

**Reporting on Literacy and Numeracy attainment in Victorian
senior secondary qualifications –Consultation paper**



**Victorian TAFE Association Response
May 2018**

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Introduction

The Victorian TAFE Association is the peak body for Victoria’s public providers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), including 12 TAFE Institutes, four dual sector Universities and an Associate member, AMES.

The Victorian TAFE Association welcomes this opportunity to respond to Reporting on Literacy and Numeracy attainment in Victorian senior secondary qualifications – Consultation paper. Specifically, we would like to comment on the following:

- A broader review
- Nature of assessment
- Including multiple touchpoints
- Reporting
- Student diversity
- Leveraging from other jurisdictions
- Senior schooling in TAFE

A broader review

The consultation paper notes a “community expectation” that “thirteen years of schooling” will enable students to enter the “workforce, further education or training with adequate levels of literacy and numeracy”. Despite this expectation, “perceptions” abound that “adequate levels of literacy and numeracy proficiency” are “not universally being realised”, leading to calls from “employer groups and some in the broader community” for “greater focus on ensuring that students have the necessary literacy and numeracy skills at the conclusion of their secondary schooling to enable full and successful participation in society and the economy”.

Taken together, these statements suggest that the issue is broader than assessment, reporting and the stipulation of minimum levels of literacy and/or numeracy. If students do indeed leave schooling without the required literacy and numeracy skills, then what is required are interventions at various stages of schooling that address the underlying causes, not merely assessment and reporting that occurs upon the student’s completion. These interventions should be developed after an analysis that gives an understanding of the host of factors that contribute to a student’s inability to obtain the appropriate skills.

Among the factors that would be relevant for consideration are whether the curriculum, as currently struck, provides students with the skills necessary to be effective and engaged Victorian citizens. It could also consider how other factors (such as, inter alia, the method of course delivery, the socio-economic status of the student, where a student is located) contribute to the inability of a student to obtain required literacy and numeracy skills. The review would be broader in scope than the latter years of schooling, to also consider a student’s preparation throughout the student lifecycle and to interventions that can be introduced along the way. It would also consider the interaction and overlap between primary and secondary schooling. Consideration could also be given to the recommendation arising from the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools to “move from a year-based curriculum to a curriculum expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age”.¹

¹ Gonski, David et al (March 2018), Through Growth to Achievement Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, page x.

The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends a review that is broader than that outlined in the consultation paper. The review should test the proposition that currently, students are departing secondary education without the required literacy and numeracy skills. Implied in this is the development of some understanding of the benchmark level of skills that should be developed during one's schooling years. If such a review shows that levels are not universally being met, the review would then proceed to determine the causal factors behind this and the optimal policy interventions. The introduction of an assessment test should be considered and introduced only as part of a suite of activities to ensure that Victorian students complete their secondary schooling with appropriate literacy and numeracy levels, and only if it can be demonstrated that such a test will achieve said aim.

Nature of assessment

There are two issues to consider in relation to assessment. The first of these is concerned with whether assessment is required or justifiable. Responding to this in the affirmative leads to the second issue, which is concerned with the manner in which such an assessment should be designed.

As noted above, the Victorian TAFE Association considers that such a test should be introduced only if it can be shown that Victorian students are not currently provided with the required levels of literacy and numeracy, only if it can be demonstrated that such a test will help to address literacy and numeracy, and only as part of a suite of activities that has been developed after consideration of all contributing factors. However, if an assessment is to be introduced, it should be designed in such a way to minimise the impact on students, teachers and schools.

To achieve this, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that:

- Leverage existing activities: Victorian students currently are tested as part of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which requires Victorian students to undergo testing in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Some students (though not all) undergo other testing processes, such as the General Achievement Test (GAT). Any proposed assessment should be developed in a manner that leverages or is at the very least cognisant of these activities.
 - Embedded testing: the Victorian TAFE Association asks that care be taken with any proposal to introduce an explicit, mandatory, discrete/standalone test. A separate, standalone test could add considerably to the burden for students and teachers and is likely to add stress to what is seen as an already overcrowded curriculum. Instead, we recommend that testing be 'embedded' into the curriculum process. However, if such a discrete test is to be introduced, its shape should be informed by input from expert stakeholders and crafted in a way that facilitates and assists students with career and education pathways.
 - Benchmarking: if benchmarks or minimum levels of literacy and/or numeracy are to be made a requirement, then the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that these be benchmarked against the Australian Core Skills Framework. This would ensure that Victorian students are measured against national benchmarks and facilitate consistency with national processes.
 - No additional mandatory subjects: The Victorian TAFE Association does not support the introduction of additional mandatory subjects. Increasing the number of
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mandatory subjects from the current requirement for English would limit student choice and the ability to cater diverse student needs.

- Diverse needs: this is elaborated upon below, but in short, any assessment should recognise, support and enable the needs of diverse student cohorts and to be met.

Including multiple touchpoints

The inspiration for this review is to ensure that students complete their secondary schooling with the literacy and numeracy skills required to function successfully in work and life. However, the focus on the end-years of schooling leaves little room for any meaningful intervention. If anything, measuring students at this late stage is likely to make a student who is assessed as not meeting the required benchmarks feeling inadequate, despondent, cheated and lost.

The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that initiatives be developed that give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate the attainment of literacy and numeracy benchmarks. These would be at various points along the student lifecycle and enable identification of individual students who do not demonstrate attainment of required skills. Where a student does not meet required benchmarks, appropriate policy interventions would be set in train.

As noted elsewhere, there are a multitude of factors that can and often do impact upon a student's ability to obtain required skills. These can be educative and pedagogical (such as curriculum content or the method of course delivery), or social (such as geographical barriers, gender discrimination, poverty or bullying). Further, the problem may be at the level of the individual student, or indeed more systemic (a whole school). The nature of the intervention would therefore be dependent upon the factor or factors that have resulted in the student's (or indeed students') inability to demonstrate required competencies.

The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that these policy interventions be cognisant of the broad factors that impact upon student success. As noted above, these factors and the appropriate interventions would be considered as part of the wider review recommended earlier in this submission.

Reporting

The experience of NAPLAN has resulted in perverse outcomes whereby testing results are used to develop simplistic, misleading and one-dimensional 'school league tables'. The impact of these tables goes beyond the news cycle but manifests itself in despondency by students attending so-called poorer performing schools; apprehension from parents; a lowering of teacher morale; and the inability of schools to enrol students.

Care must be taken to ensure that any reporting emanating from assessment does not result in similar outcomes.

If reporting is to occur, we consider that it should be structured in way that enables the following:

- Individual, school and systemic reporting: reporting should be at the level of the individual student, school and system, though care must be taken to ensure privacy in the case of the individual student.
- Informing funding and resource allocation: key factors leading to disparities in 'performance' are the resources and funding available to schools and students. The results of any test and subsequent reporting should be used to inform funding and resource allocations. Reporting at the level of the individual and school would enable

funding and support to be deployed and targeted at the appropriate level. For example, a school may show high performance but a student at said school may demonstrate insufficient grasp of literacy and/or numeracy. In such a case, the individual would not be lost in the totality of the school and would have access appropriate support.

- Touchpoints and policy interventions: as noted elsewhere, any assessment should be available at multiple points in the student lifecycle, to enable identification of struggling students as early as possible and to track performance at various stages of their student career.
- Tracking the State: the Victorian TAFE Association considers that reporting should be crafted in a manner that enables Victoria to track its performance as a state in meeting its broad educational aspirations and targets. This would enable the effectiveness or otherwise of policies/initiatives to be tested and changed where they are shown not to be delivering required outcomes.

Student diversity

It is convenient to speak of a benchmark literacy that all should aspire to and demonstrate. But this notion misses the diversity of experience and fails to grasp the contextual nature of literacy and/or numeracy. For example, the numeracy required of a physicist will differ markedly from that required of an historian. Similarly, the literacy needed for the sciences differs from that required to function in the arts and humanities.

In the move to develop benchmarks, care must be taken to preserve and recognise such diversity. This would include recognising:

- Job diversity: this was touched on above, but in short, different jobs require different levels of numeracy and literacy. A hairdresser and an engineer both require numeracy skills, but the degree and type of skills that are required will be highly variable. This variability should be acknowledged.
- Cultural backgrounds: the IQ test was shown to be culturally, economically and socially biased and deficient, being unable to cater to and recognise diverse cultural, economic and social backgrounds. It is imperative that any test for literacy not be prone to a similar bias. Care must be taken to ensure that such bias is not present in any benchmarks developed for literacy, but that flexibility be embedded to accommodate diverse backgrounds and diverse notions of literacy. Diverse backgrounds are also relevant in determining matters such as the manner of course delivery and the best way to deploy policy interventions.
- Generational matters: language is a live and evolving phenomenon, and what is judged as literate similarly changes. Different generations demonstrate different patois and vernaculars. There must be some facility to recognise new and evolving terms and new ways in which language is used. Similarly, any benchmarks must recognise terms that are increasingly obsolete.
- Migrants: the benchmarks that are developed should be cognisant of and be flexible enough to cater to migrants, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds.
- Students with disabilities: students with disabilities face challenges that are not experienced by other students. This affects their schooling and ability to achieve literacy and numeracy skills. Further, some students may demonstrate different types of literacy and may struggle to demonstrate more common forms of literacy (for

example, the deaf and hard of hearing may be proficient in Auslan but not in other forms of communication).

- Diversity of skills: as noted in the opening to this section, literacy and numeracy requirements will differ markedly across disciplines. In creating benchmarks, care must be taken to ensure that students who are mathematically inclined are not penalised. Similarly, students who are artistically inclined and/or strongly literate should be able to flourish.

If benchmarks are to be developed and implemented, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends that they be developed to take these factors into account.

Learning from other jurisdictions

The Victorian TAFE Association recommends that any proposal draw from experiences in other jurisdictions, particularly those that have historical, cultural and educational backgrounds similar to Victoria's. As such, we recommend that policy initiatives draw on the experience from NSW and its impending requirement that senior students demonstrate attainment of a minimum standard in both literacy and numeracy to receive the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC).

While the NSW initiative is not yet in force, there may be lessons that arose from its review process that can inform Victorian decisions. The Victorian TAFE Association recommends dissecting the rationales and justifications that informed the NSW policy decision, including the decision to require demonstration of minimum levels of literacy and numeracy to receive the NSW HSC. In doing so, we recommend seeking views beyond official government channels to an analysis of the views of diverse NSW stakeholders. If possible, the Victorian TAFE Association recommends a review and assessment of the submissions made to the NSW review, particularly those from key stakeholders.

The Victorian TAFE Association also notes that NSW students who do not meet the literacy and numeracy benchmarks will still be able to receive a statement of their HSC results, a Record of School Achievement (ROSA) and an ATAR, enabling them to apply for tertiary study. What they will not receive is the Higher School Certificate itself. We also note that students will be provided with several opportunities to meet the required standards over Years 10, 11 and 12, and have up to five years following Year 12 completion to provide evidence that they meet the required standard and receive their HSC. If assessment, reporting and/or achievement of a particular standard is to be introduced in Victoria, the Victorian TAFE Association considers similar opportunities for advancement and achievement should be provided.

Senior schooling in TAFE

The Victorian TAFE Association has commissioned research that shows that Victoria's TAFE institutes provide secondary education to almost 6,000 students, with increasing numbers of early school leavers completing their senior school certificates in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector universities year on year.²

The senior secondary settings in Victoria's 12 TAFEs and four dual sector Universities consistently attract young people who have struggled in school, have experienced disrupted learning for a variety of reasons and are from low socio-economic status. Such students typically face challenging learning backgrounds, which leads them to gravitate towards

² Jonas, Pam, Schultz, Nita and van Son, Jo (2017), Disadvantaged young people: senior secondary completion in Victorian TAFEs and dual sector Universities, Victorian TAFE Association.

communities and professions that accept them. Importantly, such students also demonstrate difficulties with respect to literacy and numeracy, and the TAFE setting is often the last resort for this cohort that would otherwise be left disenfranchised from education.

Despite TAFE playing such a significant role in secondary education, anomalies in funding for programs to facilitate and/or support school attendance are denied to TAFE secondary students, placing them at an unfair disadvantage compared to those studying in more traditional settings. Examples include:

- Transport and travelling allowances: TAFE institutes do not meet eligibility requirements for such programs, meaning TAFE secondary students are denied access to resources that make attending school easier.
- Scholarship programs: TAFE secondary students are ineligible to apply for programs to address financial barriers (an example being the Lynne Kosky Memorial VCAL Scholarship).

TAFE secondary students are often an afterthought in the design, implementation and disbursement of support and resources for students and in the development of initiatives to support literacy and numeracy. The Victorian TAFE Association therefore recommends that the policies arising from this review give consideration to students in TAFE settings and to the broader question of learning, social supports and resources available to TAFE secondary students.

Key contact

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