus on exam preparation". A number of participants also spoke of a whole-school approach to curriculum planning that considered alignment in terms of the sequential development of students' skills and knowledge, across year levels as they progressed towards year 12. Bryce, the manager of the Humanities curriculum in his school, said: "My strategy recently has been aligning the [Year] 7 to [Year] 11 assessment tasks with the same skill sets and concepts with the Year 12 exam".

Here the logic of alignment make sense: it is preparing students for future assessment by scaffolding skill development and taking student achievement seriously. Yet these common-sense assumptions, by which policy rhetoric tends to be guided, presume that encouraging teachers to strive for excellence is value-neutral rather than an example of how schools and teachers make themselves auditable as policy subjects (Connell 2009; Tuinamuana 2011). How has it become accepted wisdom that a student starting secondary school in 2020 should start developing the sorts of skills they need to sit for an exam in 2025? Skewing learning across all year levels towards the requirement of the final Year 12 exam illustrates how the logic of assessment alignment can become unbalanced. The changes to assessment necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic raise questions about the logic of hyper-alignment. When school systems are faced with the reality of cancelling or postponing exams, they are forced to re-evaluate or acknowledge what skills and knowledge are narrowly measured by exams. For example, when exams in Scotland were cancelled earlier in 2020, the Scottish Qualification Agency asked teachers to develop a much broader sense of student learning using a range of sources, which was seen to bring benefits that were not apparent through traditional exams (McArthur 2020). The following sections will consider how this well-intentioned discourse of alignment has morphed into a somewhat more sinister discourse of exam alignment.

A results-driven business

Across the data, the external exam was envisaged as a prepotent feature of VCE history curriculum, for both students and teachers. Its constrictive power was described by Callum: "you have got that straitjacket effect – the exam at the end of the year and one-size-fits all". Callum continued, "we really do let the exam tail wag the curriculum dog as it were". Pinar (2019, p. 107) used a similar metaphor: "the curriculum has become the tail on the dog that is standardized testing". Both quotes underscore the disproportionate emphasis placed on standardized assessment, at the expense of teacher agency and more holistic renderings of curriculum and assessment.

The participants were cognizant of the pragmatic responses required of them. This is evident in their awareness of how much the exam and expectations about results influenced their capacity to be innovative with content and pedagogy. Callum described the elite grammar school where he teaches as being "a results-driven institution" and reiterated that the approach is "very heavily exam-driven". Hamish, who teaches in a government secondary college, similarly described his school as "a results-driven business" and "highly competitive". Edward explained that at his government school, chasing higher results was the main reason for changing topics. This contrasts with the established convention in most of the other schools, where teachers feel it is prudent to stick with the same topics year after year because they know how to get high study scores.

Teachers like Callum, Hamish, and Edward, whose schools are located in more affluent areas and have comparable ICSEA values, tended to emphasize the influence of results. However, this discourse is echoed in the comments of teachers from schools with high and low ICSEA values. Participants spoke about being "torn" in relation to the demands of the exam and the desire to be more creative and flexible. Martha reflected that although "you are training them to be little monkeys in the exam", she also wanted students "to have a love and passion for this thing". Penny felt that the narrowness and "stock standard" responses required of the exam do not allow students to fully express the depth of their learning or to have fun. Others described feeling inflexible with content and disappointed

that their pedagogical creativity was constrained. Words like "battle", "slog", and "race" appeared often. Figurative language was also used to emphasize the industrial model favored by Year 12. Callum lamented, "the amount that you have to get through in the time, it really feels like you are shoveling coal into the locomotive". Hamish described the process as "this big conveyor belt we are trying to track them on because the school focus this year and last year has been on improving our mean study scores". Therefore, there is little scope to deviate from the curriculum-as-planned into curriculum-as lived (Aoki 1993), in order to draw on the students' lives, or in the case of Covid-19, to use history as a lens to investigate changing contemporary circumstances.

The sort of performativity required of these teachers is not unique to Australia. The publication of similar books geared to the general public, offering critiques of the factory model of exam-driven schooling, indicates growing dissatisfaction with this paradigm in some countries (e.g., Kamenetz 2015; Robinson 2016). Changes to exam regimes due to the pandemic may have intensified the expectations on teachers to ensure student results are maintained and maximized. In Ireland, teacher-calculated grades are being used in lieu of cancelled Leaving Certificate exams. The Teachers' Union of Ireland has called for teachers to be safeguarded from parents and guardians that might overstep by seeking to influence teachers in the calculation of grades (Power and O'Brien 2020). In other parts of the world, the influence of parents as key stakeholders and the cultural embeddedness of high-stakes exams is reinforced at this time. In Uganda for example, the Director of Basic and Secondary Education, Ismael Mulindwa, explained that high-stakes exams are considered an "ultimate outcome" of the education system and noted: "We cannot do away with exams—parents believe in them, so does the wider community" (UNESCO 2020a, para. 6).

Exam washback

These VCE teachers expressed their concern about being complicit in these practices, but because student performance is viewed as a measure of their own performance, exam alignment is a discourse that is difficult to resist. The overall discursive effect of this exam-driven thinking can be described as *exam washback*. This practice occurs when expectations concerning exam performance have a disproportionate effect on pedagogical and assessment practices during the learning leading up to the exam. The effects of exam washback can be positive or negative, intentional or accidental (Spratt 2005). This statement from Hamish illustrates how an overzealous approach to exam alignment is compelled by strategic intent at his school:

> We live and die by our mean study score to the point that we have taken assessment models and rubrics and filtered them down to Year 9 to teach them those skills there. We teach essay structure in Year 9 that we teach to year twelves, so however we set it up in Year 12 we will teach them to do it, even doing your exam source responses, we do that in Year 9.

Indeed, the majority of participants referred to "mimicking" or "mirroring" the exam in school-assessed course work, in order to better prepare students for the exam. As a result, the knowledge and skills that are valued become delimited by the exam stipulations that washback into assessment in earlier years. Thus, school-based assessment is rigidly based

on exam-style questions when it could instead be providing opportunities for students to engage their historical thinking in deeper, more creative ways.

Despite the importance of scaffolding the development of skills and knowledge, exam washback means history is in danger of becoming formulaic and exam-centric. Martha, an experienced exam assessor, expressed serious concern about the "problematic" impact this practice is having: "There is now a perceived formula for how to do the exam and so teachers are paranoid about how to beat the formula". By perpetuating common beliefs about emulating the exam, teachers are expected to become exam technicians. Martha continued, "Quite often teachers will say 'this is the way to do it' and everyone goes 'okay'… all these things are being entrenched in what we think we have to do, that we pass on as 'here's the way'". VCE teachers can also apply to undertake exam assessor training with the VCAA. For Hamish, this training was ultimately about improving results: "Fifty per cent of the success is actually being able to do the exam, it is not so much content knowledge". Training to be an exam assessor is considered the best professional learning a VCE teacher can do, because it is perceived to provide exam knowhow that will advantage their students.

This has concerning socio-economic consequences. An investigative newspaper report, entitled "VCE assessors: the secret weapons helping schools achieve top results" (Cook and Butt 2017), used VCAA data to demonstrate that "droves of teachers at top-performing private schools are signing up to mark other students' VCE exams in a bid to gain valuable insight into the high-stakes tests" (Cook and Butt 2017). The authors highlighted that the schools with the highest concentration of trained exam assessors were from elite schools, where the practice was widely encouraged in the belief that teachers who are exam assessors have the capacity to improve student performance—a trend that is correlated with study score data. Teachers at government schools are more likely to struggle to access funds, in order to be released from teaching to attend the training and assess the exams. Private schools outperform government schools and have a much higher percentage of students who continue to university, further demonstrating how examinations provide a means to exercise social power within the curriculum hierarchy (Bexley 2017; Teese 2013). Social inequality persists because the most socially, economically, and culturally supported students continue to outperform those who lack this social power and resourcing (Teese 2013, 2014). Every year this is demonstrated by the lists of top VCE study scores published in Victorian newspapers, which present as a roll call for Victoria's most elite schools and to a lesser extent select-entry government schools, or those with high ICSEA values. As discussed below, Covid-19 is likely to exacerbate these sorts of socio-economic inequities.

Exam anxiety and curriculum reform

This study was conducted during a significant period of curriculum reform which included the introduction of the new *History: VCE Study Design* (VCAA 2015a), the first syllabus document in Victoria to incorporate elements of the *Australian Curriculum: Senior Secondary History*. Two of the curriculum leaders interviewed underscored their awareness of the exam's influence on inducing teacher anxiety during the consultation period.

The ACARA representative, who was involved in the development of the new senior secondary Australian Curriculum History units, saw assessment as the biggest challenge of all for national reform:

For states that have external exams—there's not even a list of essay questions that students have had to answer in the past…. What are the real outcomes of this [new]

course that we want the students to have, or for them to perform in the exam? And we don't know if there is not that bank of stuff we have relied upon in the past.

This observation suggests that nationwide, curriculum reform represents a nervous time for teachers because they rely on guidance from past exams and an established "bank of stuff". The representative from the History Teachers' Association of Victoria (HTAV) said that many teachers were "very anxious" that they would not be provided with a sample exam until they had already commenced teaching with the new Study Design. Martha also described her colleagues as being "quite anxious". This consternation was evident at the implementation briefings conducted by the VCAA. Consistent concerns were expressed about the exam and are summed up by the teacher who said: "I teach to the exam" (VCAA 2015b). It was in this context that a VCAA representative reassured teachers that the exam was a key factor behind the more explicit stipulation of the required knowledge in the new Study Design (VCAA 2015b).

As a result of this "curricular efficiency", content is in danger of becoming more homogenized. When recent Study Designs are compared with earlier ones, there is a clear trend towards content prescription, which has concerning implications for the representation of historical contexts and the capacity of curriculum to cater to increasingly diverse student cohorts (see Cairns 2020a). In history, increased content prescription means there is less time for students and teachers to engage with deeper historiographical issues or do the sort of critical reflection that is required to challenge ethnocentric metanarratives (Cairns 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, a New Zealand study found senior secondary History teachers "have considerable concerns about the impact of assessment on the delivery of history education" (Ormond 2019, p. 151), which was seen to result in the narrowing of history programs. In arguing for more holistic conceptualizations of assessment in the context of senior secondary Physical Education, Brown and Penney (2017, p. 153) noted that "as the 'stakes' associated with assessment increase, the degree of prescription also increases". Other studies have also found that examinations encourage contraction of content, adoption of teacher-centred approaches, and increased focus on excessive amounts of content at the expense of higher-order thinking skills (e.g., Au 2007; Fountain 2012).

When the discourse of exam alignment intersects with other discourses acting on curriculum enactment, the subject positions available to VCE history teachers become constrained, resulting in an apparent need to compromise idealism for pragmatism. The pressure of exam performativity undermines other ideals relating to student engagement, relevant content, pedagogical innovation, and the more philosophical dimensions of history education (see Cairns 2018). Ball (2015) wrote about these tensions in terms of the ontological duality experienced by teachers as policy actors, where there is movement between "the creative agency of teachers, a necessary basis for enactment, and the ways in which policy discourses and technologies mobilize truth claims and constitute rather than reflect social reality" (p. 307). Around the world, "[e]xamination-driven technologically structured curricula" (Pinar 2019, p. 2) and the evaluative use of student performance data diminish teacher autonomy and focus on the individual aspects of teaching, rather than the challenges of the cultural and structural conditions in which teachers work (Lopes 2016; Priestley et al. 2016).

The Covid-19 crisis has underscored just how dependent Australian school systems are on these exam-driven structures. Due to the impact of lockdowns and remote learning in Victoria, the VCAA (2020) has compacted curriculum by modifying part of the Study Design to focus on essential elements and reduced school-based assessments. However, it is steadfast in its reluctance to cancel or postpone exams, despite Victoria remaining in

strict lockdown after a second wave of the virus, only months out from the scheduled Year 12 exams in November.

Towards a more inclusive model

This may be a small, illustrative study, but the curricular decision-making of VCE history teachers occurs under discursive conditions that also characterize the global education policy arena. The literature supports the notion that senior secondary standardized exams are representative of a *policy technology* of performativity, a regulatory intervention that forms and re-forms the values and subjectivities of teachers and other policy stakeholders (Ball 2003). Teachers are thus impelled to be reactive curriculum policy actors, valued for deploying their knowhow as exam technicians to improve student results. The hyper-alignment of assessment in the quest for improving student results pleases some stakeholders, but many others are deeply concerned by the constraints imposed on teachers' capacity to flexibly and creatively interpret curricula. These are the hallmarks of education systems that are unlikely to cope with the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic, and unlikely to effectively prepare young people to live and work in the transformed world they are inheriting. A teacher in Britain argued that if there is any hope of addressing the structural issues that disadvantage some students, "schools must never return to normal" (Sweeney 2020, para. 1). and instead seek to end the fixation on A-Level exams as the "gold standard" (Sweeney 2020, para. 14). and the competitiveness of the education market.

It is more important than ever to understand how structural conditions shape curriculum policy enactment and educational achievement. The Education Sustainable Development Goal reminds us that more than 262 million children and youth are not in school, while school closures due to Covid-19 have further compromised the basic human rights for many millions of children (Human Rights Watch 2020; UNESCO 2020c). The economic impacts of Covid-19 worldwide reaffirm the need to vigorously support the *Education 2030 Agenda* to "build systems that are inclusive, equitable and relevant to all learners" (UNESCO 2020c, para. 2). The United Nations (2020) estimated that 23.8 million additional children and youth are at risk of dropping out of school due to the pandemic's economic impact. It advocates "build[ing] resilient education systems for equitable and sustainable development" in order to "reimagine education and accelerate change in teaching and learning" (United Nations 2020, p. 3). Even in a relatively wealthy country like Australia, the move to home-based, online learning has made the disparities between well-resourced and disadvantaged students more visible. Anecdotal evidence already indicates that the achievement gap between Year 12 students has widened during the pandemic, reinforcing old problems around resourcing and family support (Morton 2020). This suggests that well-resourced students will continue to maintain their capacity to leverage socio-economic power through the continuation of exams under these conditions.

Social distancing has required exam authorities to look to alternatives to high-stakes standardized exams. The teacher assessment that has been used to calculate final grades in the UK and Ireland during the pandemic is an approach that could be considered in Australia. Recent research from Britain has shown that teachers can reliably assess student progress and achievement. Rimfield and colleagues (2019) found that "test scores correlate so highly with the teacher assessments raise questions about the value of the testing culture that characterizes compulsory education in the UK, culminating with the high-stakes GCSE exams at age 16 and A-level exams at the age of 18" (p. 1282). In response to the pandemic, these researchers argued, "our results suggest that substituting high-stakes

exams for teacher assessments might be a good thing, not just during the current Covid-19 crisis, but on a permanent basis" (Rimfield et al. 2020, para. 18). There have, however, been controversy and student protests in the UK around the lowering of marks based on teacher assessment, because the algorithm used to moderate the teacher-generated grades is believed to discriminate against economically disadvantaged students (Cole 2020). The controversy is not around the use of teacher assessment but rather the technocratic process which was then used to modify the results. As McArthur (2020, para. 17) noted, the controversy has raised important questions around fairness: "Covid-19 has shone a light on the larger problem of justice and assessment". Here in Victoria, a rigorous system of statistical moderation for school-based assessment already exists to help teachers make reliable judgments, which makes moving to a 100 percent school-based system a viable option. Another strategy to decenter the external exam would be to considerably reduce the 50% weighting it is given in calculating study scores.

Closing comments

The Covid-19 global pandemic challenges us to adopt a new normal. The fraught changes brought about by nation-wide lockdowns and exam disruptions prompt educators to acknowledge "the ways in which we are all deeply implicated in, and bound up and into, the contemporary neo-liberal and globalizing settlement…that most of the time we do not even notice it is there" (Ball et al. 2012, p. 139). In this article, I have used a localized study to illustrate how senior secondary assessment has become more managerial as it gets increasingly used for performative and accountability purposes (Stobart 2008). As a result of these wider policy conditions, the discourse of exam alignment and the associated practices of exam washback have disproportionally acted upon VCE History teachers' enactment of curriculum, contributing to concerns about pedagogical stagnation and the imbalance of social power and privilege. The pandemic places a spotlight on exam-driven and market-driven curricular practices worldwide, underscoring the need for continuing international conversations and research. Hopefully, in some contexts, the need to reorganize senior secondary examinations will provoke more lasting moves towards a new normal without standardized senior secondary exams, or at least lower the stakes and prompt teachers to reflect on the larger structural and systemic forces that shape their curriculum enactment practices.

References

ACARA [Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority] (2014). *About ICSEA*. http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/About_icsea_2014.pdf.

Aoki, T. (1993). Legitimating lived curriculum: Towards a curricular landscape of multiplicity. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 8*(3), 255–268.

Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher, 36*(5), 258–267.

Au, W. (2011). Teaching under the new Taylorism: High-stakes testing and the standardization of the 21st century curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 43*(1), 25–45.

Bacchi, C., & Bonham, J. (2014). Reclaiming discursive practices as an analytic focus: Political implications. *Foucault Studies, 17,* 173–192.

Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy, 18*(2), 215–228.

Ball, S. J. (2015). What is policy? 21 years later: Reflections on the possibilities of policy research. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 36*(3), 306–313.

Ball, S. J., Braun, A., & Maguire, M. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Barcan, A. (2003). The struggle for curriculum reform in Australia 1987-1993. *Education Research and Perspectives, 30*(2), 108–139.

Bexley, E. (2017). Aligning student ability with learning opportunity. In T. Bentley & G. Savage (Eds.), *Educating Australia: Challenges for the decade ahead* (pp. 229–241). Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Brown, T., & Penney, D. (2017). *Examination physical education: Policy, pedagogies and possibilities*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cairns, R. (2018). The many voices of senior history curriculum enactment. *Agora, 53*(2), 4–13.

Cairns, R. (2020a). Deimperialising Asia-related history: An Australian case study. *Curriculum Inquiry, 50*(2), 126–148.

Cairns, R. (2020b). Recognizing, reproducing and resisting West as method discourse: An analysis of senior secondary Asia-related history curriculum enactment. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2020.1764413.

Cole, M. (2020, August 13). A-level results: Confusion is the result of months of inertia and years of policy. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/a-level-results-confusion-is-the-result-of-months-of-inertia-and-years-of-policy-144260.

Connell, R. (2009). Good teachers on dangerous ground: Towards a new view of teacher quality and professionalism. *Critical Studies in Education, 50*(3), 213–229.

Cook, H., & Butt, C. (2017). VCE assessors: The secret weapons helping schools achieve top results. *The Age*. http://www.theage.com.au/national/secondary-education-victoria/vce-assessors-the-secret-weapons-helping-schools-achieve-top-results-20170111-gtpmnh.html.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Fountain, G. J. (2012). *Caught in-between: The impact of different forms of mandated national assessment for qualifications on teacher decision-making in year 12 history in New Zealand, 1986-2005*. Wellington: Victoria University.

Heaney, C. (2020). Covid-19 disruption to school year sparks call to axe exams. *Herald Sun*. https://www.heraldsun.com.au/education/covid19-disruption-to-school-year-sparks-calls-to-axe-exams-and-atars/news-story/bfc18993dc76052d7f9b57890dcbae9c.

Hu, B. (2018). *Educating migrant children in urban schools in China: Unravelling the implementation paradox*. Singapore: Springer.

Human Rights Watch (2020). *Covid-19 and children's rights*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/09/covid-19-and-childrens-rights-0.

Judy, J. (2020). High school exit exams. In J. Ainsworth (Ed.), *Sociology of education: An A-Z guide*. https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/sociology-of-education/n186.xml?term=exit.

Kamenetz, A. (2015). *The test: Why our schools are obsessed with standardized testing—but you don't have to be*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.

Kellaghan, T., & Greaney, V. (2020). *Public examinations examined*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Kelly, A. (2019). *The high stakes of testing: Exploring student experience with standardized assessment through governmentality*. Leiden: Brill Sense.

Klenowski, V. (2012). Raising the stakes: The challenges for teacher assessment. *The Australian Education Researcher, 39*(2), 173–192.

Le Greco, M., & Tracy, S. (2009). Discourse tracing as qualitative practice. *Qualitative Inquiry, 15*(9), 1516–1543.

Lingard, B., & Ozga, J. (2007). *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in education policy and politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lingard, B., Thompson, G., & Sellar, S. (2016). *National testing in schools: An Australian assessment*. London: Routledge.

Lopes, A. (2016). The theory of enactment by Stephen Ball: And what if the notion of discourse was different? *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 24*(25), 1–15.

McArthur, J. (2020, August 11). Scotland's exam result crisis: Assessment and social justice in a time of Covid-19. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/scotlands-exam-result-crisis-assessment-and-social-justice-in-a-time-of-covid-19-144248.

Mercurio, A. (2005). The discourse of alignment: Curriculum and assessment disjunctions at upper secondary level. In C. Harris & C. Marsh (Eds.), *Curriculum developments in Australia* (pp. 127–144). Deakin West: ACSA.

Morton, R. (2020, April 25). Last exams: Reality of year 12 in lockdown. *The Saturday Paper*. https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/education/2020/04/25/last-exams-reality-year-12-lockdown/15877368009739.

Ng, K. (2020, April 5). Coronavirus: Stress over university entrance exams has skyrocketed amid Hong Kong school closures. *South China Morning Post*. https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/education/article/3078513/coronavirus-stress-over-university-entrance-exams-has.

OECD (2017). *PISA 2015 results: Students' well-being*. Paris: OECD. https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-iii_9789264273856-en.

Ormond, B. M. (2019). The impact of standards-based assessment on knowledge for history education in New Zealand. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 26*(2), 143–165.

Pinar, W. (2019). *What is curriculum theory?* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Power, J., & O'Brien, C. (2020, May 9). Leaving Cert: Teachers seek safeguards against parental pressure on grades. *The Irish Times*. https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/leaving-cert-teachers-seek-safeguards-against-parental-pressure-on-grades-1.4249587.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2016). Teacher agency: What is it and why does it matter? In J. Evers & R. Kneyber (Eds.), *Flip the system: Changing education from the ground up* (pp. 134–148). Abingdon: Routledge.

Priestley, M., & Philippou, S. (2018). Curriculum making as social practice: Complex webs of enactment. *Curriculum Journal, 29*(2), 151–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2018.1451096.

Rimfeld, K., Malanchini, M., Hannigan, L. J., Dale, P. S., Allen, R., Hart, S., et al. (2019). Teacher assessments during compulsory education are as reliable, stable and heritable as standardized test scores. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 60*(12), 1278–1288.

Rimfeld, K., Malanchini, M., & Plomin, R. (2020, March 26). Don't worry about cancelled exams: Research shows we should switch to teacher assessment permanently. *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/dont-worry-about-cancelled-exams-research-shows-we-should-switch-to-teacher-assessment-permanently-134709.

Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Roberts, P. (2020, April 2). Covid-19 has thrown year 12 students' lives into chaos. So what can we do? *The Conversation*. https://theconversation.com/covid-19-has-thrown-year-12-students-lives-into-chaos-so-what-can-we-do-134891.

Robinson, K. (2016). *Creative schools: Revolutionizing schools from the ground up*. London: Penguin.

Spratt, M. (2005). Washback and curriculum innovation: The implications for teaching and learning of studies of washback from exams. *Language Teaching Research, 9*(1), 5–29.

Stobart, G. (2008). *Testing times: The uses and abuses of assessment*. London: Routledge.

Sweeney, N. (2020, April 7). When the Covid-19 crisis finally ends, schools must never return to normal. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/apr/07/when-the-covid-19-crisis-finally-ends-uk-schools-must-never-return-to-normal.

Teese, R. (2013). *Academic success and social power: Examinations and inequality*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Teese, R. (2014). *For the common weal: The public high school in Victoria 1910-2010*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Tuinamuana, K. (2011). Teacher professional standards, accountability, and ideology: Alternative discourses. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 36*(12), 72–82.

UNESCO (2020a). *Exams and assessments in Covid-19 crisis: Fairness at the centre.* Paris: UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/news/exams-and-assessments-covid-19-crisis-fairness-centre.

UNESCO (2020b). *High-stake assessment*. Paris: UNESCO. http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/high-stake-assessment.

UNESCO (2020c). *Leading SDG4 - Education 2030*. Paris: UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/themes/education2030-sdg4.

UNESCO (2020d). *Standardised test*. Paris: UNESCO. http://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/standardised-test.

UNESCO Bangkok (2015). *The culture of testing: Socio-cultural drivers and the effects on youth in the Asia-Pacific region*. Bangkok: UNESCO. https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/themes/education/quality_education/culture_of_testing/UNESCO_Bangkok_Culture_of_Testing_Literature_Review.pdf.

United Nations (2020). *Policy brief: Education during Covid-19 and beyond*. New York, NY: UN. https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf.

VCAA [Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority] (2015a). *History: VCE study design*. Melbourne: VCAA.

VCAA (2015b). *VCE history update 2015 video*. Melbourne: VCAA. http://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/Resou rce/ByPin?Pin=SHDC9G&SearchScope=All.

VCAA (2020). *Covid-19 advice*. Melbourne: VCAA. https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/lates t-news/Novel%20coronavirus%20update/Pages/SchoolsandEducators.aspx.

Volante, L. (2017). *The PISA effect on global educational governance*. London: Routledge.

Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2004). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

World Bank (2020). *High-stakes school exams during Covid-19 (Coronavirus): What is the best approach?* Washington, DC: World Bank. https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/high-stakes-school-exams-durin g-covid-19-coronavirus-what-best-approach.

Zhang, Y. (2015). *Lessons that matter: What should we learn from Asia's school systems?* Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.

Ziebell, N., Ong, A., & Clarke, D. (2017). Aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment. In T. Bentley & G. Savage (Eds.), *Educating Australia: Challenges for the decade ahead* (pp. 190–203). Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing.

Rebecca Cairns is a lecturer in education at Deakin University in Geelong, Australia. Her curriculum inquiry research spans history education, studies of Asia, and education policy. It investigates how curriculum policy shapes, and is shaped by, discourses of race, culture, nation, self and other in the past and present. This includes examining the way global and national education policy discourses intersect with local curriculum practices and the effects this has on how curriculum is developed and experienced by teachers, students, and other stakeholders.