



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee Report

Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

June 2014

List of acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
APIP	Accessible Portable Item Protocol
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
NAP	National Assessment Program
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SCSEEC	Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood
WCAG	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

The Australian Government Department of Education welcomes the Report on the Inquiry into the *Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy*. A response to each recommendation in the report is provided below. The Department has sought the views and input of ACARA in preparing these responses.

Recommendation 1: The committee recommends the quick turnaround of test results should receive the highest priority in the design of NAPLAN Online with achievable and measurable targets built in to the system.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government agrees in principle with this recommendation.

The Australian Government is committed to delivering National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test results faster, as this will enable schools and parents to quickly access the diagnostic elements of the test, and develop appropriate intervention strategies to support and extend students' literacy and numeracy capabilities.

Current situation

All education ministers have agreed in principle that the return of individual student results for diagnostic purposes is beneficial to improve student learning and the faster the results return to teachers the better.

The Australian Government is working cooperatively with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and the states and territories to achieve faster turnaround of NAPLAN test results to students, teachers and parents.

The Australian Government believes it is important that the use of NAPLAN item level data should be used to inform teacher classroom practice and that states and territories actively develop assessment literacy skills amongst their teachers.

Since September 2013, negotiations about the release of individual student results and the individual student reports to parents have been held with all stakeholders. The Australian Government encourages all states and territories to reduce the time it takes to return individual student reports to parents.

ACARA is scheduled to release National Summary Information (preliminary results), previously known as the NAPLAN Summary Report, in a web-based format on 18 August 2014. This information will provide preliminary national, state and territory level results four weeks ahead of the time that the Summary Report was released in 2013. In addition, the majority of states and territories will deliver results back to schools and parents sooner. It is expected that in 2015 turnaround times will continue to be reduced.

NAPLAN online

A key element of the rationale for delivering NAPLAN testing online is that there will be a significant reduction in the time taken to provide feedback to schools, students and parents. Faster turnaround of results is a key goal in the planning and design of NAPLAN online.

It is intended that the design and process mapping for the online delivery of NAPLAN maximises the use of technology to automate existing processes that will reduce the time taken. Over time this will provide more information on student performance leading to richer reporting on student performance.

Recommendation 2: The committee recommends that when designing adaptive testing for NAPLAN Online the needs of students with disability are taken into account.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that the needs of all students, including those with disability, continue to be taken into account in the design of NAPLAN testing online. Student assessments should be designed to cover a broad range of abilities that enables the strengths and weaknesses of students to be measured. For NAPLAN testing, disability is defined as per the Commonwealth *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

At the individual student level, NAPLAN provides a measure of literacy and numeracy skills relative to his or her peers. This measure can then be used to monitor student progress, enable longitudinal tracking of student achievement, and inform strategies for improving literacy and numeracy achievements. To achieve this, tests must yield comparable data, so that students' results can be compared and placed on a scale relative to each other. For a test to yield comparable data, tests must be standardised, and students must as far as possible undergo the same test experience.

In the case of students with disability, this may entail adjustments to the standard way a test is delivered and undertaken. Adjustments are intended to enable access to the tests on an equivalent basis to students without disability, so that the adjusted test measures the student's literacy or numeracy performance, rather than measuring the impact of the student's disability or disabilities on their test experience (which an unadjusted test would show).

The current NAPLAN testing regime achieves the above through the *National Protocols for Test Administration 2014* (the Protocols) and in particular the *Adjustments for Students with a Disability* section, consistent with the *Disability Standards for Education 2005*, which set out the rights of students with disability and the obligations of school authorities in relation to education under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

The Protocols (available at www.nap.edu.au) allow for:

- a range of permitted adjustment types (each supported by evidence bases that isolate the effect of the adjustment and demonstrate the effectiveness of the adjustment)

- to be applied singly or in combination
- on a case by case basis dependent on individual student needs
- as determined by the school together with the relevant Test Administration Authority, the parent/carer and the student
- exemption of students with significant intellectual and/or functional disabilities, who are unable to access the tests within the guidelines for adjustments

Examples of the application of these adjustments can be found in a set of ‘scenarios’ published on the National Assessment Program (NAP) website www.nap.edu.au.

NAPLAN online

The needs of students with disability will be taken into account in the design of adaptive testing and the test development and delivery systems. To this end, ACARA is working closely with stakeholders, expert advisers and service delivery partners, as well as its working, advisory, and reference groups that support the test development process.

Adjustments for students with disability in the online environment will be guided by the Protocols adapted for the online context. As far as possible, online assessment for each student with accessibility requirements will replicate the arrangements currently in place for that student in daily classroom assessment activities.

Research commissioned in 2013 (which included a review of online accessibility options in use for online assessment in other jurisdictions) is informing work in this area. Further research on the adaptation of the accessibility aspects of the Protocols to the online environment is planned.

Technical specifications

In addition to the measures outlined above, there are specific business requirements which will need to be met in the design of the NAPLAN online test authoring and test delivery systems:

- ACARA has specified compliance with all legislative requirements as well as Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, WCAG2.0 Level AA, in the business requirements for the NAPLAN online component of the test delivery system under development.
- In addition, the systems will meet the Accessible Portable Item Protocol (APIP) Standard – a data model for standardising the interchange file format for digital test items, which provides a test delivery interface with all the information and resources required to make a test and an item accessible for students with a variety of disabilities and special needs.
- Test items will be developed in accordance with item specifications, which will include accessibility and usability requirements (including provision of adjusted or alternate content where an online interaction is by its nature inaccessible to a particular user group, for example because it is graphically-based, as determined by APIP).

Recommendation 3: The committee recommends that when designing adaptive testing for NAPLAN Online the needs of students from a non-English speaking background are taken into account.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government agrees with this recommendation.

The Australian Government is committed to ensuring that the needs of all students are taken into account for in the design of NAPLAN testing online, including those with non-English speaking background.

NAPLAN is designed as a standardised assessment - all students across Australia sit the same tests for their year level. The tests are designed in such a way that the questions, administration conditions, scoring procedures and analysis are consistent for all students. This allows for a comparable understanding of performance across the country.

The tests identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for their learning. While it is recognised that all students do not have the same cultural and language background, competency in Australian English is essential for all students to allow them to participate fully in Australian society. This is particularly important for students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island heritages who may not speak English as their first, second or third language, as well as migrant and refugee students.

As NAPLAN *literacy* assessments are tests of student ability in standard Australian English, specific adjustments are not made for students with a non-English speaking background. The literacy demands of the *numeracy* tests should not, however, exclude a student with a non-English speaking background from accessing the numeracy tests.

Test development

NAPLAN tests are developed collaboratively by the states and territories, and the Australian Government and the non-government sectors. The development of NAPLAN test items is extensively quality assured through highly specific and rigorously applied processes, continuous quality control and auditing. ACARA has in place a rigorous test development process and uses expert panels to develop and review test items.

As part of the test development process, all proposed test items undergo quality assurance that takes cultural background into account. In preparing the assessments, test developers must ensure NAPLAN tests are not culturally biased against any student group, including students from a non-English speaking background. The development process involves ACARA working with specialist item writers under contract, and supported by expert review and recommendations from officials from all states and territories, including assessment and curriculum specialists. This process ensures that no questions in the NAPLAN tests require direct personal knowledge of a topic outside the curriculum for respective year levels.

NAPLAN tests are standardised and serve a national comparability purpose. The test development process is designed to ensure that test content is aligned to the curriculum expectations of each state and territory, with testing to be based on the Australian Curriculum

from 2016. The development process includes having each state and territory review all proposed test items for cultural and language appropriateness.

The consideration of students from non-English speaking and diverse cultural backgrounds will continue in the development of NAPLAN test items in an online environment.

Recommendation 4: The committee recommends that ACARA closely monitor the use of NAPLAN results to ensure results are published to assist the Government to deliver extra, targeted funding to schools and students who need more support, rather than the development of league tables.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

ACARA's strategic directions are set by [ACARA's Charter](http://www.acara.edu.au/about_us/about_us.html), (available at http://www.acara.edu.au/about_us/about_us.html), determined by the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC). Amongst other matters, the Charter vests responsibility with ACARA for:

- collecting national data (including on individual schools) for the purpose of accountability and reporting, research and analysis, and resource allocation as directed by SCSEEC
- analysing data, as required by education ministers and their departments, to support system management and policy.

ACARA undertakes a role in monitoring how NAPLAN results are used in the public domain.

The Australian Government supports the fair and responsible publication of NAPLAN results, and does not support the development of league tables. A key purpose of NAPLAN is to provide information for all Australian governments to underpin school improvement and target funding where it is most needed in Australian schools. The *My School* website (www.myschool.edu.au) allows users to compare schools with statistically similar groups of students, providing contextual information to support fairer and more meaningful comparisons. If the performance information is separated from the contextual information, meaning and fairness are diminished.

Under the Australian Government's *Students First* policy, school autonomy and the Independent Public Schools initiative will enable principals to have more support and freedom to make decisions for the benefit of their school. It is intended that this policy will provide capacity for principals to apply funding to support those students who need help to improve their literacy and numeracy skills. This reform reflects international evidence that in seeking to improve schools, the autonomy of the principal to make informed decisions supports student outcomes.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 1: The Australian Greens recommend that, if publication of individual school results on the *My School* site continues, the Government remove the functionality that enables ranking and comparisons of individual school results.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government does not agree with this recommendation.

The Australian Government supports the fair and responsible publication of NAPLAN results. A key purpose of NAPLAN is to provide information for all Australian governments to target funding where it is most needed in Australian schools.

My School is a unique online tool that promotes transparency in education by providing parents, schools, governments and the wider community with high quality, nationally comparable data on the performance and progress of Australian schools.

The *My School* website was purposely designed to minimise the construction of crude league tables which create unfair and indefensible comparisons of Australian schools.

While the *My School* website allows users to compare statistically similar schools, it provides contextual information to support fairer and more meaningful comparisons of schools than publication of performance information without providing information about key factors that impact the performance of schools. The *My School* website does not include rankings of schools.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 2: The Australian Greens recommend that in the event that functionality for the ranking and comparisons of individual school results is removed from the *My School* website but improper and detrimental use of NAPLAN data continues (such as the creation of league tables) the Government remove the school-level data, in accordance with their prior policy position.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government does not agree with this recommendation.

As outlined in the response to the Australian Greens Recommendation 1, the Australian Government does not support the development of simplistic league tables. The *My School* website was purposely designed to minimise the construction of crude league tables which create unfair and indefensible comparisons of Australian schools.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 3: The Australian Greens recommend that the Government clarify the purpose of NAPLAN testing, particularly with regard to its use as a diagnostic assessment, and adapt the structure and any publication of the data to align with the stated purpose.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government does not agree with this recommendation.

The purpose of NAPLAN is clearly articulated. As the largest and most significant program within the NAP, NAPLAN provides data on student learning in literacy and numeracy and these data are used to inform the development of strategies to improve literacy and numeracy skills of students in all schools across Australia.

NAPLAN results provide a baseline for monitoring student and school progress, enables longitudinal tracking of student achievement, and can be used to inform strategies for improving the literacy and numeracy achievements of students.

NAPLAN testing allows Australian governments to identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge which provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in school and the community. NAPLAN results provide reliable, comparable information on how students, schools and school systems are performing against national standards, including national minimum standards in each of the assessed areas.

The following NAPLAN results are published to support this purpose.

- National, state and territory NAPLAN results are published in a preliminary and National Report each year.
- Schools receive comprehensive data packages on NAPLAN results, and states and territories have developed programs for data analysis to support teachers in using and interpreting NAPLAN data to improve student outcomes.
- Parents/carers receive an individual student report on NAPLAN results which enable them to see how their child is progressing against national standards, including the national average and middle 60 per cent of students for the year level.
- Information on NAPLAN results at the school level is published on the My School website, which is updated each year.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 4: The Australian Greens recommend that the Government provide further support and training for teachers and schools to analyse the NAPLAN data and devise individual educational programs to assist students to ensure the resources used to run the tests and create the data are not wasted.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government notes this recommendation. Teacher professional development is the responsibility of state and territory governments.

The Australian Government's submission to this Inquiry outlined the support and training available for teachers in jurisdictions to analyse and use NAPLAN data to support those students. All states and territories have developed programs for data analysis to support teachers in using and interpreting NAPLAN data to improve student outcomes. For example, see page 16 of the Department's submission to the Inquiry (Submission 69 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations).

NAPLAN results are an important resource for teachers to be able to target their teaching practice to the needs of their students. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers require teachers to be able to assess, provide feedback and report on student learning. For the Graduate standard, this includes an expectation that teachers can 'demonstrate the capacity to interpret student assessment data to evaluate student learning and modify teaching practice.' (Standard 5)

The national approach to the Accreditation of Initial Teacher Education Programs in Australia: Standards and Procedures require universities to demonstrate how they will be preparing their students to meet the Graduate teacher standard. The data produced by NAPLAN tests are rich and detailed and can be of great value in informing teaching practice and student learning. Analysis of the data down to the level of each test question (item), for each student, can help teachers identify the gaps in learning of particular students. It can also highlight areas where classroom strategies are succeeding or may need adjustment.

As part of their ongoing teacher professional development, increasing the assessment literacy capabilities of teachers is fast becoming an essential 21st century skill for teachers. This means that teachers need training and support in ways to interpret and analyse data to inform and change their practice, if needed in extending the achievement of all students. As well as improving the outcomes of lower achieving students, it can be applied to supporting and extending higher achieving students.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 5: The Australian Greens recommend that the Government consult with schools to determine the best time of year to hold the annual tests in light of discussions around the purpose of the testing.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government does not agree with this recommendation.

The timing of NAPLAN tests was agreed by education ministers in July 2006. Moving the tests to May allowed diagnostic information to be provided to teachers and parents earlier in the year than had previously been the case with state and territory literacy and numeracy tests. This assists with planning needed interventions sooner and using assessment to improve teaching and learning.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 6: The Australian Greens recommend that NAPLAN Online uses the advantages of the medium to test a broader scope of knowledge within literacy and numeracy, more accurately reflect classroom learning styles and incorporate questions which encourage lateral and creative thinking from students.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government notes this recommendation.

Work is underway to determine the scope and scale of the test delivery system features when NAPLAN goes online and this is being undertaken in consultation with state and territory governments and the non-government school sector. Further research on the development and use of technically enhanced items, including multimedia stimulus material, is being conducted by ACARA with the intention of including these item types as part of the NAPLAN full-cohort testing program over time.

Evidence shows that tailored test design, which comprises multi-stage branching tests, provides better alignment of tests to the ability of each student. Tailored test design ‘branches’ students through test pathways depending on their ability level, ensuring that high performing students are adequately challenged and that low achieving students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge. For the latter group of students, the test design significantly enhances the testing context and student engagement. The increased number of items in this test design also provides an opportunity to broaden and enhance the coverage of the Australian Curriculum in NAPLAN testing.

Other assessments

All Australian governments support additional assessments that focus on lateral and creative thinking through instruments such as the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), which in 2015 will incorporate collaborative problem solving in its test design.

The NAP sample assessments are currently under review and the longer-term future directions of the program post-2015 are being developed by ACARA for consideration by education ministers.

The Australian Greens Recommendation 7: The Australian Greens recommend that ACARA actively consults with teachers and academics experienced in teaching students from language backgrounds other than English to scrutinise the tests for cultural assumptions and inappropriate content and styles of questioning.

Australian Government Response

The Australian Government notes this recommendation. As this recommendation overlaps Committee Recommendation 3, please refer to that response.