

Investigation into the 2025 teaching of the  
incorrect Ancient History topic in nine  
Queensland High Schools

# Panel Report

## December 2025

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# Executive Summary

In October 2025, in the two days leading up to the Year 12 Ancient History external examination, nine Queensland secondary schools identified that the content taught to Year 12 students in semester 2, 2025 – on the topic of Augustus – did not align with the external examination topic. Designed and invigilated by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA), the external examination is worth 25% of students' result for that subject and contributes to their Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). In 2025, the external examination topic of Julius Caesar reflected a significant change after five years on the topic of Augustus. When the error was initially identified at one school, who immediately notified the QCAA and sought advice, the QCAA then initiated a responsive process to check all schools offering Ancient History in 2025. The process check revealed that of the 173 Queensland schools that offer Ancient History as a General Subject, eight additional state and non-state schools identified the same error.

To better understand the contributing factors in this event, an investigation panel was established, guided by Terms of Reference (ToR)<sup>1</sup>. This report synthesises the insights gained through a series of 27 consultation meetings with 63 stakeholders, held in November 2025<sup>2</sup>. Participants included executives, leaders, and key personnel in affected and non-affected schools, the QCAA and the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board (NSSAB), and a range of invested stakeholders who contributed system, peak body, association, union, parent body, and other Australian jurisdictions' perspectives.

Consultation gave insight into contributing causal factors, best practice solutions, and potential future actions, synthesised in Figure 1 (below).

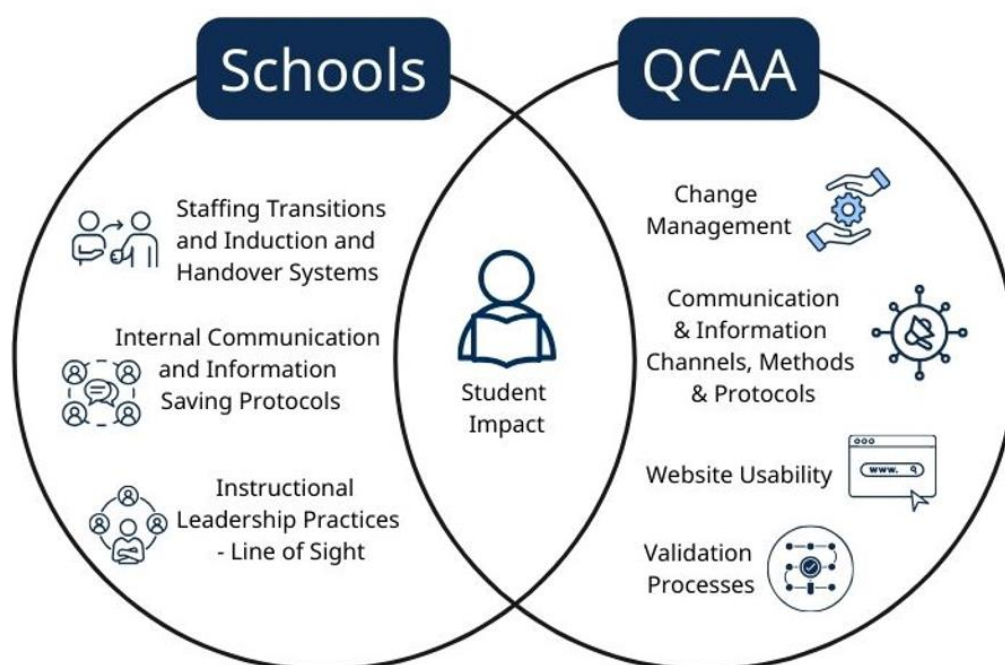


Figure 1: Learning from experience – identified actions to mitigate future risk

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for the full Terms of Reference that shaped the investigation.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2 for summary of consultation conducted by the panel.

### ***Contributing causal factors***

The investigation found that multiple unintended factors, including staffing transitions, unexpected absences and challenging handovers, and knowledge continuity systems and processes (or lack thereof) occurred simultaneously but differently in different contexts. This created a 'perfect storm' of risk within affected schools. Consistent across all schools was the absence of effective curriculum supervision and leadership oversight systems at all levels to ensure that students were taught the content of the external examination.

Within these schools, this 'perfect storm' of risk was not effectively mitigated by QCAA processes. Contributing factors included the predictability of communication and storage of information, change management processes, and the cadence of topic changes associated with external examinations. For some affected schools, these processes made it difficult to ensure timely clarity of necessary syllabus content aligned with the external examination topic for school leaders and teaching staff.

### ***System best practice insights***

The investigation findings identify four best practice pillars that help assure alignment between teaching in schools and external examination topics. These four pillars include: system predictability, consistency of messaging, precision in validation/registration and oversight, and ongoing collaboration between the curriculum authority and schools to co-design strategies that best mitigate risk.

### ***Insights for future action***

The investigation found that actions from both schools and QCAA could effectively mitigate the risk of future error. These include short term technical responses, improved curriculum supervision and leadership oversight processes and systems and longer-term development of professional collaboration between stakeholders. These responses are wide ranging but include collective actions, singularly focused on supporting schools through synchronised actions to ensure schools have access to consistent, precise, and predictable messaging.

Identified school actions include an explicit focus on assuring knowledge transfer within the school for external examination matters and broader QCAA processes. This includes protocols for cascading and updating external examination information especially when staffing transitions occur. In addition, sharing and embedding best practice in instructional leadership would further mitigate risk. In line with the [Australian Professional Standards](#), principals have responsibility for creating a positive culture of challenge and support that enables effective teaching. They are accountable for students' achievement in all aspects of their development, which requires ensuring curriculum delivery matches syllabus standards.

The QCAA can play a stronger role to reduce the risk of schools not enacting critical decisions related to external examinations. Actions include proactive change management strategies, such as consistent validation/registration processes across subject areas, a focus on precision and predictability of critical changes, and ensuring critical communication and information sharing processes are easily accessible, timely, clear, and concise.

While an empirical assessment of the impact on students and families is outside the scope of this report, students and their educational outcomes remain at the heart of this investigation and its conclusions. The Panel has been guided by a commitment to ensuring that students and families are not impacted by misalignment between teaching and assessment at such a critical juncture of the educational journey in future practice.

# Introduction

## Background

### *Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE)*

The QCAA is established under the [Education \(Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority\) Act 2014 \(the Act\)](#) to undertake functions that include developing syllabuses for senior subjects; providing services for the professional development of teachers; and developing and implementing external assessments. In addition, the Act provides that the QCAA functions to support schools to implement a syllabus through the provision of resources. The QCAA is responsible for the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE).

A new QCE system was introduced for Year 11 students in 2019, with the first cohort to graduate in 2020. The QCE is internationally recognised and provides evidence of senior schooling achievements. The QCE allows students to choose from a wide range of learning options to suit their interests and career goals. To receive a QCE, students must achieve the set amount of learning, at the set standard, in a set pattern, while meeting literacy and numeracy requirements. The system integrates multiple interconnected components designed to ensure fairness, consistency, and academic rigour. It only works when every part—curriculum, assessment, quality assurance, and tertiary entrance—operates in alignment with one another.

For the QCE, students' results for General Subjects are based on their achievement in three internal school-designed and delivered assessments and one external QCAA-designed, invigilated, and marked assessment. Schools develop these internal assessments according to syllabus parameters. QCAA endorse internal assessment instruments to ensure that all assessments provide sufficient opportunities for students to demonstrate syllabus requirements.

### *Ancient History Syllabus and External Examination*

To support the introduction of the new QCE system, the QCAA developed a syllabus for Ancient History which was approved by the QCAA Board in April 2017 for implementation with Year 11 students in 2019. The Queensland Ancient History General Senior Syllabus V1.2 is structured into four units. Typically, Units 1 and 2 are studied in Year 11, while Units 3 and 4 are studied in Year 12. Each unit focuses on different aspects of ancient societies, evidence, and historical inquiry.

In line with other General Subjects, in Ancient History the summative external assessment is developed and marked by the QCAA and contributes 25% to a student's overall subject result. The external assessment in Ancient History is common to all Queensland schools and is administered under the same conditions, at the same time, on the same day. For this summative assessment, QCAA nominates one topic from Unit 4, Topics 6–12 that will be the basis for external assessment (Topic 6: Thutmose III, Topic 7: Rameses II, Topic 8: Themistokles, Topic 9: Alkibiades, Topic 10: Scipio Africanus, Topic 11: Julius Caesar, Topic 12: Augustus).

The Syllabus also specifies that the QCAA nominates the topic for external examination at least 12 months before the external examination is undertaken. Official QCAA Memos, sent

by email, notify principals and their QCAA delegates<sup>3</sup> of changes, along with teachers who have chosen to subscribe to QCAA updates. The memos are then also stored in the Resources section of the QCAA portal and on their public website.

The QCAA notified schools of external examination topics for Ancient History as detailed in Table 1.

External Examination Year	Topic of the External Examination	Year/s External Examination topic was communicated	QCAA Notification Memos
2020	Augustus	2017; 2019	<a href="#">044/17</a> and <a href="#">015/19</a> <sup>4</sup>
2021	Augustus	2017; 2019	<a href="#">044/17</a> and <a href="#">015/19</a>
2022	Augustus	2020	<a href="#">040/20</a>
2023	Augustus	2021; 2022	<a href="#">059/21</a> and <a href="#">063/22</a>
2024	Augustus	2021; 2023; 2024	<a href="#">059/21</a> and <a href="#">054/23</a> and <a href="#">016/24</a>
2025	Julius Caesar	2023; 2024	<a href="#">054/23</a> and <a href="#">016/24</a> <sup>5</sup>

*Table 1: External examination topics and corresponding QCAA notifications*

In addition to memos, the QCAA provide reminders about the topic of external examinations through syllabus resources, e-newsletters, and professional learning sessions, which are both online and face-to-face.

In 2025, the examination topic was Julius Caesar. This was the first time since the introduction of the 2019 syllabus that the external examination was not Augustus. This change occurred in the final year that the 2019 syllabus was to be taught to Year 12 students in Queensland schools, overlapping with the introduction of a new 2025 syllabus for Year 11 students. An overview of Ancient History Syllabus and Examination junctures is provided in Figure 2.

<sup>3</sup> In each school, the principal identifies an appropriate staff member to act as their delegate in relation to QCAA matters. This role has a range of functions including developing and overseeing the school's quality management system, including quality assurance processes within the school.

<sup>4</sup> Memo 044/17 indicates the 44<sup>th</sup> memo from the QCA in the year 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the 016/24 memo also gave advice about the 2026 external assessment topic.

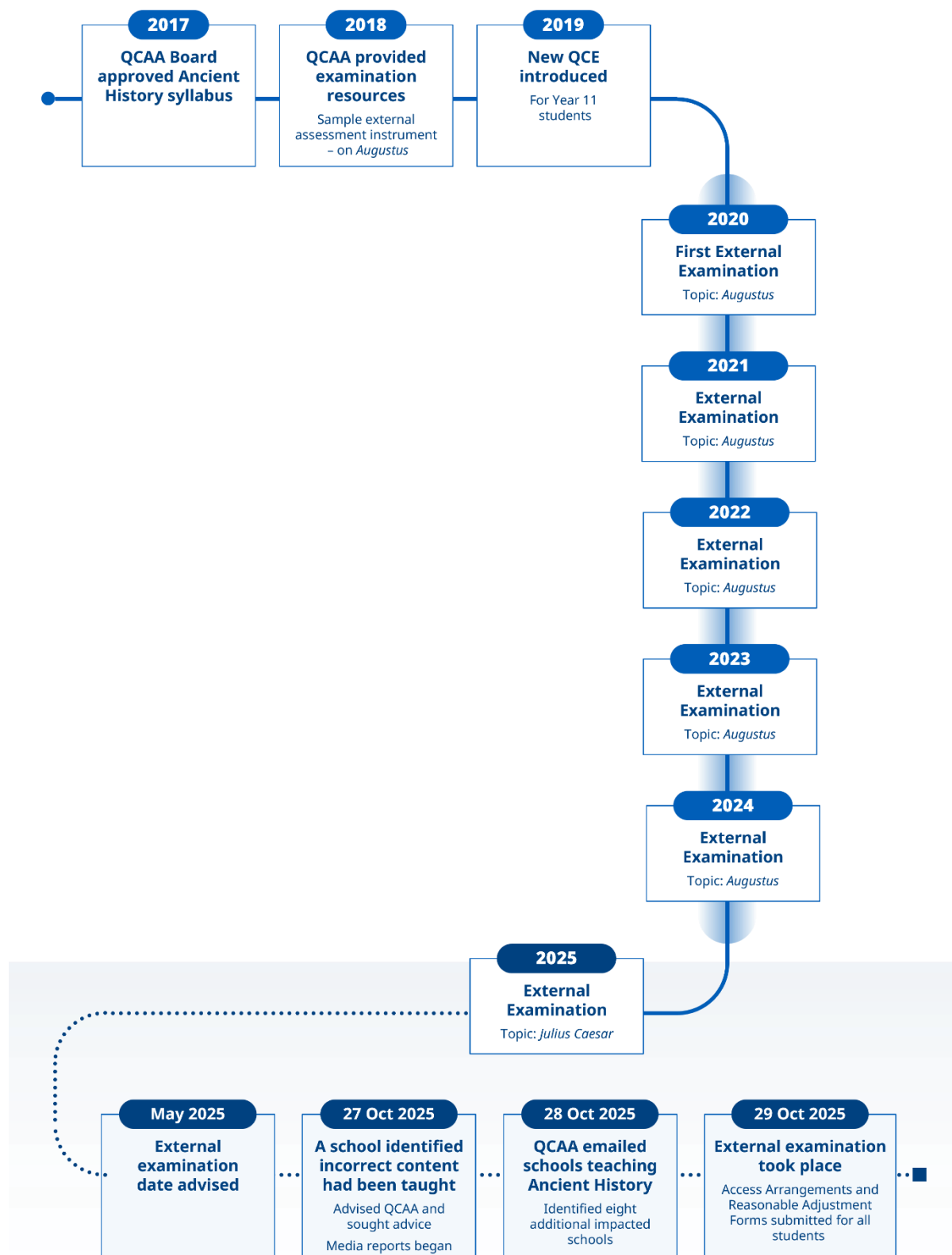


Figure 2: Timeline of 2019 Ancient History Syllabus and External Examinations



## Error Timeline

On Monday 27 October 2025, a school identified that incorrect content had been taught in Semester 2, 2025 for the Year 12 Ancient History external examination which was scheduled to take place on Wednesday 29 October 2025. This school immediately contacted the QCAA and subsequently communicated the situation to students and their parents. In response, QCAA emailed schools on Tuesday 28 October 2025 and identified that a total of nine out of the 173 state and non-state schools teaching Ancient History had continued to teach Augustus as the examination topic rather than the new topic of Julius Caesar.

The impacted schools were:

- Brisbane SHS
- Flagstone Community College
- Meridan State College
- Redcliffe SHS
- Yeronga SHS
- St Theresa's Catholic College
- West Moreton Anglican College
- James Nash SHS
- Kuranda District State College

With support and advice from the QCAA, impacted schools submitted *Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments – Illness and Misadventure* forms for all students involved. Subsequently, these were approved by QCAA. During investigation interviews, many school staff in impacted schools described the quality of support they received from the QCAA to manage the situation. One school described the support as “second to none”.

## Coordinated Response: Investigation Panel

At the request of the Minister for Education, the Director-General of the Department of Education established a three-person Investigation Panel to better understand the factors that contributed to the error. An external expert in education systems' improvement, Dr Grant Webb, was appointed to lead the investigation panel. Other panel members were:

- Ms Christine Ashton, Executive Director, bringing legal and regulatory experience and expertise to the panel.
- Ms Lisa Starmer, Executive Principal, bringing secondary school leadership experience and expertise to the panel.

Ms Michelle Brown, a Director with the Department of Education, provided Secretariat support for the Investigation Panel.

The approach and methods used by the panel are outlined next in the methodology section.



# Methodology

## Terms of Reference

Terms of Reference (ToRs) for the investigation (**Appendix 1**) were developed and approved by the Director-General of the Department of Education. The ToRs were provided to the Chairs of the QCAA and the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board (NSSAB) for comment prior to approval. The ToRs provided a clear frame for the purpose, objectives, scope, and operating approach for the investigation.

## Consultation Plan

The Investigation Panel developed a Consultation Plan prior to commencing data gathering. This Consultation Plan mapped investigation stakeholders, and the investigation mechanisms that would be used for each stakeholder. Additionally, the Consultation Plan provided key consultation scripts and a schedule of consultations. **Appendix 2** gives an overview of the consultations undertaken with schools, professional associations, the QCAA, unions, regulatory and employing authorities, peak bodies, and other jurisdictions. In addition, the panel decided to interview schools across the systems who did not experience this error.

## Methodological Orientation

This investigation drew on aspects of qualitative research and appreciative inquiry. In particular, the investigation drew on the Discover phase (discover strengths and successes) and Dream phase (envision the ideal future by imagining possibilities) of the 5D appreciative inquiry cycle. In addition, the 'Positive Principle' of appreciative inquiry was drawn upon, maintaining a focus on strengths, learning, growth, and successes. The investigation employed a three-step methodology of Data Gathering, Data Analysis and Data Synthesising.

## Data Gathering

Data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews, conducted face-to-face or virtually. Most interviews were one hour in length. All interviews started with introductions and an overview of the ToRs, emphasising 'out of scope' aspects of the investigation. Initial discussion also included an assurance of anonymity, including the ways in which the investigators would protect privacy. Interviews were not digitally recorded by the Panel. However, panel members took notes to be able to summarise key points at the respondent validation stage of the interview.

For interviews with schools, the investigation panel invited the principal to engage, and the principal then decided to extend the invitation to other members of staff who they thought could add value to the discussion. For interviews with the QCAA and other authorities and jurisdictions, the investigation panel invited the Chair and the CEO, and it was at their discretion to extend the invitation to other staff when it added value to the discussion.

To gather rich and contextual data and to establish a credible evidence base, interviewees were then asked three broad questions, as shown in Figure 3, which correlate with the ToRs and align to the Discover and Design phases of appreciative inquiry as previously outlined.

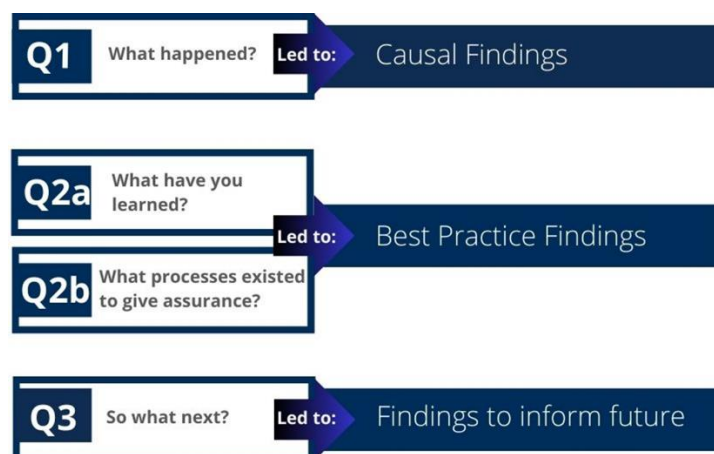


Figure 3: Investigation interview questions and aligned outcomes

In the diagram above, Question 2a was used in interviews with the nine impacted schools, while Question 2b was used when interviewing the additional schools. Each interview finished with respondent validation, where the panel members summarised what was heard and asked the participant to confirm, clarify, or correct it. This ensured accuracy and validated that the participant's perspective was captured faithfully. In addition, a limited desktop review was undertaken where additional data were gathered through accessing QCAA materials, documents, and technology (such as websites) relevant to the error as well as accessing school websites and materials where appropriate.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was concurrent throughout the data gathering phase of the investigation. This supported the Panel to iteratively refine questioning to ensure that ongoing data collection remained aligned with the investigation's objectives. Raw data were processed and interpreted by identifying themes, patterns, trends, and insights.

## Data Synthesis

Data synthesis occurred to undertake 'sense making' and integrate findings into clear conclusions. To support these processes the panel used the objectives from the approved ToRs as an organising framework, identifying systemic causal factors, best practice factors, and insights into potential future actions.

Together these approaches framed an ethical and rigorous investigative framework that ensured that the investigation, in line with the ToRs, maintained a focus on understanding systems, patterns, and contributing factors and identified possible ways forward.

# Findings

## Finding 1:

The investigation found the event coalesced differently in each school when multiple systemic and school-based control gaps occurred, creating a ‘perfect storm’ of risk, which led to nine schools teaching the incorrect content.

### Discussion

Principals of the nine schools acknowledged receipt of QCAA memos in 2023 and 2024 related to the 2025 Ancient History Unit 4 external examination topic. They were all aware of the wording in these memos about ‘what to do next’ and each school had processes to enact this. QCAA memos included the following wording:

*Bring this memo to the attention of teachers of senior history subjects in your school. Ensure teachers know that external assessment topic notifications for Ancient History and Modern History are published in the Resources section of the relevant syllabus in the QCAA Portal.*

All principals recognised their accountability related to this error occurring in their school. They recounted their responsibility for leading teaching and learning, which includes ensuring that the curriculum is taught in alignment with syllabus expectations. All principals reflected on the range of interwoven factors at the school level that led to teaching the incorrect topic. Their descriptions articulated multiple contextual and cumulative factors, with many principals reporting self-initiated critical reviews of practice in their schools to identify opportunities to enhance the line of sight between syllabus content and external examination topics to better assure the quality, fidelity and integrity of the senior secondary curriculum delivered at their school. Challenges related to contributing factors are detailed below.

### **Maintaining continuity of knowledge through staff transitions**

Interviews with school staff revealed that personnel transitions, including role changes within the same school, required effective handover and induction processes. In affected schools, staffing transitions around and between when the QCAA memos were sent and when the content was taught created a knowledge gap. Many schools reported challenges in handover protocols, including induction processes, to ensure continuity, clarity, and accountability through structured communication, clear responsibilities, and documentation. This led to a staff knowledge gap related to the 2025 external examination topic that directly contributed to the error by eroding institutional knowledge and creating critical information disparities. The investigation determined that the transition of roles in schools between the time that the memos were released in 2023 and 2024 and the teaching of the content and preparation for the external examination at the end of 2025 was a causal factor contributing to the error.

### **Managing and anticipating curriculum change**

As the topic of the external examination had remained unchanged for the previous five years, some staff developed confidence in the continuity of the topic and placed less focus on verifying critical changes. During interviews, all school staff took responsibility for this error and recognised that they had professional accountability to ensure students are taught

the correct content and that syllabus requirements are followed. This accountability is explicitly embedded in the [\*Australian Professional Standards for Teachers\*](#) (AITSL) which directly ties to accountability for syllabus adherence. School and curriculum leaders share responsibility for ensuring these standards are upheld through effective oversight and leadership. While teachers took responsibility for this error, they made mention that this was the last year of implementation of the 2019 Ancient History Syllabus, and the topic of Augustus had been consistent for the life of the syllabus to 2024. This, together with the retention of the mock examinations and resources on Augustus, and the absence of Julius Caesar resources on the QCAA website, amplified a confirmation bias that Augustus was the external examination topic in 2025.

### ***Enhancing quality assurance through curriculum supervision***

While there were multiple contributing factors that lead to this error, the investigation also identified that a breakdown in schools' internal curriculum quality assurance frameworks and supervision practices was the common factor that compromised the alignment of teaching and external assessment in all affected schools. For those teachers who were highly experienced, supervision practices became a 'double-edged sword.' While experienced teachers bring stability and expertise, there can be a tendency to reduce their supervision, creating significant risks. Many school leaders reflected that, in retrospect, the school's documented curriculum quality assurance and supervision frames were not, for a variety of reasons, implemented with fidelity and that this is an area they need to remedy with urgency.

### ***Best Practice: Learning from experience***

From speaking with schools where this error did not occur, the investigation identified several practices which mitigated risk. Conversations revealed that integrated curriculum oversight and supervision with clear accountability and clear validation processes for critical communication were major mitigation strategies.

The investigation found that in unaffected schools there was a strong focus on implementing robust, integrated quality assurance processes through curriculum supervision practices such as curriculum meetings with a strong focus on curriculum, teaching, and assessment alignment. These were then supported by school-based professional conversations and collaborative planning sessions, which further mitigated the risk of misalignment.

These non-affected schools described the precision that is created by clearly documented protocols with multiple contextual layers of communication. The schools embedded 'loop back' processes to verify and assure that critical curriculum updates are received and acted upon.

### ***Insights for the future: Potential next steps***

The investigation identified that it is essential that schools have strong induction processes and formalised knowledge transfer systems to act as critical safeguards and ensure curriculum intent is maintained during staff transitions. This practice would not only support the onboarding of beginning teachers but provides support across all staff transitions.

The investigation further identified that some schools where this error occurred did not have a systematic process and/or established protocol for saving, communicating and validating receipt and actioning of key documents and communications such as QCAA memos. This suggests that when Principals establish and ensure the use of a consistent communication

protocol and information management system, the risk of misalignment may be reduced in their schools.

In addition and most importantly, literature reviewed by the investigation team such as the [\*2022 Spotlight Paper – Instructional leadership – leading the teaching and learning\*](#) – highlights the central role of instructional leadership in improving student outcomes through quality curriculum. The [\*Professional Standards for Principals in Australia\*](#) make it clear that principals hold ultimate responsibility for ensuring the curriculum is taught in line with syllabus expectations. Embedding a range of external examination quality assurance processes as part of a highly effective curriculum supervision model which ensures line of sight, would action a key part of this work. This notion was also confirmed by interviewees. Finally, the investigation concluded that clarity of accountability in the school's curriculum quality assurance processes is vital to ensure the ongoing fidelity of the senior school curriculum and assessment practices in their school and across the state.

## Finding 2:

The investigation found that the QCAA's communication with schools, and its change management processes, did not effectively anticipate and mitigate the risk of misalignment between teaching and the external examination topic in all schools.

### *Discussion*

The investigation heard a range of contributing factors that gave insight into the intersecting causes of the error. Throughout, the findings give insight into the benefits of proactive, systematic, and supportive change management.

### ***Critical changes need proportionate communication responses***

Through the interviews, stakeholders strongly referred to the need for more comprehensive layers of communications for critical changes for external examinations. Participants shared that the QCAA communication of the changed external examination topic to schools was not proportionate to the criticality of this update. Changing the external examination topic in the last year of the 2019 syllabus implementation cycle disrupted five years of syllabus and external examination stability. A critical change to the external examination topic required a matched comprehensive communication strategy. A strong message from school-based staff was the need for QCAA to adopt a communication strategy that included messaging in the year that the assessment was implemented, especially when there are changes in external examination topics.

Further, stakeholders identified that additional communication factors also contributed to this error. These included:

- the volume of undifferentiated memos from QCAA. This makes it difficult for recipients to discern those critical messages for external examinations. Memos could be better distinguished according to priority, context, and purposes.
- the lack of options for teachers to subscribe to subject-specific QCAA communications. This leads to teachers deciding to disconnect from the general communication strategy.
- relevant, important memos not being located with the syllabus. This complicated timely validation of information in some schools.

### ***Enabling accessibility of information: A school-friendly website***

The investigation found that the QCAA website, in its current form, did not function as an effective safety net to highlight the correct content as aligned with the external assessment for staff who were not aware of the QCAA memos. Both QCAA and school personnel from both the affected and non-affected schools made consistent and constant references to the usability of the QCAA website. School staff expressed their frustration at the multiple locations they had to know and access to source appropriate information to effectively deliver the curriculum.

During interviews, the QCAA articulated plans for a review and a possible reconfiguration of the website. Teachers identified a need for a single 'point of truth' containing all relevant information, including relevant memos for each General Subject, to mitigate the risk of misalignment of teaching and assessment. Parent groups also relayed the value of public-facing websites which are culturally and linguistically appropriate for all parents; this allows

them to provide better support to their children (and schools) as partners in learning with their senior students. Some parent groups saw that informing parents about the external examination processes can function as another mitigation factor.

### ***Improved quality assurance and validation processes***

The investigation found that this error would be less likely to have occurred if Ancient History had a validation and/or registration process in 2025. All affected schools commented that if they had been required in the year of assessment to validate or register the examination topic through existing QCAA processes, the risk of error would have been reduced. This would also be consistent with registration processes that currently exist for other General Subjects, such as English. Through the interview process many schools identified that a consistent validation or registration process across all General Subjects would better support school-based quality assurance processes. The QCAA also noted the benefits of increased quality assurance processes, including strengthening validation and registration of external examination topics.

### ***Best Practice: Learning from other jurisdictions***

It became evident through the jurisdiction conversations that best practice for risk mitigation at the system level is underpinned by system predictability, consistency, precision, and collaboration. Throughout the cross jurisdictional interviews, as well as in interviews with other stakeholders, these four underpinning pillars were highlighted through practice.

#### ***System predictability***

Through conversations with senior officers from curriculum authorities in other Australian jurisdictions, it was evident that a predictable cycle of renewal for syllabus and assessment is a strong mitigating factor. The investigation found that, in one jurisdiction, within the lifetime of a syllabus, only the prescribed resources change, and these changes are communicated 18 months prior to implementation.

#### ***Consistent and clear messaging***

Other jurisdictions highlighted the need for consistency of messaging as a strategy for mitigating risk. Practices from other jurisdictions included:

- the use of official notifications (memo equivalent) as the means for communicating prescribed resource changes. To ensure consistency and accessibility, these are dated, sent to all sectors, uploaded to relevant syllabus locations, to the public website and to social media sites.
- weekly communications inclusive of official notifications are sent to all subscribers, providing consistent and clear messaging.
- official notifications are co-located with the syllabus. Storing all related and critical information together, including changes to syllabus, assessment and resources, ensures predictability and consistency and acts as a 'one stop shop' for users.

#### ***Precision in implementation of syllabus, teaching, and assessment***

In another jurisdiction, secondary schools are required to provide students at the start of each school year with a curriculum overview and an assessment schedule. These schedules must align with the state's Curriculum Authority's requirements and link directly to the



Authority's official assessment schedules. The assessment schedule includes dates, types of tasks and weightings. Schools are expected to ensure that their internal schedules match the Authority's published timelines for external examinations.

In that same jurisdiction, the Curriculum Authority conducts Syllabus Delivery Audits (SDA). The SDA is a senior school moderation activity whereby schools are required to submit a course outline and assessment outline when offering either a new course or a recently reviewed course in Years 11 and 12. The SDA operates with other moderation activities to provide a broader picture of assessment practices in a course and at a school for a particular course. The purpose of the SDA is to ensure that schools are implementing the correct syllabus and to ensure comparability between schools. This supports fairness for all students no matter which school they attend. In addition, in any given year, for a selection of courses, schools may be required to submit a course outline and assessment outline for a given course to the Authority for review.

### ***The benefits of a collaborative approach***

Across both jurisdictions it was clear that there is collaboration through multiple layers of governance inclusive of all levels of stakeholders, internal and external. These governance structures provide approvals for critical changes to curriculum, teaching and assessment and have explicit discussions to ensure cognisance of the impact on schools and teachers of all the critical changes in one year.

### ***Insights for the future: Potential next steps***

With a view to mitigating future risk across all General Subjects, the investigation panel identified a range of possible short and long-term actions from the perspectives of contributing stakeholders. During the interviews, stakeholders proposed a range of next-step measures intended to reduce the risk of teaching the wrong content in a sustained way.

#### **Short-term actions**

In the short-term, existing frameworks and processes could be strengthened to address risk. It should be noted that with the introduction of the 2025 Ancient History Syllabus, Unit 4 content will be aligned to the external examination and schools have been advised that in 2026 and 2027, they will choose and validate through a registration process one of two selected historical figures – Julius Caesar or Cleopatra. This change to a choice of topic in Unit 4 rather than a single mandated topic is a change in process requiring schools to engage in a QCAA registration process in the year of the external examination. This will reduce the risk of teaching the wrong content for an external examination.

#### **Long-term actions: Insights from QCAA discussions**

##### ***Validation to support quality assurance***

As previously emphasised, the development of a validation or registration process for external examination topics where there is a single mandated topic would better support alignment between syllabus, teaching, and assessment. In these cases, the process is not related to the school's choice of topic but instead acts as a confirmation from the school that they know the topic of the external examination and plan to teach aligned content. This validation/registration process could occur in both the year before and the year of the

external examination thereby reducing the risk that staff transitions create a knowledge gap in the school.

### ***Ensure a single point of truth***

The annual external examination timetable includes the external assessments for General and General (Extension) subjects. The timetable is designed to: minimise clashes for students across the examination period; ensure most students sit no more than two external assessments on one day; provide sufficient breaks between external assessments for popular courses and frequently combined courses; and enable all external assessments to be marked in time for students to receive their final Year 12 results. The examination timetable is an essential tool, continuously accessed by schools, students, and parents following its release in May each year. QCAA may consider including external examination topics in the examination timetable, as this could be a significant mitigation strategy to reduce the risk of misalignment between teaching and the examination topic. If this document listed the date and time of each examination and the topic/s of examinations, this would serve as a reliable point of truth for schools, parents, and students.

### ***Leverage digital infrastructure to enable easy retrieval of critical information***

Another practical strategy for reducing the risk of critical information being missed is to ensure that key content is prominently posted in high-traffic areas of organisational portals and websites within the QCAA. By deliberately positioning critical updates on pages users most frequently visit — such as landing pages, dashboards, or commonly accessed resource hubs — the QCAA can significantly increase visibility and accessibility of information, reducing the likelihood that important information is overlooked. This approach not only leverages existing digital infrastructure but also aligns with user behaviour, recognising that stakeholders are more likely to notice and act upon information that is embedded within their routine points of access.

## **Long-term actions: Insights from Other Stakeholder Discussions**

### ***Clarity and consistency of information***

Current practice in Ancient History is to list a series of topics for study in Unit 4, with the QCAA advising schools at least 12 months in advance of the external examination topic(s). This information is not formally embedded in the syllabus. Stakeholders noted the syllabus functions as the primary reference point for teachers, and therefore the absence of examination topics is a lost opportunity to create clarity and consistency. Much discussion highlighted that embedding the external examination topics directly into the syllabus would provide an additional safeguard for schools and teachers. Notwithstanding the need for periodic updates during the life of the syllabus cycle, such integration will ensure that critical information is visible and accessible in the document most relied upon by educators. This measure would strengthen alignment between teaching practice and assessment expectations, reduce the risk of miscommunication, and enhance confidence that schools are adequately prepared for external examinations.

### ***The benefits of a 'just-in-time' communication strategy***

Many stakeholders commented on the desire for the QCAA to communicate the external examination topics in the year of the assessment through official memos. This addition to the official memos which are provided two years and then again one year prior to the external examination being conducted would strengthen current practice. This reissuing of the memo

in the year of the external examination is in line with a 'just-in-time' strategy, which delivers critical information at the moment it is most useful, enhancing efficiency, clarity, and engagement. Associated with this is the desire of schools to receive memos attached to emails so that there is 'one less click' to access information. This also encompasses the desire to receive emails that quickly indicate the level of importance of the information to the receiver.

### ***Proactive management of high-stakes changes***

There was a strong desire from a range of stakeholders for the development of an annual summary document that, in one place, lists all critical and high-stakes changes and updates to the senior program for the coming year. Curriculum leaders in schools, who hold responsibility for quality assurance of the senior program across multiple subjects, made this request explicitly. The proposal was also supported by regulatory authorities, employing authorities, and peak bodies, who noted that such a document would serve as a central reference point. Importantly, it would also enable these organisations to reinforce key messages to schools, ensuring consistent communication while promoting collaboration in distributing information through a variety of channels. This document would also serve as a resource for NSSAB's Authorised Persons (APs) when they are undertaking school visits.

### ***Enable asynchronous access to professional development opportunities***

The QCAA's provision of synchronous professional development to support teachers' implementation of syllabus and assessment is valued by school staff. These synchronous opportunities and events, both in-person and virtual, include QCAA presentations at professional association meetings and conferences, communities of practice, webinars, and syllabus familiarisation workshops. Some school staff noted that, due to factors such as geographic isolation, family commitments, and limited access to relief staff, they are not always able to attend scheduled events. However, they expressed strong interest in being able to engage with a recorded version of these sessions later. Complementing existing synchronous delivery of these opportunities to allow flexible and inclusive asynchronous engagement may better enable school staff to benefit from the content despite attendance constraints.

### ***Maximise organisational evaluation and learning***

Following any error, systems typically undertake a structured review to identify what occurred and to explore opportunities for mitigating the likelihood of recurrence to reduce the impact on students. Stakeholders spoke of the need for QCAA to review their current critical documents, such as incident plans and risk management plans to ensure they are updated to include this newly identified risk (teaching of incorrect content for an external examination). This would support the consideration and development of a range of short and long-term mitigation strategies. This reflects risk management theory and organisational learning principles, ensuring risks are reduced to acceptable levels, resilience is strengthened, and the damage to reputational risk is minimised.

### ***Use co-design principles to create a user-friendly single point of truth***

Stakeholders consistently reported challenges in using the QCAA portal and public-facing website. This was particularly true for schools, who have responsibility for implementing critical information provided by the QCAA. There was a strong desire from both school and QCAA staff to undertake a usability review of these digital interfaces to ensure these serve

as reliable resources and a single point of truth for staff in the field. Further, this review could also encompass digital communication protocols. A recurring message was the need to reorganise the website so that subject-specific spaces are available, enabling teachers to locate all materials related to their subject area in one place. Embedding this structure would streamline navigation to reduce the risk of critical information being overlooked. In line with current best practices in digital platform design, several features were discussed as essential to increase usability including mobile-friendly design. QCAA discussions also indicated that a potential action could be for external examination information to be included on individual student and teacher portals and may, in the long term, be specific to that student and/or the school.

## Concluding Comments

The Investigation Panel heard and considered a range of contributing causal factors, best practice examples, and actions that hold potential to inform and strengthen future practice. This report consolidates and synthesises those key findings with a view to supporting ongoing alignment between syllabus requirements, teaching in schools, and student assessment. The success of any short or long-term risk mitigation strategies will depend on sustained collaboration among all stakeholders, ensuring shared accountability and coordinated action into the future.

For a variety of reasons, including time limitations and the investigation timing occurring at a critical period in the school academic year, this investigation did not undertake a comprehensive jurisdictional review. However, the investigation found that there are potential practices undertaken in other jurisdictions that may offer insights in the long-term that could help to limit impact on student outcomes in future. This report has outlined website design, validation, and/or registration processes, and implementing consistent and predictable syllabus cycles as potential mechanisms for strengthening Queensland's arrangements for externally examined subjects.

Finally, while this report necessarily examined the systemic causal factors that contributed to the 2025 teaching of the incorrect Ancient History topic in nine Queensland secondary schools and outlined best practice processes to prevent recurrence, the unwavering focus remains on students. This investigation has been guided by a commitment to ensuring that no student or family is disadvantaged by misalignment between teaching and assessment at such a critical stage of the educational journey. Above all, our work is driven by the principle of every student realising their potential — through achievement, wellbeing, and engagement across schooling. Students, their learning, and their wellbeing are, and will continue to be, at the centre of all that we do.

## **Investigation into the 2025 teaching of the incorrect Ancient History topic in nine Queensland High Schools**

### **Terms of Reference**

November 2025

## Revision History

Revision date	Version Number	Author	Description of changes
14/11/2025	0.1 (Draft)	Michelle Brown	Initial Draft
17/11/2025	0.5 (Draft)	Various	Updated Draft
18/11/2025	Final	Various	Final for Director-General consideration

## Approvals

This document requires the following approvals in Content Manager:

Position	Name	Action required
Deputy Director-General, Strategic Policy and External Relations	Kathleen Forrester	Endorse
Director-General	Sharon Schimming	Approve



## Purpose

This Terms of Reference defines the authority, objectives, and scope of activities of the investigation into the circumstances surrounding the teaching of the incorrect Ancient History topic in nine Queensland high schools for the 2025 external Ancient History exam.

## Objectives of the Investigation

The objectives of the investigation are to:

- Document any systemic causal factors leading to the teaching of an incorrect Ancient History topic in nine Queensland high schools for the 2025 external Ancient History exam.
- Identify best practice processes to prevent a recurrence of the incident.
- Make findings in relation to actions that should be taken by any relevant organization or person to prevent incorrect teaching of topics for any externally examined subject.
- Make any other findings arising from this investigation that could help to strengthen Queensland's arrangements for externally examined subjects.

## Authority

The investigation will be undertaken by a three-person panel (the Panel), with a range of expertise, comprising:

Panel member	Current role	Expertise
<b>Dr Grant Webb</b>	Education consultant	Education system operations and improvement
<b>Panel Chair</b>		
<b>Christine Ashton</b>	Executive Director, Department of Education	Legal and regulatory expertise Non-state school regulatory arrangements
<b>Lisa Starmer</b>	Executive Principal, Office of the Assistant Director-General Human Resources	Secondary school leadership

The Panel's work will include:

- gathering information on changes to the 2025 Ancient History external exam;
- consulting with relevant stakeholders to inform the investigation;

- considering arrangements in other jurisdictions to inform observations about best practice, including the role of parents and students;
- preparing an investigation report with findings.

The Panel will seek support (if required) and provide updates on the work of the investigation, including the consultation plan and a verbal briefing on the draft investigation report jointly to:

Queensland Department of Education

- Leanne Nixon, Deputy Director-General, School and Regional Operations and Performance
- Kathleen Forrester, Deputy Director-General, Strategic Policy and External Relations

Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA)

- Mark Campling, Chair QCAA Board

Non-State Schools Accreditation Board (NSSAB)

- Patea Walton, Chair NSSAB Board

The Panel will deliver a final investigation report to the Director-General, Department of Education.

## Scope

The following areas are **in scope** for the investigation:

- Existing model
  - The effectiveness of systems and processes used by the QCAA to communicate 2025 external assessment topics to schools, families and students, including processes to ensure information was being acted upon.
  - The effectiveness of processes used by the QCAA to manage changes in external assessment topics.
  - The effectiveness of arrangements at system, region and/or school level to assure teaching is aligned with external assessment topics.
- Future model
  - Best practice processes for ensuring teaching aligns with QCAA external assessment topics, including through review of processes used by other jurisdictions or for other subjects in Queensland.

The following areas are **out of scope** for the investigation findings:

- Impacts of the incident on students and families
- Human error within the QCAA, regions or schools.

## Investigation Operating Approach

- The Panel will prepare a Consultation Plan naming stakeholders to be engaged as part of the investigation. Stakeholders to be interviewed include:
  - QCAA Board members and executive
  - NSSAB Board members and Secretariat
  - Department of Education executive
  - Non-State Schools executive
  - Queensland Secondary Principals Association
  - History Teachers Association
  - Queensland Teachers Union and Independent Education Union
  - Principals of impacted schools and other relevant school community members as determined by the principal
  - Parent Associations including P&Cs Queensland, Catholic School Parents Queensland, Queensland Independent Schools Parents Network, Isolated Children and Parent Association
- As part of the investigation, the Panel will access QCAA materials and technology (such as Portals) relevant to the incident.
- The Panel will provide a draft written report of key findings to the Director-General by 25 November 2025.
- The Panel will be bound by the public service code of conduct and be prohibited from making any comments to media. The Panel must also declare any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest at the commencement of the investigation or as soon as they arise. The Director-General will determine how any conflict is to be managed.
- Decision making by the panel will be by consensus where possible, with escalation to the Director-General of any matters that cannot be resolved by the Panel through consensus.
- The Panel will be assisted by a senior officer, who will report to the Deputy Director-General Strategic Policy and External Relations for the duration of the investigation.

Ends

## Appendix 2: Consultation Data

The following tables provide de-identified data regarding interviews conducted by the Investigation Panel.

### School personnel

Number of meetings	13
Number of Principals	12
Number of Deputy Principals	9
Number of other school personnel	12

### QCAA and NSSAB: (Board and staff members)

Number of meetings	3
Number of Board Members	3
Number of Staff	7

### System and Peak Body Executives

Number of meetings	3
Number of participants	4

### Associations/Unions/Parent Body Personnel

Number of meetings	6
Number of participants	9

### Other Jurisdictions

Number of meetings	2
Number of participants	7

27  
Consultation  
Meetings

63  
Stakeholders