



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
Submitting as a: Government Agency
State: NSW

Summary

ACARA was established by an act of federal parliament in 2008. ACARA's mission is to improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment and reporting. Its functions include development of national curriculum, administration of national assessments and reporting on educational outcomes for young people in Australia. There is extensive international evidence that shows that these are important features of successful and improving education systems.

The work of ACARA ensures that what children learn (the Australian Curriculum) is evidence based, committed to high standards and relevant. The Australian Curriculum recognises the diversity and range of needs of Australian students.

General capabilities are embedded in the Australian Curriculum and represent skills, knowledge and understandings that are relevant to the dynamic 21st century context in which our students learn and contribute to.

The National Assessment Program provides standardised assessment which can track students over time and provide individual feedback to teachers and parents on student learning (NAPLAN) or measure the level of learning in particular learning areas at points in time (NAP sample assessments in science literacy, civics and citizenship and ICT literacy).

The reporting function of ACARA ensures that Australian schooling is transparent and accountable to parents, students and the community.

ACARA's future workplan builds on these successes and supports ongoing improvement to the education system. The Australian Curriculum continues to be monitored and evaluated and teaching resources are continually being created. The development of literacy and numeracy progressions will assist teachers identify the learning pathway of their students and ensure optimal learning is taking place.

Important developments in student assessment include moving to online testing of literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN online) which will provide more precise results. A greater focus on formative assessment tools will aid classroom teachers to understand how students are progressing.

Main submission

The Australian Curriculum

Australia has a robust curriculum agreed to by education ministers from Foundation to Year 12. This was achieved through extensive national discussion and collaboration led by ACARA with partners and stakeholders across the country, accessing the best available advice and expertise, providing opportunities for broad public consultation, seeking targeted input from national and international experts and maintaining transparency around decision making for all stakeholders.

The Australian Curriculum has been designed to set the expectations for the learning of all young Australians as they progress through school, regardless of where they live or the background from which they come.

Development of the first national curriculum was guided by the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008) which committed to “supporting all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens” and to promoting equity and excellence in education.

Underlying the propositions that shaped the development of the Australian Curriculum are the assumptions that:

- each student can learn and that the needs of every student are important
- each student is entitled to knowledge, understanding and skills that provide a foundation for successful and lifelong learning and participation in the Australian community
- high expectations should be set for each student as teachers account for the current level of learning of individual students and the different rates at which students develop
- the needs and interests of students will vary, and that schools and teachers will plan from the curriculum in ways that respond to those needs and interests.

Increasingly, in a world where knowledge itself is constantly growing and evolving, students need to develop knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that apply across subject-based content and equip students to be lifelong learners able to operate with confidence in a complex, information-rich, globalised world. Often referred to as 21st century skills, in the Australian Curriculum these are known as

general capabilities and include literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding and are crucial to the enhancement of all learning areas and subjects.

In the Australian Curriculum, the general capabilities are addressed through the content of the learning areas and are identified where they are developed or applied in the content descriptions. They are also identified where they offer opportunities to add depth and richness to the student learning via the optional content elaborations, provided to give teachers ideas about how they might teach the content. Learning continua have been developed for each capability to describe the relevant knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions at particular points of schooling.

For example, Critical and Creative Thinking should be embedded, as appropriate, in English or Mathematics or History and is explicitly taught, not “caught”, enabling students and teachers to extend the learning in ways that engage students and encourage them to aspire to excellence. Reinforcement of the capabilities as part of a whole-school approach to the disciplines, particularly with their potential to personalise student learning, offers a powerful strategy for educational success.

The Australian Curriculum also includes the cross-curriculum priorities of sustainability, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Amongst other benefits, these global, regional and local priorities support students to understand and share different worldviews in a diverse and ever-changing global world. Not least of all, contributing to the commitment to Reconciliation in Australia.

Students in Australian classrooms have multiple, diverse and changing needs that are shaped by individual learning histories and abilities, their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and a range of socio-economic factors. The Australian Curriculum acknowledges the diversity of learners and takes account of:

- students with special educational needs
- students who speak English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D)
- students who are assessed as gifted and/or talented in some aspect of intellectual, social, creative or physical engagement.

Educational success may be regarded as:

- acquisition of deep disciplinary knowledge as an essential precursor and accompaniment to development of skills
- capacity to transfer knowledge and skills across learning areas in a study context

- capacity to apply knowledge and skills for effective participation in society and in the workplace.

The publication of the Australian Curriculum has resulted in the development of quality resources for teaching and learning by educational, cultural and community organisations, and commercial publishers, as well as by ACARA in collaboration with school authorities. The Australian Curriculum website makes the curriculum available to teachers and the community and is a popular resource.

How should school quality and educational success be measured?

As noted above, ACARA has a key responsibility for national assessment and data analysis and reporting as well as setting achievement standards for learning. ACARA is dedicated to data transparency and the provision of a full picture of school and system effectiveness. Through its national assessment program and data analysis and reporting functions, ACARA provides parents, teachers and school education leaders with an objective measure around student assessment. In addition, it ensures the provision of related quality information on schooling that allows for a view to where growth has been achieved.

ACARA's priority in this area is highlighting improvement, where these gains may be explored and the underlying strategies adopted by other schools.

National Assessment Program - the National Measurement Framework

[The Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia](#), as agreed to by Australian education ministers, is the basis for reporting to the community on progress towards the Educational Goals of the Melbourne Declaration and includes key performance measures for school quality and educational success in Australia.

Achievement in the National Assessment Program (NAP) is one of the key performance measures for the Declaration. The NAP focusses on student outcomes in national assessments of literacy, numeracy, civics and citizenship, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy and science literacy.

National reporting provides important contextual information about the outcomes of schooling and promotes accountability.

The annual [National Report on Schooling](#) reports on progress towards the Education Goals. It focusses on reporting at a national level and contains contextual information on schooling in Australia as well as reporting student outcomes, achievement and attainment. Importantly it contains valuable information on equity measures such as student attainment by indigenous status, sex, language background, geographic location, socioeconomic background and disability.

National Report on Schooling data portal provides interactive and user-friendly access to national data sets for schooling relevant to the annual national report on schooling in Australia. Data provided through the portal is updated regularly and aims to provide the user with the most up-to-date information available. The charts and tables are interactive and accessible, enabling the user to filter the data by state, school sector, school type or level, Indigeneity and other factors where appropriate. For users wishing to perform their own analyses of the data contained in the Portal can be downloaded.

Measurements of school quality and educational success should go beyond academic outcomes. There are ongoing discussions between ACARA and stakeholders considering measures of student engagement and wellbeing. Both student engagement and wellbeing are referred to in the Melbourne Declaration and the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum. The Declaration specifically highlights the importance of engagement in relation to the middle years of schooling and its role in improving educational outcomes for indigenous youth and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

There has already been agreement by ministers to report on student attendance and senior secondary outcomes, also considered to be important aspects of engagement.

The My School website

My School provides information for parents and the community about schools in their area. Transparency and accountability are identified by McKinsey and Company (2010) as a factor in improving school systems. The [OECD case study on the development and implementation of NAPLAN and My School](#) (OECD, 2012) identifies many benefits of school transparency and accountability including that it encourages innovation and excellence in schools.

My School is regularly reviewed to ensure it reports data in a way that is meaningful to parents and genuinely reflects achievements at the school level. For example, the website is undergoing development to allow better graphical display of changes over time in student achievement.

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

In short, high quality of teaching and learning is essential to ensure young people achieve expected standards.

While responsibility for realising this largely rests with teachers, schools and school authorities they can be well supported in their role through the setting of expectations for what young people should learn, and enhancing support for teachers to identify what individual students currently know and can do, what they should learn next and how best to support this learning.

Australian Curriculum – monitoring and evaluation

While change will always be debated, what is imperative is that any revisions to the curriculum are evidence-based and focused on achieving the best possible education outcomes for Australian students.

The ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Foundation to Year 10 (F-10) Australian Curriculum balances the desire for curriculum stability for schools, the community and education authorities against the need for ongoing enhancements to reflect the rapidly changing world and facilitate depth and breadth of consultation.

ACARA is undertaking research and gathering information about the effectiveness of the Australian Curriculum and identifying ways in which the curriculum could be improved for future consideration by education ministers.

ACARA's current program of research, intended to inform the next generation of the Australian Curriculum, shows clear alignment between the existing general capabilities and the attributes and competencies identified in international research activities (e.g. [OECD Education 2030 Project](#)).

ACARA is also reviewing the strategy and processes for contributing to high quality senior secondary curriculum, including collaborative work with Australian senior secondary curriculum and certification authorities on senior secondary expectations and options for further development of senior secondary curriculum in partnership with interested jurisdictions.

National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions

All Australian education ministers agreed to collaborative action to develop national literacy and numeracy learning progressions in December 2015. ACARA, in partnership with the NSW Department of Education, is leading development of the progressions which will be presented to the Education Council for consideration at the end of 2017.

The National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions support student improvement over time by assisting teachers to better determine current literacy and numeracy knowledge, understanding and skills and to identify the appropriate future learning pathway of a student relative to their current literacy and numeracy development.

A considerable body of research shows that optimal learning occurs when learners are presented with challenges just beyond their current level of attainment. The progressions are designed to help teachers support students to more successfully and rigorously engage with the literacy demands of the F–10 Australian Curriculum.

Assessment

Meaningful student assessment and quality assessment tools have been shown to be common features of education systems showing sustained improvement (McKinsey and Company, 2010).

The NAP is delivered and administered by ACARA in partnership with state and territory testing authorities. It provides schools and parents with the means to periodically assess students against previous performance, national standards and their peers using an objective measure. This provides crucial evidence for evaluating and monitoring student progress and the implementation of Australian Curriculum and other educational initiatives and policies.

National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

All students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 participate in NAPLAN. NAPLAN is an essential tool for improvement in education and forms part of the evidence base for assessing “what works” in the classroom. NAPLAN data is used for planning, allocating support and resources, and tracking progress and achievements of individuals and groups of students over the course of their education.

ACARA has in recent years increased its focus on students’ improvement, or gain, as they progress through the national literacy and numeracy assessments. Reporting “point in time” student achievement cannot identify whether students are coasting, failing or improving over time. It is important to be able to identify schools where students are improving and share what these schools may be doing to achieve gains in literacy and numeracy.

The National Assessment Program: Sample assessments

The NAP Sample Assessment Program, now conducted online, tests a representative sample of Australian students in a rolling three-year program. Assessments take place in Year 6 and Year 10 in the areas of Science Literacy (available to Year 10 from 2018); Civics and Citizenship; and ICT Literacy.

ACARA is currently undertaking further work to allow schools that have not participated in the sample assessments to access them voluntarily via the online platform. Quality assessment tools for teachers and schools support improvement in learning outcomes.

STEM school education strategy

The [COAG Education Council’s STEM School Education Strategy](#) aims to meet key aspects of the Melbourne Declaration and halt declining performance against international benchmarks of science literacy, as well as increase participation in senior secondary science and advanced maths. Science literacy, as measured in the National Assessment Program, is the ability to engage with scientific concepts and

principles, is identified as essential to help meet the complex environmental, social and economic pressures of the future. As part of the National STEM school education strategy from 2018 the NAP - Scientific Literacy assessment will be extended to Year 10 students and be made available online to non-participating schools.

Access to data to conduct evidence based research

ACARA provides access to datasets on student achievement (appropriately de-identified to protect privacy) to interested parties for research purposes. This facilitates quality research and contributes to the evidence base for improving student educational outcomes. In the last three years ACARA has provided various data for over 80 research projects across Australia. This is in addition to research carried out by and for state and territory agencies using their respective datasets. ACARA supports the use of evidence based research to underpin practices to achieve improvement of student outcomes. It is important to build upon information available and to ensure students across Australia are the beneficiaries of shared, innovative and sustainable good practice. Assessment data alone can only go so far in driving improvements. A solid evidence base requires the appropriate balance of other measures.

To meet this need, ACARA supports the recommendation made through the Productivity Commission's National Education Evidence inquiry that ACARA, in collaboration with its partners, be made responsible for promoting a culture of using evidence based research by policy makers and educators and working with its partners to communicate and implement what works best.

Are there any new or emerging areas for actions which could lead to large gains in student improvements that need further development or testing? What are they and how could they be further developed?

Curriculum reform and student assessment have been identified as common elements of "improvement journeys" undertaken by improved school systems (McKinsey and Company, 2010). Through its work, ACARA seeks to continuously improve the Australian Curriculum, the National Assessment Program and related reporting functions in liaison with its partners and stakeholders

Australian Curriculum

A robust curriculum is one that continues to meet the needs of students in a changing world, is practical for teachers, and reflects best practice nationally and internationally. As a part of agreed monitoring and evaluation processes, ACARA has set in place ongoing activities to gather information about the effectiveness of the Australian Curriculum and identify ways in which the curriculum can be improved over time, including research into high-performing nations and systems. Possible strategies include:

- Refine the Australian Curriculum to emphasise balance of knowledge and skills at the disciplinary and inter-disciplinary levels
- Provide explicit support for teachers on teaching the General Capabilities
Develop support materials that support teachers to better use the Australian Curriculum's achievement standards to set expectations and report on achievement and progress
- Ensure that senior secondary curriculum builds on the F-10 curriculum and better prepares students to succeed in employment, further education and participation in society.
- Continue to improve the nature of assessment items in NAPLAN and other NAP instruments to reflect the Australian Curriculum expectations and to align these with international assessments eg PISA focus on problem-solving etc.)

Online Assessment

In October 2013 education ministers endorsed principles for national online assessment. These principles underpin the work to deliver NAPLAN online in all schools in all States and Territories by 2019.

The principles require online assessment to support quality teaching and learning, deliver better national and assessment information and broaden the curriculum coverage of assessments. Teachers can improve student learning outcomes through the development of data-driven effective teaching strategies.

Online testing provides the opportunity to administer tests that are targeted to students' achievement levels. The computer-adaptive design ensures that most of the items presented to students are within their level of achievement and level of development. This allows more precise estimates of students' achievements than paper tests where all students attempt the same set of items

Online assessment also allows adjustments (where technically feasible) to make tests more accessible for students with disabilities.

NAPLAN online will deliver results within weeks, rather than the current 3 months. This is particularly important for students in Year 3 where large gains in development can mean that test results are out of date by the time they are delivered.

Surveys of students participating in trial online testing have also found that the faster turnaround provides an immediacy and greater relevance to participants. Online testing will also provide flexibility in the future to assess more content and a wider set of skills.

Formative assessment

The development of formative assessment tools has been identified as a priority for national action by education ministers. The development of online formative assessment tools that “help teachers collect and use data about individual student learning needs” is part of the STEM school education strategy.

Identifying high achieving students

NAPLAN online will make it easier for high performing students to be tested at the highest level of their ability, due to the adaptive nature of the online testing platform. ACARA is undertaking exploratory work to develop standards for consultation with stakeholders.