



# Reporting on literacy and numeracy attainment in Victorian senior secondary qualifications – Consultation paper

## **AEU RESPONSE**

### **Basic Position**

Our submission is a response to what we see as the consultation's key question:

*The central consideration therefore must be to determine whether new forms of reporting literacy and numeracy attainment levels as part of senior secondary qualification will improve outcomes for Victorian students.<sup>1</sup>*

The AEU considers that student attainment of literacy and numeracy competencies should remain reported through the satisfactory completion of units of study which demonstrate that they have met the standards required to be awarded either a VCE or VCAL certificate.

The AEU is opposed to a separate minimum level of literacy and/or numeracy as a requirement for the awarding of a senior secondary qualification and does not support any increase in testing in the senior years of schooling. There is no evidence that the standard of student literacy and numeracy skills will be raised by these proposals. However there is evidence that they will erect a barrier to senior students in their transition from school to post-school destinations and increase the percentage of students leaving school before they complete a Year 12 qualification. Introducing a new separate literacy and numeracy assessment for Year 12 will also fundamentally undermine confidence in the assessment processes of Victoria's existing final year certificates.

The AEU position is that schools must be resourced to help students who need additional literacy and numeracy support early on, well before the end of Year 12. Schools know what additional supports are needed to bridge achievement gaps and governments need to stop abrogating their responsibility to properly fund public schools.

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<sup>1</sup> VCAA Consultation Paper, p.2

## Minimum Literacy/Numeracy requirement for senior secondary qualifications

The AEU supports the statements in the consultation paper about the quality and reputation of the VCE and VCAL:

*The VCE has a very strong reputation as a senior secondary qualification based on high and robust standards. VCE studies are regularly benchmarked against international equivalents and the VCE is currently offered in nine international locations and accepted as a tertiary entrance qualification widely across the world.*

*The VCAL is an alternative senior secondary qualification focused on applied learning. VCAL typically provides a direct pathway to training or employment and is widely regarded as an important alternative to the VCE that enables a significant number of young people to complete senior secondary education*

Students who successfully complete either of these certificates have met the appropriate set of curriculum and assessment standards which are built into the courses they have undertaken. VCE standards have been developed and reviewed over a period of time through a comprehensive process set out in the *Principles, guidelines and processes for the development of VCE studies*.<sup>2</sup> They are further endorsed by the VRQA's *Standards for accreditation of senior secondary courses*.<sup>3</sup> The processes have been overseen by experts and Authority personnel involving "as many stakeholders and interested parties as possible from a variety of sources". VCAL must also meet the VRQA accreditation standards and the quality assurance processes required by the VCAA.<sup>4</sup>

The AEU contends that the imposition of an add-on requirement for literacy and numeracy achievement would undermine community perception of the quality and value of the two certificates. It would imply that the literacy and numeracy standards implicit in the standards for successful completion of the various studies and units, and therefore the certificates as a whole, are unsatisfactory. If there is concern about the level of the implied literacy and numeracy standards in some of the studies and units then this issue should be addressed through the existing quality assurance procedures built into the development and review processes of the VCAA.

We also oppose the introduction of a literacy and numeracy minimum standards requirement for qualifications because it will create a new barrier for successful school completion for students. There is evidence that vulnerable young people who are struggling with their learning are more likely to disengage and drop out if they believe that they cannot meet an additional mandated hard barrier in literacy and numeracy. In this case we agree with the position articulated by Professor John

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/VCE\\_principles\\_guidelines\\_development\\_review\\_VCE\\_studies2013.pdf#search=vce%20study%20review%20process](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vce/VCE_principles_guidelines_development_review_VCE_studies2013.pdf#search=vce%20study%20review%20process)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/Documents/accreditation-seniorsecondaryqualificationstandards\\_1.pdf](http://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/Documents/accreditation-seniorsecondaryqualificationstandards_1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> VCAL Quality Assurance Kit 2018 [http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vcal/qakit/vcal\\_qakit.pdf](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/vcal/qakit/vcal_qakit.pdf)

Hattie when he stated that: "I think the biggest issue is that one in five students who start high school don't finish school".<sup>5</sup>

We would also endorse the caution expressed in Minister Merlino's letter to the Chairperson of the VCAA setting up the current review.

*The evidence is very clear about the benefit to the individual and to the broader community of completing senior secondary schooling. Research shows that, on average, those who complete Year 12 tend to be more successful in making the transition from education to work than those who do not. We should therefore be very cautious about the introduction of any new barrier to the completion of senior secondary schooling.*<sup>6</sup>

In 2013 Western Australia introduced a new requirement that students pass an Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (OLNA) ensuring they meet a minimum standard for successful completion of the West Australian Certificate of Education (WACE). The OLNA is seen as being mostly to blame for a big drop in WACE achievement rates among students who entered Year 12 in 2016 (the first year it affected Year 12 completers), with more than one in 10 (10.6 per cent) failing to graduate with a WACE — well down on the past five-year average of about 3.1 per cent.<sup>7</sup> 91.9 per cent of students who completed the required number of year 11 and 12 courses were awarded the WACE in 2016, compared to 96.4 per cent of year 12 students in 2015, 96 per cent of students in 2014 and 96.9 per cent in 2013. Five per cent of year 12 students failed to make the minimum literacy and numeracy standard despite meeting all other requirements for the WACE.<sup>8</sup> WA Education Minister Sue Ellery said she had expected to see a reduction in students graduating with a WACE after changes to requirements and was surprised it wasn't greater.<sup>9</sup>

The creation of a new barrier for school completion in Victoria would appear to be at odds with the State Government's Education State targets. The second "breaking the link" target states that "By 2025 the proportion of students leaving education during Years 9 to 12 will reduce by 50%." This means moving from 96.3% in 2017 to 98.8% in 2025.<sup>10</sup> Introducing a new hurdle for students to jump before they can be awarded their end of school certificate would likely have the opposite effect. Instead what we

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<sup>5</sup> Henrietta Cook, *VCE set for its biggest shake-up in almost 30 years*, The Age, 27/2/18  
<https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/vce-set-for-its-biggest-shake-up-in-almost-30-years-20180226-p4z1tq.html>

<sup>6</sup> James Merlino, Letter to the Chairperson of the VCAA, 26/2/18  
<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/review/Ministerletter.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Josh Zimmerman, *Nearly 40% leaving WA public education without Western Australia Certificate of Education*, The West Australian, 12/5/18

<sup>8</sup> Pallavi Singhai, *Students consider dropping out before HSC as Naplan requirements weigh heavily*, Sydney Morning Herald, 18/5/17

<sup>9</sup> Op cit Zimmerman

<sup>10</sup> DET (2018), *Education State Ambition: Breaking the link*  
[http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/EducationState\\_BreakingtheLink.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/EducationState_BreakingtheLink.pdf)

should be seeking to accomplish is further improvements in student literacy and numeracy achievement through standards embedded in the Year 12 qualifications.

## **Opposition to more testing**

The AEU does not support the introduction of additional stand-alone testing in Year 12. There is no evidence that more high stakes standardised population testing leads to improvement in student achievement in literacy and numeracy. In fact the effect may be the very opposite to this. There is a growing concern that NAPLAN through its negative influence on pedagogy and the curriculum in schools has had an adverse impact on the achievement of Australian students. The decline in literacy and numeracy performance in international sample testing over the past ten years has paralleled an increase in the high stakes nature of NAPLAN.<sup>11</sup>

If a new literacy and numeracy test is administered to all Year 12 students as a stand-alone evaluation of their skill levels it will inevitably become high stakes. This will add to the high levels of stress experienced by students trying to meet the demands of Year 12 courses and maximise their post-school options. Employers who have expressed frustration with what they see as the limitations of VCE reporting regarding “spelling, grammar and basic maths” will likely use the test as a qualification for employment.<sup>12</sup> Robyn Ewing, Professor of Teaching from Sydney University, quoting international research, described the impact of high stakes testing on disadvantaged cohorts of students who did not perform well in tests like these – Indigenous students, those whose primary language was not English, and those from low socio-economic backgrounds – as increasing inequity.<sup>13</sup> Another observed outcome of high stakes testing is the distortions it introduces into the curriculum and learning processes, everything from teachers and schools working to maximise student scores leading up to the test to edu-business companies exploiting the test industry market. The noted Finnish educator, Pasi Sahlberg, having observed the Australian education system at first hand, stated that student achievement would benefit from less (rather than more) standardised testing.<sup>14</sup>

## **Literacy and Numeracy Improvement Strategies**

The push for a minimum standard in literacy and numeracy in Year 12 qualifications, or for an additional Year 12 high stakes standardised test, is misconceived as an improvement strategy. The ‘arguments for change’ in the paper are about employers and other groups calling for students to have improved literacy and numeracy skills when they leave school. Having a last minute test hurdle after 13 years of school will

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<sup>11</sup> Pallavi Singhai, Teaching to NAPLAN leading to Australia’s falling PISA scores: expert, Sydney Morning Herald, 10/5/18

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Anderson and Richard Willingham, *VCE students to face minimum literacy, numeracy standards under proposed shake-up*, ABC News, 27/2/18 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-27/vce-students-to-face-minimum-literacy-numeracy-standards/9489278>

<sup>13</sup> Anne Susskind, *Will the new NAPLAN reforms push kids out of school*, ABC News, 12/5/17

<sup>14</sup> Paul Karp, *‘Bizarre’ Naplan writing test measures ‘all the wrong things’*, The Guardian, 9/4/18

not achieve that aim. Improving student literacy and numeracy standards requires a system commitment to this goal, which should apply to every student from the moment they enter school. Research from the Early Development Census indicates that 15.6 per cent of children are developmentally behind in language and cognitive skills (including numeracy) when they enter school.<sup>15</sup> Having a piece of paper at the end of Year 12 with some sort of comparative metric to indicate literacy and numeracy skills may provide a further sorting mechanism for employers but it will not improve student achievement.

The real question is how do we improve literacy and numeracy achievement for all students? The many initiatives outlined in the DET's Literacy and Numeracy Strategy document<sup>16</sup> have the potential to be part of the support schools and teachers need to enable ongoing improvement. However their implementation, in the sense that new and relevant elements are integrated into teacher practice, will take time. The concern for teachers is that the level of policy churn which has accompanied previous strategies and initiatives will continue and not provide that time.

Far more importantly than new policy advice from the Department, teachers and schools need appropriate government funding support to assist them in doing what they know needs to be done to improve the outcomes for students who are falling behind their peers. When students struggle, it is typically because they face multiple barriers to learning and their schools simply do not have the funding to provide the additional learning support that the individual student needs. This issue is critical for public schools because of the nature of their student population. Public schools do the heavy lifting in relation to students from disadvantaged backgrounds and evidence points to an increasing equity gap. This is evident from the point of school entry:

*By way of example, for the language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain, children in the most disadvantaged areas in 2009 were 2.9 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, relative to children in the least disadvantaged areas. By 2015, children in the most disadvantaged areas were 4.1 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable, relative to children in the least disadvantaged areas.<sup>17</sup>*

Sue Thomson, the director of educational monitoring and research at the Australian Council for Education Research, said Australia's declining results in PISA would not improve while there was a "constant issue of advantage and disadvantage".

*PISA shows that the school a student attends has an impact on outcomes. Disadvantaged students in average socioeconomic level schools, for*

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<sup>15</sup> AEDC, National Report 2015, p.19

<sup>16</sup> DET (2017), Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/support/litnumstrat.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> AEDC op. cit., p.20

*example, are almost a year of schooling higher than those in disadvantaged schools.*<sup>18</sup>

The AEU receives regular feedback from its members around the state about the impact of resource limitations on student learning. The major school workload survey involving over 13,000 respondents conducted by the AEU(Vic) at the end of 2016 found that teachers were limited in the extent to which they were able to meet the learning needs of their students. For example, only 33.5 per cent of secondary teachers said they were able to fully (5-7 on a 1-7 scale) meet students' individual learning needs, only 27.0 per cent were able to monitor and assess student progress effectively, and only 14.7 per cent said they were able to any great extent provide timely and useful feedback to students about their learning.<sup>19</sup> Improving student literacy and numeracy outcomes requires a substantial increase in the resources public schools have to address individual learning needs, particularly where students are struggling to keep up with increasing literacy and numeracy demands as they progress through schooling. Victorian public schools are the lowest funded in the nation. In 2015-16 for Commonwealth and State funding combined it was \$1,619 per student below the Australian average. The 'money doesn't matter' rhetoric of the Commonwealth Government finds no echo in schools where teachers know the sort of individual support many students need (more one-on-one assistance) but are frustrated by their school's inadequate resource capacity to provide it.

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<sup>18</sup> Sue Thomson quoted in Alexandra Smith, *PISA results show gap between rich and poor students unchanged in 15 years*, Sydney Morning Herald, 15/3/17 <https://www.smh.com.au/education/pisa-results-show-gap-between-rich-and-poor-students-unchanged-in-15-years-20170314-guxj4k.html>

<sup>19</sup> ACER, School Staff Workload Study, AEU, October 2016  
<https://www.aeuvic.asn.au/sites/default/files/AEU%20Workload%20Survey%20Report%20FINAL.PDF>