

**SPEAK  
Out**

ALBERTA STUDENT  
ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

# WHAT WE HEARD

Demystifying Diploma Exams

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## DEMYSTIFYING DIPLOMA EXAMS

### Background

During the fourth Annual *Speak Out* Conference, a workshop called *Demystifying Diploma Examinations* gave students an opportunity to voice their opinions about the benefits and drawbacks of diploma exams. The purpose of this workshop was to “demystify” diplomas by educating students about why we have them in Alberta, how they are made and how to prepare for the exams and manage the stress that often accompanies them.

The workshop was designed and facilitated by representatives from Alberta Education and the Minister’s Student Advisory Council (the Council):

- Tim Coates – Director, Diploma Exams, Alberta Education
- Jenny Kim – Examiner: Mathematics, Alberta Education
- Nathalie Langstaedtler – Examiner: Social Studies, Alberta Education
- Tim E. – Member of the Council
- Gabriel K. – Member of the Council

### Executive Summary

Students participating in the *Demystifying Diploma Exams* workshop had mixed views on diploma exams. They agreed that there are definite benefits to having diploma exams in Alberta: the exams are marked fairly and equitably across the province; they prepare students for the future by having them deal with stress (which everyone will face in the “real world”) and high-stakes tests that are similar to what they will face if they attend university; and they hold teachers to a high standard and help maintain Alberta’s strong reputation in education, which gives students an advantage when applying for post-secondary education.

However, students also agreed that there are significant drawbacks to diploma exams and that some of the same benefits could be achieved while making changes to the exams and the way they are administered. The most widely voiced drawback to diploma exams was the sheer amount of stress they put on students. Much of the stress is due to the fact that the exams are worth 50 per cent of a student’s final grade. This is a very high percentage given the relatively short amount of time students have to prepare for and write the exam compared to the months of work they have put in throughout the year to achieve the other 50 per cent of their final grade. In general, students fear the possible negative impact of having “one bad day” on the day of their exam.

Another criticism students had about diploma exams was that the written format of the exams limits what they can test. As one student put it, “Diploma exams can only test content-based learning, so strengths in teamwork, leadership, creativity, etc. are hard to evaluate in this format.”



Several students proposed replacing some of the weighting on diploma exams with standardized unit tests or modular exams throughout the school year. Assuming these modular exams would each have weightings of much lower than 50 per cent, they would reduce the amount of stress students feel while testing the same content. They would also ensure teachers maintained pace with the curriculum, thereby lowering the probability that a teacher would miss covering some of the diploma exam content during the year. However, it was acknowledged that there were drawbacks to this proposal as well—notably that modular exams would not prepare students for future stress and high-stakes exams as well as the 50 per cent diploma exams do, and that the cost of administering multiple standardized tests throughout the year would be significantly higher.

*For information on how this summary was derived, please see Appendix 1 – Process.*

*For more detailed information on “what we heard” throughout the process, please see Appendix 2 – What We Heard.*

## **Implementation**

The student input collected during the *Demystifying Diploma Exams* workshops forms part of our understanding of how the current diploma examination system is perceived and what students’ ideal system would look like. Through various internal meetings and conversations, the input informs representatives in the diploma examination assessment sector, who might be looking down the road at potentially changing diploma weightings and other issues related to the examination system.



## Appendix 1 – Process

The workshop was a combination of presentations by the workshop hosts, videos by the Council members and three group discussions among the student attendees. The group discussions were held at four tables, each with six to 11 students, who wrote their ideas on notepads, talked about them within their tables and shared them with the rest of the workshop participants. The workshop was run four times throughout the day, and student attendees from each workshop provided consistent feedback in the group discussions, which shared common themes.

Tim Coates introduced the workshop by speaking to the students about standardization. Standardization is an important concept in many fields throughout the world, such as engineering, aviation, medicine and logistics. It allows doctors and pharmacists to use consistent measurements when prescribing medicine, manufacturing companies to meet technical specifications for customers overseas, and pilots to safely land their planes at airports in countries where other languages are spoken.

Standardization is also important in education. Alberta Education uses standards when determining programs of study, school facility requirements, course resources, teacher qualifications, hours of instruction and bus safety requirements. Diploma exams are used to standardize the way students are tested across Alberta to ensure they are being graded fairly and equitably, regardless of their location or teacher. This presentation led to the first discussion, Pros and Cons of Standardized Tests.

Jenny then presented on how diploma exams are made, including:

- Who is involved (exam team leaders, examiners, branch director, branch professional support staff and psychometricians)
- Who Diploma Programs staff work in coordination with (including editors, translators, artists, copyright pursuers, field test staff and audio recording experts, among others)
- The one-year timeline it takes to administer an exam from start to finish

This presentation led to the second discussion, Ensuring Fairness: High-Quality Exams. In this discussion, students examined two examples of standardized tests and discussed their similarities and differences.

Finally, Nathalie presented about how teachers are involved in the marking process, standards confirmation and rescoring. This led to the final discussion, Strategies for Success. In this discussion, students brainstormed about short-term and long-term strategies they can use to succeed at their diploma exams.

The results of the three student discussions are summarized in Appendix 2.



## Appendix 2 – What We Heard

### Discussion 1: Pros and Cons of Standardized Tests

#### Benefits of Alberta’s Diploma Exams

Four main themes emerged about the benefits of Alberta’s diploma exams: fairness, motivation, preparation for the future and maintaining standards.

##### **Fairness:**

- Students are tested and marked fairly and equitably, and differences in the way teachers are marking (across different schools and within the same school) are neutralized. Everyone receives the same opportunities.
- The tests are secure and have more checks to ensure fairness. Exam questions are tested and carefully chosen to ensure they are fair.

##### **Motivation:**

- Diploma exams motivate students to learn the material and give them an opportunity to raise their marks significantly.
- Students have access to many preparation materials that can help them get ready for the tests.

##### **Preparation for the Future:**

- Diploma exams prepare students for life after high school by challenging them to work hard, manage their time and deal with stress.
- Diploma exams prepare students for university, since university midterms and final exams are often worth 50 per cent (or more) of students’ grades.

##### **Maintaining Standards:**

- Since Alberta-educated students have a strong reputation, students who have good grades after writing the diploma exam have shown they meet a high standard. This gives them an advantage when applying to post-secondary institutions.
- Diploma exams hold schools and teachers to a certain standard and allow additional teacher evaluation.
- Standardized diploma exams hold teachers accountable for preparing students throughout the year. Student comments included the following:
  - “Diploma exams are based on clearly outlined standards and outcomes, so teachers and students know how to prepare for them and what content should be clearly covered.”



## **Drawbacks of Alberta's Diploma Exams**

Drawbacks of Alberta's Diploma Exams that students voiced in all four workshops were stress, disproportionate grade weighting, format limitations, a lack of equity and fairness, and diploma exams' hindrance of teaching and learning.

### **Stress:**

- Diploma exams place a lot of pressure on students because the stakes are so high. Some teachers also cause stress by building up the exams in students' minds.
- It is highly time-consuming for students to prepare for one diploma exam.
- The diploma exam schedule is too compressed to give students enough time to properly prepare for tests of such high importance. Student comments included the following:
  - "There is sometimes too little time between classes ending and diploma exams starting, leaving little time to study."
  - "Why can't diplomas be taken when the student feels he or she is ready? Why should there be a defined date that everyone has to take them?"

### **Disproportionate Grade Weighting:**

- Diploma exams can have a highly negative impact on a student's grades if the student has "one bad day"—all the work that he or she has put in throughout the year becomes less meaningful. Student comments included the following:
  - "The weighting of diplomas is disproportionate to students' time and effort (i.e., a two-hour exam compared to a full school year's worth of work). After months of hard work, a two-hour exam can be the difference between passing and failing. There is very little room for error on the diploma exam. This is also the key driver in student stress resulting from diploma exams."

### **Format Limitations:**

- Diploma exams have limitations due to their format since they only cater to one learning style (i.e., written tests as opposed to hands-on skill tests). They don't necessarily showcase students' skills, knowledge or ability to work.

### **Lack of Equity and Fairness:**

- Diploma exams may penalize students if their teacher's style does not translate well to the diploma exam format or if the teacher didn't properly prepare students for the exam (for example, if teachers failed to cover all content). Student comments included the following:
  - "If a teacher marked too easily throughout the year, students may have a false sense that they understand the class material better than they actually do. This may lead students to study less and then fare poorly on the exam."
  - "If a hardworking student has a bad teacher, no matter how much effort they put into the course, the difficult diploma and high weight can significantly lower their mark and therefore hinder them in the long run."



- They may be unfair to English as a second language and English language learner students who have a language barrier.
- Diploma preparation carries a monetary cost, for courses or materials. This is unfair to students who are unable to afford these supports.

**Hindrance on Teaching and Learning:**

- Students aren't necessarily able to learn from their diploma exams because they can't see the marked tests to identify what they did wrong on them. Student comments included the following:

“Diploma exams limit teachers; they have to teach to the diploma and don't have as much freedom. There's pressure on teachers to have good results.”

**Discussion 2: Ensuring Fairness: High-Quality Exams**

In this exercise, students compared excerpts from two different exams (Sample A and Sample B) and listed the similarities and differences between them.

**Similarities:**

- Both sample exams related to history and social studies.
- Both samples used a multiple-choice format.

**Differences:**

Sample A	Sample B
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There were no source-based questions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions were linked to a variety of types of sources.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions depended on memorization, prior knowledge of facts and recall.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions depended on students' ability to apply their skills.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The sample used <i>discrete</i> questions.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The questions were more complex, required interpretation and the application of a variety of thinking skills.</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• There was some question on how to provide answers because each question had one option of “don't know”</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The sample used <i>evaluative</i> questions (e.g., “Choose the <i>best</i> answer”), but had one clearly correct answer.</li></ul>

Following the exercise, it was revealed that Sample A was an excerpt of an exam in a jurisdiction outside of Canada, and Sample B was an excerpt of a prior Alberta diploma exam. While the questions in Sample A tested students' ability to memorize and recall facts, Sample B tested a students' ability to apply their knowledge and skills in analyzing situations. In each of the workshops, it was agreed that tests like Sample B are more applicable to the “real world,”



since they encourage students to think critically. In contrast, students noted that an ability to recall facts is less important today, since this can easily be achieved by quick Internet searches.

### Discussion 3: Strategies for Success

In this exercise, students brainstormed strategies that they can use to achieve success on their diploma examinations. The strategies were grouped into short-term and long-term strategies.

<b>Long-Term Strategies</b>	<b>Short-Term Strategies</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Program and schedule planning: keep your diploma exams in mind when selecting which courses to take each semester</li><li>• Explore your post-secondary requirements</li><li>• Refer to Alberta Education website:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Guides for students</li><li>○ Subject information bulletins</li><li>○ Diploma exam FAQs</li><li>○ Released items (old diploma exam questions online)</li><li>○ Samples of student writing (e.g. for English and Social Studies)</li></ul></li><li>• Take advantage of Quest A+</li><li>• Constant review and consistent effort—review throughout the year instead of just cramming</li><li>• Work on organization, time management and scheduling skills</li><li>• Achieve good grades throughout the semester to give yourself a “cushion”</li><li>• Form a regular sleep pattern</li><li>• Identify and join a study group filled with people who have the same goals and study style as you</li><li>• Ask for help when you need it</li></ul>	<p>Leading up to the exams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prepare a study schedule around your exam schedule</li><li>• Form study groups</li><li>• Use Quest A+, practice exams, study guides, “The Key”</li><li>• Take diploma exam preparation courses</li><li>• Explore WP option for Part A’s</li><li>• Be well rested, be well hydrated, eat healthily</li></ul> <p>During the exams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Arrive prepared with materials:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Calculators</li><li>○ Dictionary, thesaurus, etc.</li><li>○ Writing tools</li><li>○ Water, snacks (if permitted)</li></ul></li><li>• Use highlighters</li><li>• Cover distracters—visualize response</li><li>• Work backward from distracters</li><li>• Circle questions for revisiting</li><li>• Cross out wrong answers</li></ul>