

# Evidence supports value of internal assessment in schools

June 19 2013

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Research carried out at Victoria University challenges criticism of internal assessment in schools and shows the assessment method plays an important role in helping students to think critically.

The two-and-a-half year research project into how students learn to think critically and historically was led by Dr Mark Sheehan, a Senior Lecturer in Victoria's Faculty of Education, and involved seven history teachers and nearly 100 Year 12 and 13 history students in five schools throughout the country.

The study found that students doing internal assessments actively engaged with project work and typically developed strong, robust knowledge about their subject.

"They could look at sources and know how to use them and how to determine what was biased and what wasn't," says Dr Sheehan.

"Like scholars, they could think about their question over a period of time—typically spending six to nine weeks on a project. They were highly motivated with a strong sense of ownership about what they were studying because they had selected their topic. They produced sophisticated pieces of work and often did more than was required for them to pass the assessment," he says.

Dr Sheehan says the research goes against critics of internal assessment who have described it as demotivating, better for girls and not as robust

as exams.

"The research found the opposite to be true. There was no evidence for those views and no difference between boys and girls. The students themselves expressed a cynical view about exams. Despite passing them they said things they learned in internal assessment tended to stay with them a lot longer."

Dr Sheehan says exams are an important part of senior assessment but a robust programme involves a mix of internal assessment, exams and oral presentations.

Dr Sheehan's research was sparked by an article he read which argued that young people, the so-called [Google](#) generation, were no longer able to do sustained in-depth reading because they spent so much time surfing the Internet.

Dr Sheehan didn't buy the argument which he says goes against his experience as a former secondary school history teacher.

He set out to investigate aided by a grant from the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative, which seeks to enhance the links between educational research and teaching practices, and assisted by Dr Kate Hunter, a Senior Lecturer in History at Victoria.

Their goal was to find out how students move from being novice historical thinkers, who approach history passively and are reluctant to ask question, to expert thinkers who see history as an interpretation of the past and question, interrogate and evaluate those interpretations.

Dr Sheehan says the research, which involved interviews with students and teachers and looking at assignments and journals, shows that internally assessed research projects were giving students the skills they

needed to become expert thinkers.

He says it also shows that a teacher's knowledge of how the discipline of history operates and their ability to translate that into classroom teaching, is a key variable in how effectively students learned to think critically.

Dr Sheehan and his team are now testing their findings with a larger and more diverse cohort of almost 3000 [students](#) throughout New Zealand.

Provided by Victoria University

Citation: Evidence supports value of internal assessment in schools (2013, June 19) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-evidence-internal-schools.html>

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