

Incident Review

Review of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority



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Foreword from the Independent Reviewer

For most Victorian families and their children, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) – mostly undertaken in one and sometimes two years – is the most stressful and consequential of their schooling years. It is a reasonable expectation for the Victorian community to have the preparation of examination papers undertaken without development and production errors. Regrettably, for the past three years (2022–24) the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) has performed below expectations in this most critical role.

In its current form, the VCAA operates under the Education and Training Reform Act 2006. It undertakes a range of important functions relating to the development of policies, criteria and standards for curriculum and assessment for students ranging from early childhood to senior secondary. Of those, the most important and public-facing one is the preparation and assessment of the VCE.

Following the problems that emerged in 2024, the Minister for Education, the Hon. Ben Carroll MLA, announced a ‘Root-and-Branch’ Review of the VCAA. The Review will report to the Secretary of the Department of Education and comprises two reports.

This first report is intended to answer three questions:

1. What happened to cause the unintentional disclosure of examination content?
2. Why did these problems occur?
3. What steps need to be taken to minimise the likelihood of such problems recurring in 2025?

The second report will be a review of the entire organisation, examining whether it is fit for the important roles it is required to perform. That report will cover the VCAA’s governance, the capabilities of its staffing, the adequacy of its resourcing, its organisational culture, and its structure.

Each of the failures of the past three years has specific explanations as to why they occurred. Taken together, however, they reveal systemic shortfalls in the quality of governance and some parts of the VCAA management. Accordingly, responsibility should be shared by the VCAA Board and those in management roles covering the preparation and production of the examination papers, over a longer period than just the one year covered by this report.

We are cognisant that the VCAA is in the throes of preparing for the 2025 VCE examinations, as well as the General Achievement Tests (GAT) and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). For 76,000 students this year, the VCE examinations are of utmost importance. Accordingly, the recommendations in this first report are, in the first instance, directed at strengthening the examination preparation and production processes by addressing issues of immediate importance without disrupting these processes.

The time available for the preparation of this report has been necessarily short. It could not have been done without the active cooperation of the staff and management of the VCAA. For many staff, reliving the difficult experiences of 2024 was particularly stressful. I appreciate

their willingness to engage actively with this part of the Review in the spirit of making improvements to the operations of the VCAA.

This report could not have been produced without the excellent professional support provided by the KordaMentha team; Morgan Forrest, Marija Simich, Dilir Ali and George Waterman. Their commitment to the task, their empathy during staff interviews and the quality of their analyses were first rate.

I commend this report to the Secretary of the Department of Education.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Y. Blacher', with a stylized, cursive script.

Yehudi Blacher

Independent Reviewer

VCAA Root-and-Branch Review

11th April 2025

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Executive Summary

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) is a statutory authority tasked with designing and administering high quality curriculum and assessment for over one million Victorian students across 2,300 schools. Every year, the VCAA develops and delivers over one hundred VCE examinations to more than 70,000 students across Victoria and internationally as the final milestone of their secondary school education. In recent years, a small but significant number of errors in the development and delivery of these examinations have necessitated successive reviews.

In 2022, errors in the Mathematics examinations, identified after the examinations had taken place, led to a review undertaken by Deloitte consultants. The review recommended improvements to the process of appointing, training and providing feedback to different cohorts involved in the development of examinations. While recommendations were accepted, the VCAA was slow to respond and commence implementation.

In 2023, multiple errors in Mathematics and Chemistry examinations, as well as the incorrect distribution of a Chinese Second Language paper at two schools, led to the commissioning of a further review led by Professor John Bennett. The review recommended additional reforms to the Mathematics and Science examination development processes. All recommendations were accepted to be implemented, with some still necessarily in progress at the time of writing.

In 2024, the VCE examinations faced further challenges due to the unintentional disclosure of examination content. The incident comprised multiple issues:

- i. Compounding delays in the examination development schedule, with late-stage processes two weeks behind a critical production deadline.
- ii. The need to make up for lost time led to the suggestion of a new process for the way in which sample cover pages were created.
- iii. The new process was intended to generate sample cover pages from the original examination papers by linking the pages in a way that examination content would not be visible. However, this process unintentionally enabled some questions and stimulus material¹ to be revealed using commonly available software. This occurred in 65 of the 116 VCE examinations.
- iv. The initial response to the unintentional disclosure did not address the issue. Some examination content continued to be 'visible' to people using more advanced software.
- v. A decision to rewrite all the disclosed examination content was impacted by a lack of clarity in the instructions given to the examination panels responsible for the rewrites.
- vi. Logistical issues in the distribution of rewritten examinations.

¹ Stimulus materials include case studies and graphics to which students are prompted to respond to in examinations.

Subsequent actions were undertaken to assure the integrity of the 2024 examinations, notably the commissioning of the Expert Advisory Panel chaired by Professor John Firth.

In response to the 2024 incident, the Minister for Education commissioned a 'Root-and-Branch' Review of the VCAA.

The Review will deliver two reports:

1. This report, which considers the incidents of the 2024 examination development process, including the causes of the incidents and recommendations to prevent recurrence in 2025
2. The second report, which will investigate whether the VCAA in its current form can adequately undertake the functions for which it is responsible

Methodology

The understanding of the events in 2024 has been established and validated through discussions with VCAA Executives and staff, some Board members and, where appropriate, corroborating material and records provided by the VCAA. In some instances, corroborating material was not available and we have relied on the accuracy and completeness of information provided by Executives and staff.

How did the disclosures occur?

Sample cover pages are a resource published on the VCAA website to allow students to familiarise themselves with the 'look and feel' of the first pages of each examination. They do not provide new information but are published for the benefit of some teachers and students. The disclosures occurred due to a change in the customary practice used to develop these sample cover pages.

Numerous delays occurred in the examination development process throughout 2024 that were not rectified through Executive or Board action. Due to a two-week delay in the finalisation of examinations, the team responsible for the creation and uploading of sample cover pages was undertaking multiple duties within a compressed timeframe.

To expedite the production of sample cover pages, the previous process – which involved creating new files and copying across only relevant information – was revised. A new tool was utilised to 'link' the cover page to the finalised examination and restrict what could be viewed to exclude examination content. This process was intended to make up for lost time arising from delays in the finalisation of examinations. However, all data on linked pages, including stimulus materials and questions from examinations, were unintentionally embedded into the sample cover pages. This change in process was neither formally approved nor assessed for risk.

Less than a week after the sample cover pages had been uploaded, a VCAA examination panel member discovered that examination content on sample cover pages could be 'selected' by using commonly available software. Further investigation initially identified that 55 examinations were impacted. The discovery was escalated, and a select group of Executives and managers conferred to develop a response. Having considered potential pathways, the

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) decided that 53 of the 55 examinations identified as containing sensitive materials should be rewritten². A report by cybersecurity specialists later revealed that 65 examinations had been impacted.

Approximately one hundred staff were mobilised to rewrite the disclosed questions within a two-day timeframe. To minimise disruption, staff were only given guidance relating to their area of responsibility, and it appears that different groups were given differing information. A truncated oversight process was implemented to manage the rewrite, but the extent of change was ultimately inconsistent and, in some cases, insufficient to address the problem.

In order to meet examination deadlines, the VCAA engaged additional printing contractors and reprinted all examination content. Upon completion of reprints, the VCAA amended the marking guides for rewritten questions and commenced packaging and distribution of examination papers. There were several minor errors in the packaging process, as system constraints necessitated manual repacking. Staff ensured that the reprinted examinations were able to reach schools prior to their VCE examinations. Of the 76,000 students sitting over 300,000 written VCE examinations in 2024, there were 24 instances of a student receiving an incorrect examination paper. These students were assessed using the original marking guides to ensure they were not disadvantaged.

The situation was gradually brought to public awareness through multiple channels- including internet posts from people who had downloaded and uncovered the examination content on sample cover pages, teachers who had received the original version of the examination (prior to rewrites), and via reports in the media.

An Expert Advisory Panel led by Professor John Firth was commissioned to assess any impacts to the integrity of examinations. Professor Firth concluded that a very small number of results were anomalous, and were therefore excluded from the sample used to scale marking to avoid any potential disadvantage to students.

Causes of the disclosures

The review has determined the root causes of the unintentional disclosure of examination content and inadequate resolution of the issue to be:

1. Lack of appropriate Board-level oversight in the development and production of examination papers.
2. Poor management capabilities in the areas of the VCAA responsible for the development and production of examination papers.
3. Unacceptably weak identification and management of risks for crucial processes.
4. Poor project management capabilities in critical areas of the organisation.
5. Insufficiently documented critical processes, and variable levels of compliance.

² It was decided that Music Contemporary Performance and Music Repertoire Performance would not be rewritten, due to only stimulus material and not questions having been disclosed, and the difficulty in rerecording stimulus material CDs for these subjects. It was subsequently decided to rewrite these two examinations after the disclosure became public

6. Ineffective management of change.
7. No evidence of crisis planning.

Our recommendations in this first report will be limited to those which require immediate attention in 2025.

Our second report will examine these issues in more detail and make recommendations on longer term changes to the structure, operational processes, capabilities and technology utilised by the VCAA in its important work.

Recommendations for 2025 VCE Examinations

The VCAA's examination development and production processes are extremely complex involving high levels of risk. Accordingly, the recommendations below are confined to those which we believe the VCAA can implement without disrupting the preparation of the 2025 examination papers.

1. Reconstitute the VCAA Board to include additional capabilities in critical governance areas.
2. Cease the creation of sample cover pages.
3. Create a more senior executive director role as a single point of accountability for end-to-end delivery of examinations.
4. Clearly document the examination development process end-to-end, identifying and managing key risks.
5. Ensure clear, specific accountabilities that align to defined milestones in the examination development process.
6. Strengthen the risk and project management capability of those responsible for the examination development process
7. Conduct regular crisis planning at an executive level in conjunction with the VCAA Board
8. Pilot the development of an examination repository for select subjects

With assurance provided by Ms Margret Crawford, the Independent Monitor, we are confident that the implementation of these recommendations will minimise the likelihood of the problems of 2024 recurring in 2025.

Background

Summary of VCAA remit

The VCAA is a statutory authority established to oversee the development of high-quality curriculum and assessments for over one million Victorian students across 2,300 schools ranging from early childhood to senior secondary. It operates under the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006 (Vic)* and is primarily responsible to the Minister for Education.³

The VCAA's legislative responsibilities include, but are not limited to:

- **Policy Development:** Creating policies, criteria, and standards for learning, development, and assessments, from early childhood to senior secondary education.
- **Curriculum and Assessment:** Developing and maintaining standards for curriculum, assessments, and courses, including those leading to registered qualifications.
- **Performance Measurement:** Conducting assessments and reporting on early childhood learning and development, as well as school student performance.
- **Reporting:** Providing assessment results to the Minister, Secretary, and relevant bodies.
- **Support and Resources:** Offering resources and professional development to educators to support curriculum and assessment implementation.

Specifically, the VCAA has remit over the policy, design and reform of curriculum and assessment across Early Childhood Education, F-10 and VCE, and delivers NAPLAN and GAT assessments for Victorian students. It also designs the Vocational Education and Training (VET) curriculum and assessments, a foundational pathway into trades or higher vocational education including TAFE. The VCAA is a registered Senior Secondary Awarding Body with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and is responsible for the awarding of its VCE and Victorian Pathways Certificate (VPC) courses to VRQA registered schools.

While all of its activities are important, none are as public-facing or scrutinised as the development and delivery of the VCE examinations every year.⁴ Public trust in the VCAA, and its social licence to operate, is directly tied to the successful delivery of VCE examinations.

Introduction to the Root-and-Branch Review and terms of reference

The Minister for Education commissioned this Review in response to the problems with VCE examinations in 2024 following problems in both 2022 and 2023. This Review will assess the performance of the VCAA in delivering its core functions and make recommendations to ensure the organisation is fit-for-purpose and equipped to regain the trust of the Victorian public.

The Review will deliver two reports:

³ An overview of the organisational structure has been included in Appendix 2.

⁴ An explanation of the VCE Examination development process has been included in Appendix 3

1. This report considering the incidents of the 2024 examination process, including the causes of the incidents and recommendations to minimise the likelihood of recurrence in 2025
2. A second report investigating whether the VCAA in its current form can adequately undertake the functions for which it is responsible

The recommendations made in this report have been developed in consultation with the Independent Monitor.

Section 1: Events leading up to the disclosure of VCE examination content

Issues prior to 2024

Over the past five years, the VCAA has faced significant challenges which have exposed critical vulnerabilities and eroded public trust. The VCAA was seen to adapt well to the COVID-19 pandemic, transitioning to examination development with Panels online and ensuring all examinations were conducted in line with COVID requirements. This marked a significant change to the culture and processes in the organisation.

In 2022 however, critical errors in several VCE examinations including Mathematics affected approximately 10,000 students and highlighted systemic issues in the examination development and production process. This prompted the VCAA to engage Deloitte to undertake a review of the sources of the errors. The 2022 Deloitte Review made a number of recommendations regarding the appointment, training and provision of feedback to Examination Panels, Examination Development Managers and Reviewers. Despite receiving the report in August 2023, it was not considered by the full Board until December, with implementation commencing in February 2024.

Issues persisted into 2023, with multiple errors in Mathematics and Chemistry examinations, and the incorrect distribution of a Chinese Second Language paper at two schools, further eroding public trust. These errors included the invalidation of seven questions due to ambiguities or factual inaccuracies identified in the VCAA's post-examination quality assurance processes. This resulted in the Secretary of the Department commissioning a review led by Professor John Bennett, that recommended significant further reform to the Mathematics and Science examination development processes. All recommendations were accepted and are in the process of being progressively implemented.

At the leadership level, frequent change over the past five years – with six Acting and substantive CEOs and nine Executive Directors – has contributed to decreased employee morale and created organisational instability. While the 2024 incidents occurred during Acting CEO (subsequently substantive CEO) Ms Kylie White's tenure, the issues of 2022 and 2023 occurred under previous CEO Mr Stephen Gniel. Successive changes have contributed to an environment where many staff feel uncertain about the future of the organisation and disrupted the VCAA's ability to deliver on its critical activities. This has been reflected in the VCAA's People Matter Survey results which display poor confidence in senior leadership, low engagement from staff and increasing levels of work-related stress.

Changes to 2024 examination development process

Following the receipt of the Bennett Review in March 2024, a number of additional staff were appointed to the VCAA to assist with the implementation of its recommendations. Several of the Review's recommendations sought to improve the review and oversight of examination-setting procedures for Mathematics and Sciences, including several quality assurance steps. These were intended to be implemented in 2024. Concurrently, the then Acting CEO sought to improve project management processes in the setting of VCE examinations, including the adoption of daily process meetings in the Examinations Unit (EXU). A further change was

undertaken to redesign examination templates to meet accessibility requirements and to improve efficiency in the publishing process.

Delays in the 2024 examinations

Delays in meeting critical timelines began early in 2024. Examination Panels submitted 27 of 106 draft examinations after the 26 February deadline.⁵ These delays arose due to several factors including the late appointment of Panels and difficulty in securing Panel members who would be available during the examination development process.

Further delays occurred in mid-May, when 64 of 106 examinations missed the deadline to be sent to the teams responsible for editor mark-up and publication processes. As a result, the process of converting examinations to a print-ready format was required to be completed in a much shorter timeframe than usual.

Work capacity was further disrupted by an office move – requiring staff to move sensitive materials– and the departure of three experienced production support staff.

By 31 August, 53 of 106 examinations missed the final deadline when examination papers were due to be sent for printing. All 106 examinations were finalised and sent to print on 13 September, two weeks behind the deadline.

The Board did not receive or request any formal updates as to the status of the examinations throughout 2024 and several Board members have advised that they were not aware of the delays.

⁵ VCAA delivers 116 VCE Examinations per year but develops 106, with several smaller examinations being developed by interstate agencies.

Section 2: Unintentional disclosure of examination content

Delays to the development of alternative format examinations and sample cover pages

For many years, the VCAA has published sample cover pages as a matter of customary practice, despite not formally being required by the VCE administrative handbook. These pages are utilised by some teachers and students to familiarise themselves with the 'look and feel' of the VCE examinations. They do not provide additional information about the examination.

The creation of sample cover pages typically commences after the examination papers have been sent to the printers. Preparation of sample cover pages is generally undertaken over a two-week period between 31 August and 15 September within the Examinations Unit.

Alternative Format examinations are developed at the same time, adapting examination formats for students with special considerations (e.g. braille). The number of unique alternative formats being developed has almost doubled in four years from 48 in 2021, to 88 in 2024 due to a change in policy to provide schools greater freedom in their special considerations requests. Alternative Format examinations are typically developed by two experienced sessional staff to meet a 1 October deadline.

Examination packing typically does not commence until all examinations – including Alternative Format examinations – are printed and ready to dispatch.⁶ Due to delays in 2024, meeting this deadline required the diversion of resources normally dedicated to the development of sample cover pages. The responsible unit also undertook further work re-publishing four examinations which had been found to contain minor errors.

As a consequence of delays and competing priorities, the unit missed its customary deadline for uploading sample cover pages on 20 September, the end of Term 3. The deadline for Alternative Format examinations was also missed by two weeks.

Development of an alternative approach for developing sample cover pages

Following the end of Term 3, the VCAA started to receive correspondence from teachers enquiring as to when the 2024 sample cover pages would be available. To make up the time lost in the two-week delay, one member of the unit approached the responsible manager with a suggestion for a new approach to the creation of cover pages. This team member was experienced in using the relevant software application and had in the past suggested more efficient and faster techniques using the software. Limited detail was provided on the new approach, and no formal approval was requested or given.

On 3 October, the staff member who created the new approach for developing cover pages provided training for other team members. The relevant team at this time was supporting the development of backlogged Alternative Format examinations in addition to regular duties, with

⁶ It is possible to send Alternative Format examinations in a separate package to schools, but this approach is more costly and discouraged.

supervisory duties stretched across teams to backfill for absences. As a result, the proposed change was not properly examined.

Creation of sample cover pages

The customary practice of developing sample cover pages was to copy only instructional information from a finalised examination and paste it within a blank file. This practice was typically undertaken over the course of two weeks and involved printing and approval of each cover page by the relevant Examination Development Manager (EDM).

The intention of the new approach was to use a function of the software which would link the cover page to relevant pages from the actual examination paper and obscure sensitive examination content to produce the sample cover page. It was intended that this process would accelerate the process for the creation of sample cover pages.⁷ The new approach did not include individual approval for each cover page by EDMs.

On 4 October, 74 cover pages were created in one day using the new approach.⁸ That afternoon, the responsible manager conducted a visual inspection of cover pages and approved them to be uploaded to the VCAA website.

In practice, the new 'linking' approach caused examination content to be embedded in the uploaded pages. This information was not visible to the eye, however, because security protocols were not applied as a matter of custom⁹, the text was discoverable should anyone select and highlight the invisible text.

The disclosed examination content discoverable on cover pages included:

- Stimulus materials only (5 of 74 cover pages)
- Stimulus materials and questions (39 of 74 cover pages)
- Questions only (21 of 74 cover pages)

As a result of the Cyber Response Partner review, it was determined that 9 of the 74 uploaded cover pages did not include discoverable examination content. This is because several examinations did not include questions or stimulus material on the first page the paper.

⁷ A detailed explanation of this approach has been included in Appendix 4

⁸ VCAA publish cover pages for 74/106 VCE examinations. 42 remaining are language examinations for which no sample cover page is provided.

⁹ The customary publishing of sample cover pages without security protocols was for the benefit of teachers who may wish to copy and paste information from the cover pages into their own notes

Section 3: Discovery and response to the unintentional disclosure

Internal discovery of the unintentional disclosure

On Saturday 12 October, a member of the Mathematical Methods Examination Panel discovered unintentionally disclosed examination content within the sample cover pages and alerted the VCAA. The CEO was informed and instructed that all cover pages be taken down. Relevant staff reviewed all published cover pages and initially identified 55 containing examination content.¹⁰

The Board Chair and Departmental Secretary were informed of the breach.

Emergency planning of the VCAA response

The following day, a meeting was held with relevant Executives and staff. Staff undertook a side-by-side comparison of materials on sample cover pages by printing copies of each examination and highlighting which questions and stimulus materials had been compromised.

The meeting discussed options for responding to the disclosure. Rewriting of questions was deemed necessary for the integrity of examinations, but reprinting was not considered feasible at this stage. In the case that reprinting was not possible, rewritten questions would need to be provided to students as an addendum prior to the start of examinations. At that point, it was decided that examinations where only stimulus materials (and no questions) were disclosed would not be rewritten. This excluded English, Theatre Studies, Aboriginal Languages in Victoria and two Music Examinations from rewriting.

An assessment of website data found the sample cover pages containing the disclosed examination content had been viewed approximately 6,000 times. Internet forum activity indicates that a number of students saved the sample cover pages directly to their local hard drives, but it has not been possible to determine how many. The meeting initially allocated responsibility of rewriting 243 questions and stimulus materials to key staff with specialist knowledge.

An agreed explanation was prepared for communicating to these staff about the breach and need for rewriting, but did not explain the nature of the breach.

The CEO advised the Chair of the Board, and Departmental Secretary of the decision to rewrite questions. Later that afternoon staff advised that reprinting would be possible should additional printing contractors be engaged. However, the matter of reprinting examinations or issuing addenda was not yet decided. As a result, it was not yet clear whether public statements relating to the disclosure would be necessary. This influenced the level of transparency in internally communicating with staff undertaking rewrites.

¹⁰ Original analysis on 12 October discovered 55 examinations contained sensitive materials; subsequent technical analysis after the examinations revealed that 65 cover pages contained sensitive materials.

Inconsistent guidance on the rewriting of compromised questions

On Monday 14 October, the staff responsible for rewriting questions were given physical copies of the impacted examinations with disclosed examination content highlighted, a sign off sheet to track each step of the rewriting process, and an approved message to be read to Panel Chairs or subject matter experts assisting with rewrites. To prioritise confidentiality, staff were not provided context as to why rewrites were required. Staff were also not provided with explicit guidance by Executives on the extent to which materials should be rewritten.

Lack of agreed, explicit standards for rewriting questions amongst the Executive was a problem that would later manifest in some changes being determined as insufficient after the examination period had concluded. Interviews revealed that Executives themselves did not have a common view of what constituted 'sufficient rewriting', particularly with respect to stimulus materials. One assumed that new materials would be entirely different to those originally developed. Another assumed that the level of rewriting only needed to adhere to a standard commonly provided to schools when using externally-developed assessments. This standard stipulates that minor changes to stimulus materials are acceptable if significant changes to corresponding questions are made. It is for this reason that some final examination materials looked very similar to those unintentionally disclosed but were considered 'sufficiently different' by relevant VCAA staff to ensure no technical advantage was conferred.

Rapidly rewriting questions was a significant undertaking. Writing examination questions is usually an extensive process with inputs from a range of experts. In rewriting questions, staff needed to ensure the relevant part of the study design was being tested at a difficulty level that matched the number of marks allocated. Staff noted that rewriting stimulus material was a particular challenge as it included scenarios and data aimed at testing particular components of study design. When these staff queried the standard to which stimulus materials should be rewritten, executive direction was inconsistent and changed over the course of two days.

The scope of the task also grew over the two-day period when it was determined that English, Theatre Studies and Aboriginal Languages in Victoria were to be rewritten.¹¹ By the end of the rewriting process on Tuesday 15 October, over one hundred staff, Panel Chairs and subject matter experts had been involved in rewriting the questions.

Inadequate oversight of the examination paper rewriting processes

An oversight process for the rewrite of examination papers was developed on 13 October using a digital project management tool and physical sign off sheets attached to each examination. This process was reported to be focused on ensuring no new errors were introduced in the rewriting process. Despite this process requiring 11 verification steps from six staff and an Acting Executive, no step required a manager or Executive to check that questions had been sufficiently changed from the original question either from a technical or lay-person's perspective. The process therefore relied solely on the staff undertaking the rewriting to ensure that no actual advantage would be conferred to any student who had seen the disclosed

¹¹ Music Repertoire Performance and Music Contemporary Performance were not rewritten at this point as only the names of stimulus materials had been disclosed, and the effort required to re-record and distribute stimulus CDs could potentially introduce new errors.

materials. The process did not consider the perceived advantage that would be of significant concern if the original and rewritten materials were compared and appeared similar. The Board was not engaged in assuring this oversight process, despite the inherent risks.

In addition, this multi-layered process was inconsistently applied. Five papers did not receive all required final sign offs, and several sign off sheets had missing signatures for earlier stages of the oversight process. Significantly, the Executives conducted their approvals differently – one reported undertaking a full check of rewritten questions for suitability, errors and impact on other questions, while the other reported checking that all verification steps on the sign off sheet had been completed. On at least two occasions, an examination had been sent for printing before errors were discovered and the process was restarted.

There was significant human factor risk in allocating only a few Executives to provide final sign offs. Facing mounting fatigue in the latter stages of review, the Executives attempted to mitigate risk by both providing sign off to each examination and, in several cases, delegating final sign off to senior managers. Other VCAA Executives were not asked to support the process.

At this point, several issues were unresolved which would prove to be significant problems as the incident unfolded:

- The VCAA's assessment of risk and subsequent decisions were based on the determination that it was highly unlikely that students had discovered the material that had been unintentionally disclosed, and, having 'taken down' the materials the risk had been contained. It was only retrospectively understood through a cyber review that some sample cover pages had disclosed material but had not initially been identified, so students had access throughout the examination period. More significantly, it was not understood that internet archiving tools would capture the information regardless of it being removed from the website. This is, however, commonly understood by a technologically literate generation of students. A more accurate technical understanding of the situation may have driven a different assessment of the likelihood of discovery and therefore considered different approaches to communicating the situation and more explicit standards of rewriting
- The lack of consideration of perceived advantage would later materialise as a concern amongst students and the community. Had the Executives responsible for the rewriting process considered the possibility of perceived advantage, greater scrutiny would likely have been applied and a different standard of rewriting required

Rapid resolution of logistical issues

While questions were being rewritten, additional printing contractors were engaged and a process for delivering examinations to schools in two tranches was decided upon to accommodate printing time.

The packing process was stopped and warehouse staff commenced removing thousands of compromised examinations from school packages.¹² Due to technological inflexibility, the usual system tracking had to be replaced by paper checklists to ensure schools would get the right number of examinations for the right subjects. It was later discovered that there were four schools where the old papers were not correctly removed, which led to 16 students sitting the wrong examination. One student did not receive the correct examinations as the person was based in Senegal and new papers could not reach them in time.

Given the enormous risks introduced into the process from the decision to reprint and repack all examinations, the fact there were minimal errors from a logistics perspective is a credit to the intense and meticulous efforts of the staff involved.

Communications approach

When it became evident that reprinting examinations would allow VCE examinations to proceed without causing disruption and unnecessary stress to students, the CEO determined public statements outlining the disclosure would not be needed. However, an external communication plan was developed to be used in the event that the matter became public, referring to a production error and assuring that disclosed examination content would not be in the actual examinations.

Redevelopment of sample cover pages

At this time, the VCAA had started to receive emails querying why the sample cover pages were unavailable. The CEO directed the relevant Executive to oversee the remaking of all sample cover pages. Sample cover pages were remade using the new, unauthorised approach but with additional security protocols intended to remove access to examination content.¹³ Later analysis found that 17 of these remade cover pages still contained examination content.

Initial involvement of the Board

The VCAA Board called an extraordinary meeting on 15 October, three days after the initial discovery of disclosed materials. At this meeting, the full Board was informed of the events and assured that there would be no impact to examinations other than the distribution of papers to schools in two tranches rather than the usual one tranche. The Board queried what had led to the disclosure, how it was discovered, and the Executives' level of confidence that all disclosed material had been identified. It also expressed concern for employee wellbeing. Further detail was to be provided by the CEO at the next Board meeting. The Board agreed to establish a small committee of three members. However, it did not raise any reservations regarding the remediation approach or, more significantly, put in place a framework to assure itself that the disclosure was being adequately addressed.

¹² VCE Examination packing process involves bundling the right number of examinations for students sitting each subject per school for distribution

¹³ This protocol involved a feature in InDesign to prevent text and images from being "selectable."

Logistics involved in dispatch of reprinted examination papers

By 15 October, all rewrites had been undertaken for 53 examinations, with rewritten examinations commencing printing upon completion. The late identification of several errors, requiring the process to be restarted for at least two examinations meant that the final examination was sent for printing by 18 October.

To ensure printing timeframes could be met, the identification barcodes which are typically printed on every page of an examination were only placed on the front and back of the examination.¹⁴ While this decision was made in consultation with the outsourced marking provider, it did increase the risks in the marking process. It was fortunate that these risks did not materialise.

By 31 October, three days into the main examination period, a total of 353,310 papers were rewritten, reprinted, repacked and distributed across two batches.

This was only possible due to the immense efforts of a large number VCAA staff who worked around the clock, up to seven days a week. While the staff involved were galvanised towards a common goal, this was an extremely stressful time and significantly impacted their welfare.

Communication provided to key stakeholders

The Board met for a regularly scheduled session on 23 October. The CEO provided an update on the incident, informing the Board on progress against the packaging and distribution timeline. It was also informed of the student in Senegal who would not receive the updated examinations in time. Accounts of the discussion indicate the risk of examination integrity being compromised or communications about the incident were not discussed. The Board once again discussed staff welfare and formally requested a report on the causes of the incident. This report was not provided as it was overtaken by the announcement of the commissioning of this 'Root-and-Branch' Review. Notwithstanding the establishment of the Review, it would have been expected that the Board would undertake its own examination into what happened.

On 25 October, Panel Chairs who supported rewrites were asked to provide their Panel members with the explanation that 'there were some changes to questions as a result of our quality assurance processes post panel sign off'. This language was similar to that provided to other staff assisting with rewrites. It appears that only staff directly responsible for rewrites were informed that there may have been a disclosure of examination content.

At this point, there was no communication to schools or other affected external stakeholders.

Public awareness of the unintentional disclosure

On 2 November, a post from an anonymous account appeared on a public VCE forum on Reddit.com relating to the unintentional disclosure of examination content on sample cover pages. This post and the account were deleted shortly after posting.

¹⁴ Each examination has a unique identifying serial number encoded in a bar code to assist with online marking processes. These are traditionally included on every page of an examination to ensure no page can be misplaced or mixed up in online marking processes

On 5 November, an unrelated account made a post on the same forum which similarly identified the unintentional disclosure.

On 7 November, a Business Studies teacher reached out to a VCAA staff member to notify them that they had seen these Reddit posts, downloaded a copy of a sample cover page and discovered the sensitive materials. The teacher raised concerns that the Business Management examination was not sufficiently different to the materials they had uncovered. The staff member escalated the issue to a responsible Executive. The teacher was not satisfied with the Executive's response which referred to the disclosed examination content as 'sample material'.

On 11 November, a Mathematics teacher contacted the VCAA querying a discrepancy between the Specialist Mathematics Examination 1 examination paper that the teacher had received and one shown on a YouTube video posted after the examination. This was a result of a school receiving the original version of the examination paper.

On 12 November, the VCAA was sent a letter from the Victorian Commercial Teachers Association (VCTA) which raised concerns around the integrity of the Business Management and Legal Studies examinations. This letter included evidence of the disclosed materials being accessible using an internet archive in accordance with postings on Reddit.com. The VCTA also referenced guidance in the VCE handbook about content being 'sufficiently modified to be unique',¹⁵ and indicated that it felt this standard had not been met in the examinations.

Public explanation of unintentional disclosure

On 14 November, in response to media enquiries, the CEO made public statements that 'sample materials' had been disclosed but this disclosure did not confer advantage to the students who had seen them.

At this point, the VCAA re-recorded, reprinted and distributed examination content for two compromised Music examinations. One school informed the VCAA that it had distributed the original version of the impacted Music examinations to students, resulting in seven students receiving the wrong examinations. A further 17 students received the original examinations as a result of distribution issues. These students were all assessed by the Chief Assessor against the original marking criteria and were not disadvantaged.

On 18 November, the Minister for Education issued a public statement confirming that examination content had been disclosed because VCAA publishing guidelines had not been followed correctly. The Minister also announced the commissioning of an Expert Advisory Panel chaired by Professor John Firth which would investigate any anomalies in results and provide guidance to ensure no student would be disadvantaged by the unintentional disclosure of examination content

¹⁵ The VCE Handbook states, "Where publicly available materials are being used for school-based assessment, the school should make sure the tasks meet the requirements of the study design and that they have been sufficiently modified to be unique to the school to enable student work to be authenticated."

On the same day, Dr. Marcia Devlin was announced as the VCAA Acting CEO following the resignation of Ms Kylie White, who herself had only been appointed substantively two months prior, following nine months as the Acting CEO.

External stakeholders have reported the inadequacy of communication by the VCAA during this period. We have been informed that stakeholders, including school principals and teachers, learned of the incident through the media, and had no communication from the VCAA until several days after the Minister's statement. The lack of information contributed to considerable distress, as schools had no information to pass on to address the queries from concerned parents and students.

Assurance as to the validity of examination results

The VCAA Board held numerous meetings from the 14 November to 6 December. The focus of these meetings was to determine the number of examinations impacted, receive advice from the Expert Advisory Panel and respond to questions from the VRQA which had commenced an investigation into the examinations.

A report by the Victorian Government's Cyber Response Partner identified a small number of additional examinations with compromised materials available when opening cover pages on a widely available PDF reader.¹⁶ This extended the total number of impacted examinations to 65.

The Expert Advisory Panel used a combination of statistical and psychometric analysis of the majority of examinations to determine whether any students' performance was unusual relative to their previous pattern. It concluded only 69 students across five studies had anomalous results. Examinations with very few enrolments however were referred to the Small Studies Committee which did not find further anomalies.¹⁷

The Expert Advisory Panel recommended that anomalous results be excluded from subject scaling processes with no marks taken from students and for the 24 students who had sat the wrong examination to be assessed by the Chief Assessor using the original marking guides.

Separate to these processes, the VCAA conducted a review of all questions to determine if there were any inaccuracies or ambiguities which could have unfairly impacted students. This process identified 20 questions across 16 examinations which contained such issues. The majority of these questions were invalidated (all students awarded full marks) while the remaining accepted multiple potential answers.

The Board approved the Expert Advisory Panel and Small Studies Committee reports and communications to the VRQA which had opened an investigation into the organisation.

¹⁶ LibreOffice's PDF reader. LibreOffice is a free suite of office applications.

¹⁷ The Small Studies Committee is convened annually to review the study scores allocated for 'small' studies. This committee assessed whether students had deviated from their preliminary study score (determined by the GAT and relative score to other students in the study)

Causes of the disclosures

This report has focussed on the development, refinement, printing and distribution process of the 2024 VCE examinations. During that process, there was an unintentional disclosure of examination content in advance of the examinations. This disclosure occurred due to the insertion of an unauthorised step in the sample cover page publishing process. This unauthorised step was taken with the best of intentions by staff to make up time lost due to the poor management of earlier steps in the examination preparation process. Despite significant efforts to remedy the situation, the attempted rectification through rewriting, printing and distributing of new examinations proved to be inadequate.

While there were many contextual factors that contributed to the unintentional disclosure, the root causes of the unauthorised disclosure and inadequate steps taken to resolving the issue were:

1. Lack of appropriate Board-level oversight in the development and production of examination papers
2. Poor management capabilities in the areas responsible for the development of examination papers
3. Unacceptably weak identification and management of risks for crucial processes
4. Poor project management capabilities in critical areas of the organisation
5. Insufficiently documented critical processes, and variable levels of compliance
6. Ineffective management of change
7. No evidence of crisis planning

More broadly, these causes are symptomatic of an organisation that has been in significant and growing distress. These problems have been manifesting for a number of years without being adequately addressed. The VCAA's examination preparation and production processes are fragile – they are heavily dependent on the experience, skills and capabilities of staff and vary in the quality of their execution. In these circumstances, changes to examination preparation processes run a high risk of causing unanticipated errors.

1. Lack of appropriate Board-level oversight in the development and production of examination papers

Over the past years, the Board, in its various iterations, did not take the necessary actions to remedy the systemic problems emerging in the VCAA, despite successive reviews in 2022 and 2023.

Throughout 2024, the VCAA Board had limited visibility over the examination development and delivery process, nor did it seek to have greater oversight of this process. Reporting to the Board around risks or delays in examination development was minimal, outside of progress reporting on the implementation of the Bennett Review's recommendations.

Consequently, the Board failed in its core responsibility to assure itself that the compounding delays and issues which led to the unintentional disclosure were addressed. The remediation

approach proposed by the VCAA Executive in response to the unintentional disclosure carried significant risks, beyond the ones which materialised. That approach was not questioned by the Board. Notwithstanding the establishment of a subcommittee of the Board in response to the incident, it had no effect in providing assurance that the matter had been resolved.

Whilst membership of the Board demonstrates extensive experience in education policy and practice, its experience in risk and project management, change management, financial management, cybersecurity and the oversight of complex, time-sensitive operations is limited. Although the Board sought to supplement its risk capability through undertaking risk training in August 2024, there is no evidence that its risk capability has been improved. Indeed, the limitations of the Board's capabilities in this area is evidenced in the problems observed in 2024.

2. Poor management capabilities in the areas of the VCAA responsible for the development and production of examination papers

The senior management group responsible for overseeing the development and production of examination papers has not demonstrated the capabilities necessary to discharge their critical and time sensitive responsibilities. Management interventions should have been in place much earlier in the process; however, it is not clear that management was sufficiently engaged with day-to-day activities in order to take necessary interventions.

In relation to the attempted remediation processes, there was also insufficient skill amongst the relevant management group to provide adequate stewardship in a crisis. Having accepted a high-risk undertaking, management should have been able to provide clear guidance to staff rewriting examinations, develop a consistent and comprehensive approach to overseeing the quality and extent of rewrites, and provide support to staff within a highly stressful environment.

Insufficient curiosity is a further issue. Even well after the incident until the beginning of this Review, we found little evidence that senior Executives had reflected on the reasons for unintentional disclosure or how it could have been prevented.

3. Unacceptably weak identification and management of risks for crucial processes

Management responsible for the development and production of the VCE examination papers appears to have a limited appreciation of the risks inherent to their work. The development of sample cover pages did not have appropriate oversight from managers or Executives as it was not seen as a high-risk activity. The unintentional disclosure that eventuated was one of a number of risks in the examination development process that appear unmanaged, despite being identified as a critical risk in external assessments. The level of risk maturity is not appropriate for the development of examination papers so critical to the future of Victorian students.

4. Poor project management capabilities in critical areas of the organisation

Developing and distributing over one hundred high-quality examinations to approximately 76,000 students on a precise schedule is an extremely complicated undertaking that should be thought of with a similar degree of complexity and management to running a signalling

system on a transport network, where errors can have cascading downstream effects. Currently, that is not the case.

Basic project management techniques such as status tracking boards and progress reporting are used variably. The examination development and production processes operate in siloes, with an assumption that downstream teams can absorb missed deadlines and lateness can be tolerated. In fact, the later steps (e.g. publishing, printing and packing) have the least ability to compress their timelines. Alternative Format Examinations and the publishing of sample cover pages do not appear on the core timeline of the examination development process, and so the impact of delays and resource unavailability is not properly understood.

These silos reflect a split accountability for the end-to-end examination development process at the executive level which will be fully examined in our second report.

5. Insufficiently documented critical processes, and variable levels of compliance

The quality of documentation in the examination development process is highly variable, as is the degree of compliance to documented processes. This results in:

- A lack of a common understanding of what is involved in examination development, leading to inaccurate assumptions about the extent to which delays or other problems can be tolerated.
- Significant key-person risks in the organisation, as individuals (rather than documents) carry all of the knowledge associated with some steps in the process.
- A lack of appreciation for the 'critical path' and timeframes that cannot be compressed.

Parallel processes gradually become more interdependent as the examinations get closer to printing and distribution. For example, packing of examinations does not commence until both standard examinations and Alternative Format examinations have been completed. This makes it extremely difficult to manage these interdependencies effectively and creates the environment for issues such as the unintentional disclosure.

The actual process undertaken for examination development can vary significantly by individuals performing the same function. Whilst some variations can be tolerated, this should be done recognising the risks involved. Unfortunately, the cumulative impacts of these different approaches do not seem to have been considered by relevant managers and the Executive. Modern project management techniques have been historically resisted or sporadically taken up. The flawed approach for the development of sample cover pages in 2024, which was not formally documented or approved, is one such example.

6. Ineffective management of change

In recent years the examination development and production area of the VCAA in particular has not managed change well, evidenced in multiple instances when changes were made but their cumulative impacts were neither considered nor properly implemented. In this case, the

relevant changes included new templates for the 2024 examinations,¹⁸ an organisational restructure that blended two design and publishing teams, and an office relocation that halted business-as-usual work and changed established workflows during a critical time of year. Together, these factors introduced stress, uncertainty and time pressures on key parts of the organisation at important junctures. Similarly, when a seemingly faster process for development of sample cover pages was developed, it went unchallenged and was implemented during a time of high pressure, reflecting the low maturity of change management practices and culture.

7. No evidence of crisis planning

While the crisis response to the 2024 disclosures, undertaken by many VCAA staff were admirable, flaws in the response – evolving guidance from Executives, inconsistent communications, lack of critical engagement by the Board – could have been mitigated through crisis planning (e.g. management of unplanned changes). The potential for an unintentional disclosure in some form should have been anticipated- given albeit different problems in 2022 and 2023- with clarity of decision-making, chains of communication and accountabilities designed in advance. This would have minimised the risk of further errors.

As it is, the VCAA is extremely fortunate that due to the extraordinary diligence and hard work of the logistics teams, there were only very minor re-packing and distribution errors. Otherwise, the impact to students would have been much greater.

¹⁸ Poor scoping of the template initiative led to Mathematics examinations being reverted to previous typefaces after initial roll-out.

Recommendations for 2025 examination development process

The VCAA is an organisation responsible for time-critical public-facing functions and, unfortunately, limited capacity to absorb change in its systems and processes. Any proposed changes by this first report of the Review to processes while preparations for examinations are underway could therefore exacerbate existing risks. Accordingly, this report has developed a series of recommendations which are specific and implementable for the 2025 VCE examination cycle within the constraints of the VCAA. The implementation of these recommendations should be undertaken in consultation with the Independent Monitor.

1. Reconstitute the VCAA Board to include additional capabilities in critical governance areas

It is evident that the VCAA Board has not undertaken its critical governance role in a manner commensurate with its responsibilities, and its current practices are insufficient to provide requisite assurance to the Minister. The Board has extensive experience across various education sectors, but insufficient experience in the effective operation of public sector boards. In particular, the Board would benefit from membership with considerable experience in risk and project management, financial management and cyber security.

Accordingly, it is recommended that the Board is reconstituted with these specific skills. While reconstitution of the Board is underway, the Secretary of the Department should become a member of the Board to ensure it receives appropriate guidance in line with its role.

2. Cease the creation of sample cover pages

For 2025, sample cover pages should not be created. While cover pages are utilised by some teachers to familiarise students with examinations, they do not provide students any additional information that is not provided through other notification mechanisms and carry information security risks. Students could be provided with past cover pages and examinations, fulfilling the same outcome. Relevant teachers' bodies and stakeholder groups should be consulted on this change to ensure that they are aware of other mechanisms which provide students with necessary information about their examinations. At the time of writing this initiative was actively being implemented by the Acting CEO.

3. Create a more senior executive director role as a single point of accountability for end-to-end delivery of examinations

At present, the single point of accountability for end-to-end delivery of examinations is in the Acting CEO supported by a weekly taskforce comprising Directors, the newly-created Director, Examinations Unit and all Executive Directors. Accountability in a single individual is preferable to distributed accountability to the Acting CEO. However, rather than disrupting an established process for supporting the delivery of examinations while preparation is underway, it is recommended that following the appointment of an ongoing Chief Executive, a new position of Senior Executive Director is appointed with designated accountability for end-to-end examination development.

4. Clearly document the examination development process end-to-end, identifying and managing key risks

At present, the VCAA's understanding of examination development and delivery processes is fragmented and largely held within siloes, with little evidence of end-to-end understanding – or management – of the process. In particular, there is limited understanding of the critical path to delivery and where activities cannot be compressed.

The VCAA has now commenced work revising and rewriting VCE examination development process flowcharts and manuals. This has been an important step, as it has now captured the end-to-end process including activities which were previously not captured or built into timeframes such as Alternative Format examinations. However, there is more to be done. To mitigate the risk of new issues emerging in 2025, the VCAA should:

- i. Articulate clear timeframes and accountabilities for all steps in the examination development process.
- ii. Identify the critical path to delivery, that is, the sequence of activities that cannot be delayed without causing delay to the overall delivery of examinations – and the timeframe for the critical path. Make contingency plans at key steps to be activated if timeframes are missed.
- iii. Define points at which the Executive and Board receive reporting on progress and make decisions, design automatic escalations / interventions if milestones are below a certain threshold. For example, off-track examinations might report on progress daily to Executive.
- iv. Conduct a rigorous risk assessment for each step of the examination development process, with risk ratings validated with the Executive, Board and Independent Monitor based on the organisation's actual practices and performance. Appropriate controls must be developed for high-risk activities.

5. Ensure clear, specific accountabilities that align to defined milestones in the examination development process

Unclear accountability is a pervasive issue in the examination development and production process which features multiple layers of review – including sometimes duplicative purposes – and an extensive chain of approvals. Despite good intentions, reviewers often check multiple aspects of the examination instead of focusing on their specific task and expertise. The issue that emerges is a blurring of accountability; lack of clarity about whose role it is to make which decision and what the layer of review is meant to achieve. Rather than generic 'sign offs' each key stage of sign off needs to have point accountability, including one person with single ultimate accountability for the overall quality of the examination.

6. Strengthen the risk and project management capability of those responsible for the examination development process

Staff who are responsible for meeting timeframes in the examination development process need risk and project management skills to discharge their responsibilities. There is little evidence that the team are provided with formal training to develop these skills or held to a

consistent set of performance standards around these skills. This is often a source of delays in the preparation of examination papers. This Review understands that the first step of this change has commenced with the adoption of Asana – a commonly used project management tool - with expert support from RMIT. This is a good first step, but in addition, the VCAA should:

- i. Embed project management activities in their processes to ensure consistent foundational knowledge is applied in practice.
- ii. Set clear standards for project management requirements, including accurate progress reporting, escalations or risk mitigation strategies being applied, achievement of milestones and consequences for inadequate performance.
- iii. Adjust the EDM position description for new recruits to require project management experience.
- iv. Appoint a Project Director role to assist in the identification, management and reporting of risks, particularly in the examination development process.
- v. Review the capability and resourcing of the risk management function and bolster with expert capability as necessary.

These steps should be supplemented with the addition of a project management specialist to the team to ensure that these skills are integrated across the EDM group.

7. Conduct regular crisis planning at an executive level

The Executive and the Board should conduct ‘scenario gaming’ of critical risks. This should commence immediately with a session on risks materialising around delays in the examination development process and session prior to August on responses to distribution errors. This should include prompting the Executive involved to establish a clear chain of command and accountabilities in the crisis scenario, determine the line of upward communication to the Board and the Minister, and protocols for documenting and distributing decisions to relevant staff. This will improve the VCAA’s resilience by preparing the organisation to respond in future examination cycles.

8. Pilot the development of an examination repository for select subjects

It is clear that significant risk persists around the examination development process including single points of failure, key person dependencies, critical timeframes and security vulnerabilities. One approach to reduce overall risk is to have a repository of examinations prepared to substitute questions or full examinations if required in future situations. In addition to the recommendations made to address the incidents of 2024, it is recommended that a pilot program is scoped and funded to commence feasibility assessment and planning in 2025, for the launch of a pilot program in 2026 in a small number of subjects to create a bank of questions and papers which could be used to replace potentially compromised examinations.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary

Chief Assessor	Is responsible for planning and conducting the assessor training meeting, monitoring the application of marking principles during marking and making final marking decisions. Under the guidance of a VCAA Project Manager, the Chief Assessor is responsible for the final decisions regarding marking strategies and procedures.
Curriculum Manager (CM)	Is a VCAA employee who reviews the examination to ensure compliance with VCAA documentation related to the study and confirms the examination's readiness to proceed to desktop publishing. The CM also provides VCAA subject matter support.
Desktop Publishing (DTP)	Refers to the VCAA staff team that handles the formatting of the examination onto prescribed templates, creation of diagrams and layout of the paper. DTP's work is routinely checked by the editing team.
Examination Development Manager (EDM)	Is a VCAA employee who provides expert advice and support to the Examination Development Panel and VCAA production staff to ensure the timely completion of a valid, reliable, fair, comparable, appropriate and secure examination.
Examination Panel	An existing VCAA panel with membership comprised of the Examination Panel Chair, Panel Members, Subject Specialist Reviewers, Examination Sitter Reviewer and English as an Additional Language Reviewer. Some examinations also have a script reader and a comparability reviewer.
Examination Panel Chair (Panel Chair)	Has overall responsibility for the timely development of a valid, reliable, fair, comparable, appropriate and secure examination by the Examination Development Panel.
Examination Unit (EXU)	The Examination Unit (EXU) is a sub-division of the VCAA's Curriculum Division that is responsible for examination development and production.
Study Design	Refers to a subject's planned curriculum providing details on the subject's areas of study, outcomes and assessment.
VRQA	The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority is the statutory body responsible for registering and regulating educational providers and qualifications in Victoria including the VCAA.

Appendix 2: Overview of the VCAA

Figure 1 VCAA Organisational Structure with relevant teams and FTE (Dec 2024 – Jan 2025)¹⁹

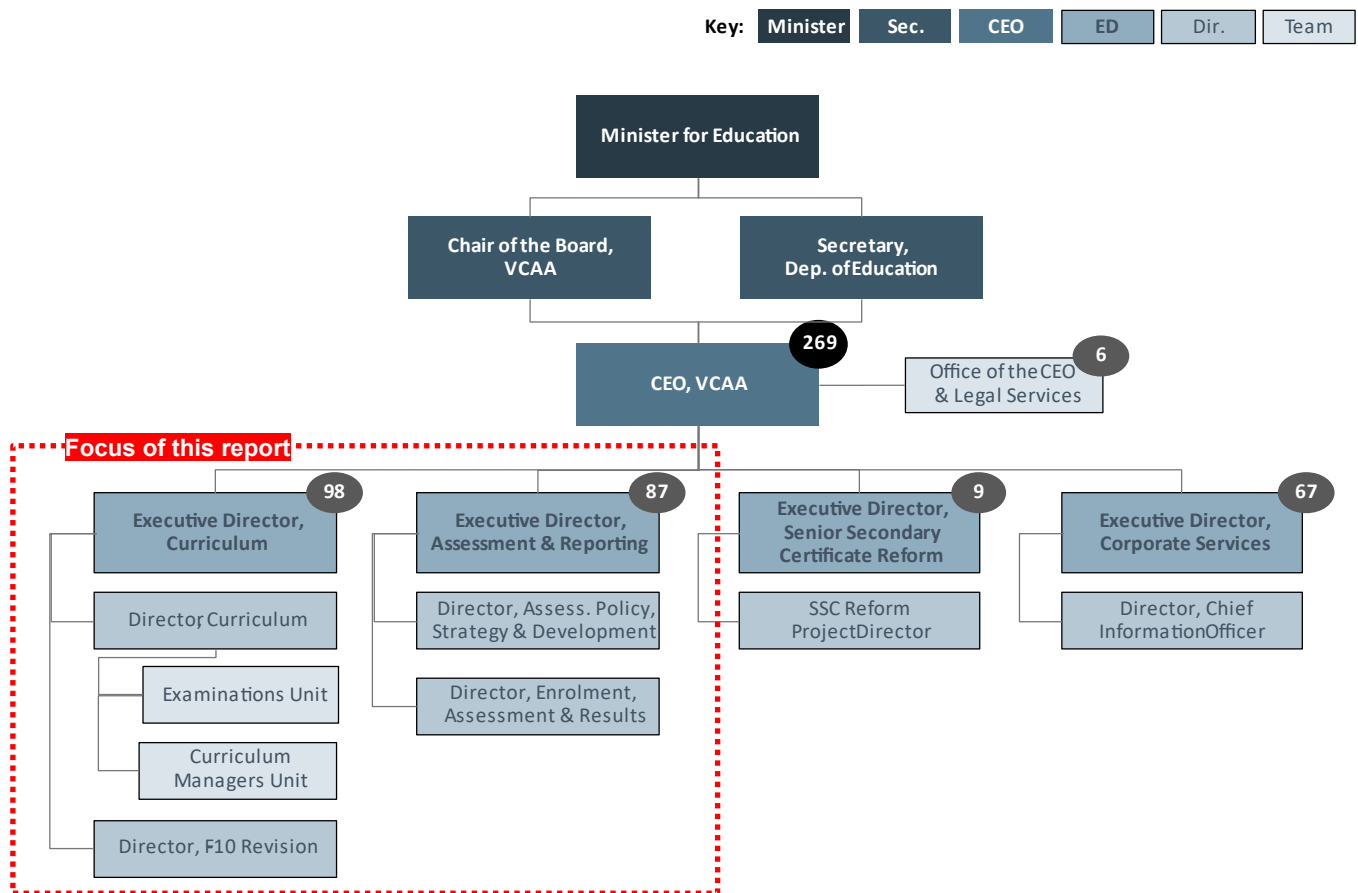


Figure 1 above shows the organisational design of the VCAA, with a focus on the teams within the Curriculum and Assessment & Reporting Divisions which hold chief responsibility for the examination development process. The Examinations Unit and Curriculum Managers Unit have been included in this diagram due to their prominence in the disclosure of examination content and subsequent response.

Minister for Education

- Chair of the Board, VCAA
- Secretary Department of Education

CEO, VCAA (269 FTE) – reporting to Chair and Secretary

Office of the CEO & Legal Services (6 FTE) reporting to VCA CEO.

Focus of this report (reporting to CEO, VCAA)

- Executive Director Curriculum (98 FTE)

¹⁹Structure as of December 2024; Full Time Equivalent positions as of January 2025, includes EAs and Executives; excludes. vacancies and casual staff members

- Director Curriculum
 - Examinations Unit
 - Curriculum Managers Unit
- Director, F10 Revision
- Executive Director Assessment & Reporting (87 FTE)
 - Director, Assess. Policy, Strategy & Development
 - Director, Enrolment Assessment & Results

Other (reporting to CEO, VCAA)

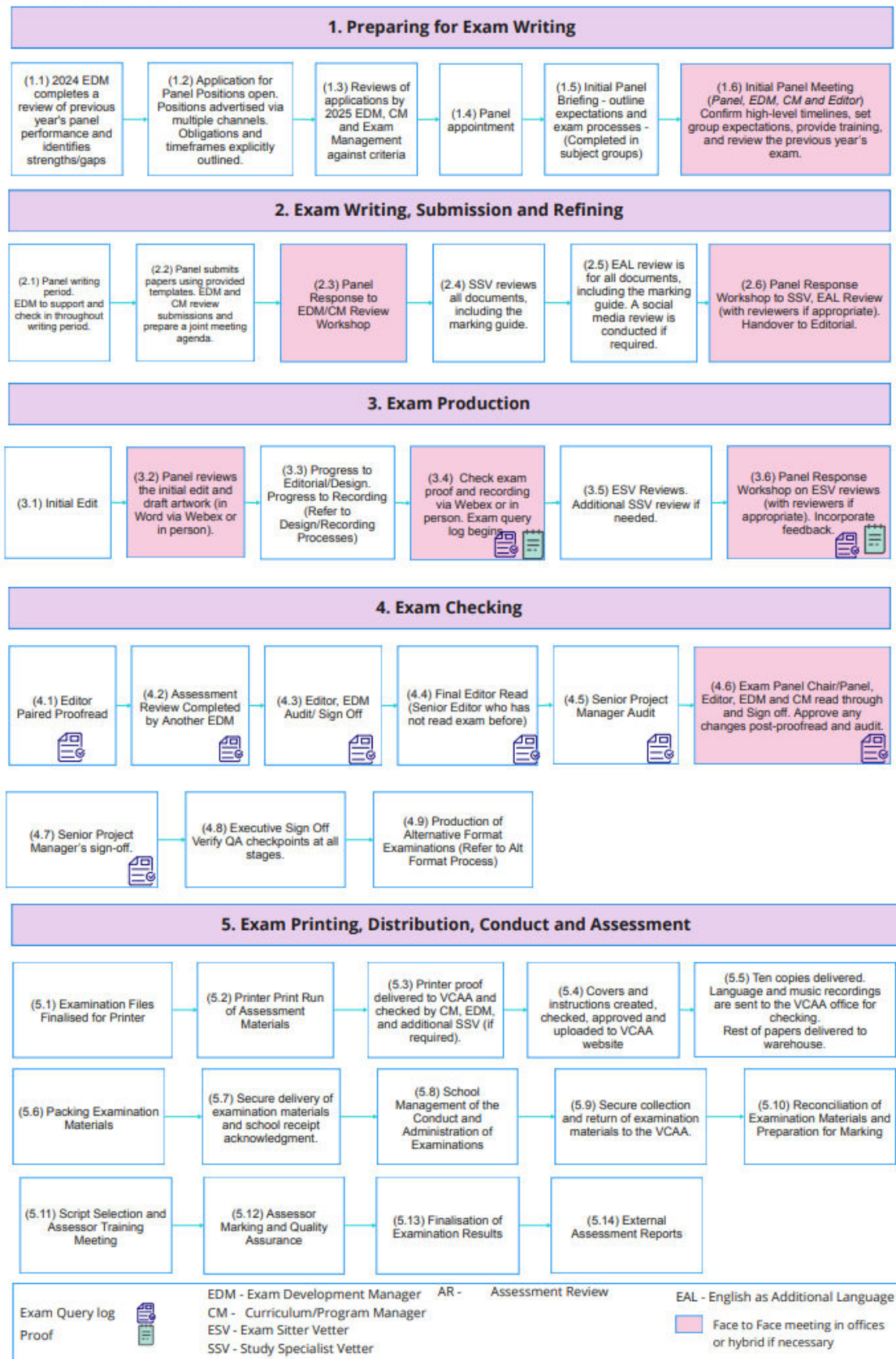
- Executive Director, Senior Secondary Certificate Reform
 - SSC Reform Project Director
- Executive Director, Corporate Services
 - Director, Chief Information Officer

While the VCAA includes ~270FTE administrative employees who are employed by the Department of Education, there are also 6,000 – 8,000 sessional employees contracted directly by the VCAA. This sessional workforce predominantly supports the Curriculum and Assessment and Reporting divisions respectively with the development and delivery of examinations. This includes the initial drafting of questions by Examination Panel Chairs, specialist reviews from subject matter experts and the logistical support to invigilate, sort and mark the over 300,000 written examinations delivered by the organisation.

Appendix 3: Overview of the VCE examination development process

Source: VCAA Curriculum Division, VCE Examination Process on a Page

2025 Examination process 13022025



1 Preparing Exam Writing

- 1.1 2024 EDM completes a review of previous year's panel performance and identifies strengths/gaps
- 1.2 Application for Panel Positions open. Positions advertised via multiple channels. Obligation and timeframes explicitly outlined.
- 1.3 Reviews of applications by 2025 EDM, CM and Exam Management Against Criteria
- 1.4 Panel appointment
- 1.5 Initial Panel Briefing – outline expectations and exam processes (Completed in subject groups)
- 1.6 Initial Panel Meeting (Panel, EDM, CM and Editor) Confirm high-level timelines, set group expectations, provide training, and review the previous year's exam (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary).

2 Exam Writing, Submission and Refining

- 2.1 Panel waiting period. EDM to support and check in throughout writing period.
- 2.2 Panel submits papers using provided templates. EDM and CM review submissions and prepare a joint meeting agenda.
- 2.3 Panel Response to EDM/CM Review Workshop (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary).
- 2.4 SSV reviews all documents including the marking guide.
- 2.5 EAL review is for all documents including the marking guide. A social media review is conducted if required.
- 2.6 Panel Response Workshop to SSV, EAL Review (with reviewers if appropriate). Handover to Editorial (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary).

3 Exam production

- 3.1 Initial Edit
- 3.2 Panel reviews the initial edit and draft artwork (in Word via Webex or in person) (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary).
- 3.3 Progress to Editorial/Design. Progress to Recording (Refer to Design/recording Processes)
- 3.4 Check exam proof and recording via Webex or in person. Exam query log begins (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary) (Proof) (Exam Query log).
- 3.5 ESV Review. Additional SSV review if needed.
- 3.6 Panel Response Workshop on ESV reviews (with reviewers if appropriate). Incorporate feedback (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary) (Exam Query log) (Proof).

4 Exam Checking

- 4.1 Editor Paired Proofread (Exam Query log).
- 4.2 Assessment Review Completed by Another EDM (Exam Query log).

- 4.3 Editor, EDM Audit/ Sign Off (Exam Query log).
- 4.4 Final Editor Read (Senior Editor who has not read the exam before) (Exam Query log).
- 4.5 Senior Project Manager Audit (Exam Query log).
- 4.6 Exam Panel Chair/Panel, Editor, EDM and CM read through and Sign off. Approve any changes post-proofread and audit (Face to Face meeting in offices or hybrid if necessary) (Exam Query log).
- 4.7 Senior Project Manager's sign-off (Exam Query log).
- 4.8 Executive Sign Off Verify QA checkpoints at all stages.
- 4.9 Production of Alternative Format Examinations (Refer to Alt Format Process).

5 Exam Printing Distribution, Conduct and Assessment

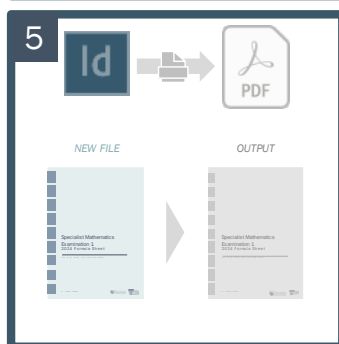
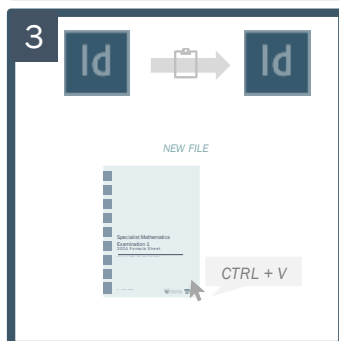
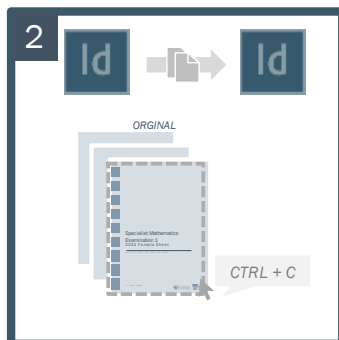
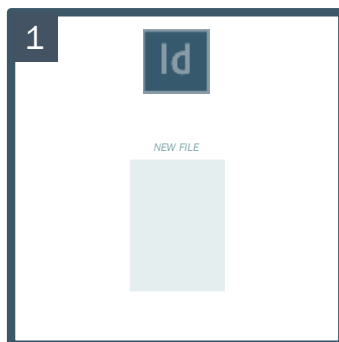
- 5.1 Examination Files Finalised for Printer
- 5.2 Printer Print Run of Assessment Materials.
- 5.3 Printer proof delivered to VCAA and checked by CM, EDM, and additional SSV (if required).
- 5.4 Covers and instructions created, checked, approved and uploaded to VCAA website.
- 5.5 Ten copies delivered. Language and music recordings are sent to the VCAA office for checking. Rest of papers delivered to warehouse.
- 5.6 Packing Examination Materials.
- 5.7 Secure delivery of examination materials and school receipt acknowledgment.
- 5.8 School Management of the Conduct and Administration of Examinations.
- 5.9 Secure collection and return of examination materials to the VCAA.
- 5.10 Reconciliation of Examination Materials and Preparation for Marking.
- 5.11 Script Selection and Assessor Training Meeting.
- 5.12 Assessor Marking and Quality Assurance.
- 5.13 Finalisation of Examination Results.
- 5.14 External Assessment Reports.

Legend:

EDM – Exam Development Manager
CM – Curriculum/Program Manager
ESV – Exam Sitter Vetter
SSV – Study specialist Vetter
AR – Assessment Review
EAL – English as Additional Language

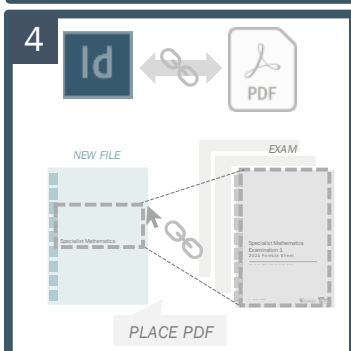
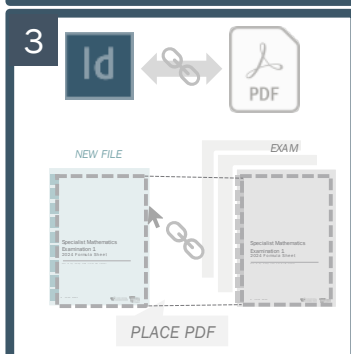
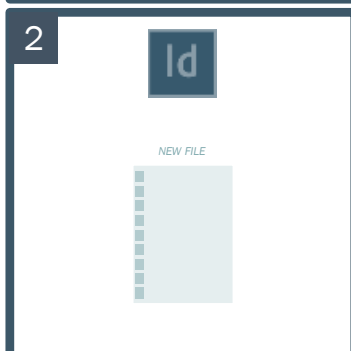
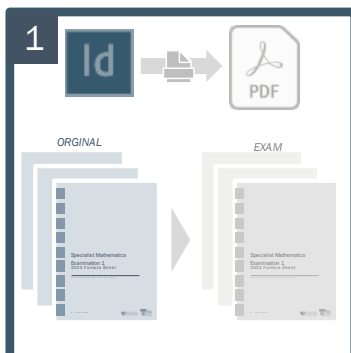
Appendix 4: Comparison of sample cover page development processes

Overview of Original Customary to Cover Page Publishing Practice (used 2000-2023)



1. Staff member creates a new file on Adobe InDesign
2. Staff member copies only relevant material from original InDesign file of finalised examinations (including cover and instructions)
3. Staff member pastes only relevant material into the new Adobe InDesign file
4. Staff member reformats the new InDesign file to ensure alignment with the finalised exam, focusing on alignment with design and accessibility guidelines
5. The new InDesign file is exported to PDF using default settings
6. The PDF Sample Cover pages are printed and provided to Examination Development Managers for review
7. Staff member processes any changes (if applicable) and re-exports the InDesign file to PDF
8. The PDF Sample Cover pages are uploaded to VCAA website as drafts
9. Final review by responsible manager prior to publication of PDF Sample Cover pages on website

Overview of New Cover Page Publishing Practice (used in 2024)



1. VCE Examinations are finalised and exported into PDFs
2. Staff member creates a new file on Adobe InDesign
3. Staff member imports finalised VCE Examination PDFs to the new InDesign file utilising the 'Place PDF' tool. Tool enables user to select relevant page(s) from finalised examination PDFs and places the full page(s) into the new InDesign file
4. Staff member 'crops' the imported PDF page to hide all extraneous information (questions, stimulus materials etc.)
5. Staff member reformats the new InDesign file to ensure alignment with the finalised exam
6. The new InDesign file is exported to PDF using default settings
7. The PDF Sample Cover pages are uploaded to VCAA website as drafts
8. Final review by responsible manager prior to publication of PDF Sample Cover pages on website