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RELATIONS AND EDUCATION

Reference: Academic standards of school education

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**SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON
EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION**

Wednesday, 25 July 2007

Members: Senator Troeth (Chair), Senator Marshall (Deputy Chair), Senators Barnett, George Campbell, Fisher, Lightfoot, McEwen and Stott Despoja

Substitute members: Senator Crossin for Senator George Campbell; Senators Fifield and Birmingham for Senators Lightfoot and Fisher respectively on 25 June and 26 June 2007

Participating members: Senators Allison, Bartlett, Bernardi, Birmingham, Boswell, Boyce, Bob Brown, Carr, Chapman, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Fielding, Fifield, Forshaw, Hogg, Humphries, Hutchins, Joyce, Kemp, Ludwig, Lundy, McLucas, Ian Macdonald, McGauran, Milne, Moore, Murray, Nash, Nettle, O'Brien, Parry, Patterson, Payne, Polley, Robert Ray, Sherry, Siewert, Stephens, Sterle, Trood, Watson, Webber, Wong and Wortley

Senators in attendance: Senators Marshall and Troeth

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The current level of academic standards of school education, with particular reference to:

1. Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:
 - a. the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage; and
 - b. the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.
2. The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for the senior secondary school certificate in each state and territory.
3. How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries.

WITNESSES

MACKAY, Mr Anthony, President, Australian Curriculum Studies Association..... 1

REID, Professor Alan, Executive Member, Australian Curriculum Studies Association..... 1

Committee met at 11.11 am**MACKAY, Mr Anthony, President, Australian Curriculum Studies Association****REID, Professor Alan, Executive Member, Australian Curriculum Studies Association**

CHAIR—Welcome to this brief special public hearing for the inquiry of the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Education into the academic standards of school education. The purpose of the inquiry is to inform the Senate about current standards and achievement levels in schools. We are considering whether basic skills are being adequately imparted and whether the academic curriculum is sufficiently rigorous to meet the requirements of university study. The focus today is on curriculum. I remind you that, in giving evidence to the committee, you are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage you on account of the evidence you give. I also remind you that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. Good morning, gentlemen. We appreciate you being able to be here. Do you have any comment to make on the capacity in which you appear?

Prof. Reid—I am Professor of Education at the University of South Australia.

CHAIR—Thank you. Would you like to make a brief opening statement before we move to a discussion?

Mr Mackay—Thank you for the opportunity. We had, as you know, the chance to make a submission. It was brief and we made it clear in that submission that, rather than tackle the full terms of reference, we wanted to pick up on the invitation that was extended in information about the inquiry to look at the reference that gave us a broader scope and, in particular, to pick up on the nature of the curriculum and the adequacy and effectiveness of the current approach to curriculum.

In our statement to you, we were keen to indicate that the Australian Curriculum Studies Association had been actively involved, over a long period of time, in work around curriculum, both at a state-territory level and at a national level. In the last couple of years, we have taken the responsibility of leading some national forums around the whole debate that has been emerging on national approaches to curriculum—‘national curriculum’ for short—and, in particular, recognising that the intensity of that debate has been growing in the public domain as well as the professional.

Our thinking was sharpened as we moved into 2007. So this year we have again taken a leadership role in gathering together peak professional associations around the country to talk about the nature of a curriculum that is adequate for the 21st century. That is in the submission, and we can say more about the developing work that has been undertaken over the last 12 months. You will see an outline of that, so I will not repeat it.

But it might be useful, Alan, if we picked up on two or three key issues that we feel are emerging and would provide a particularly powerful context for the Senate’s inquiry. We think that without having this discussion and debate, it may well be an inquiry that certainly tackles the question about academic standards, certainly tackles the question about our relative

performance in this country to international standards, but might miss the opportunity—which I understand you actually want to take—to explore the broader context in which we have this debate in this country. It might be useful, Alan, if you pick up the story at that point.

Prof. Reid—I have prepared some notes for a 10-minute submission. Is that appropriate?

CHAIR—Yes. We are agreeable to that.

Prof. Reid—During the course of your inquiry, we thought you would have heard a lot about international standards—TIMMS and PISA et cetera—so we did not want to focus on those, except to say that, on the whole, we think they suggest that Australia has an education system about which it can be proud but that there is still much to do, especially for those young people who leave school too early and who do not achieve success while at school—the sort of tail.

We are not discounting the test outcomes, but we believe that the sole or dominant focus on these outcomes has been unfortunate, because they tend to narrow what counts as excellence and what is seen as the purpose of education. Important as maths, science and literacy are, they do not represent the sum total of what it means to be fully educated. They do not, for example, tell us anything about the artistic and creative capacities of young people, so we think we need to be careful about making judgments on the quality of Australian education solely on the basis of those tests.

In this submission I want to argue that such narrowness about what constitutes standards also deflects attention from important factors that contribute to the quality of education and to academic standards. In particular, I want to urge the committee not only to focus on educational outcomes but also to appraise the standards of two important inputs: one is the quality of educational discussion and debate in this country, and the second is the quality of the processes of curriculum design and development. I want to talk about that in relation to the national curriculum stuff that is happening at the moment. I am going to focus on those two things.

In relation to the quality of educational discussion and debate, in my view a healthy education system will be characterised by healthy educational discussion and debate, not only within the profession but within the community and between the community and the profession. Such discussion, it seems to me, should be civil and respectful, should recognise the complexity of the educational task in preparing young people for life in a contemporary world, and should use a range of research data.

Unfortunately, the last five years in Australia have witnessed a debate which bears none of these characteristics. The so-called culture wars have indeed produced the opposite, thus rather than stability and respect we have name-calling; certain groups of educators are labelled as Maoist, New-Age educrats, feminist ideologues and so on. Rather than recognising the complexity of education today, the debate operates in simple binaries. For example, it seems that you cannot study a contemporary cultural phenomenon, such as *Big Brother*, and Shakespeare. It seems to be argued that it has to be one or the other.

Rather than being evidence based, there is a narrow and selective use of evidence to confirm an already established view—for example, critics seem to trawl through curriculum documents looking for examples of things with which they take issue, assuming that because it is written on

a page it is translated into action, as though teachers behave like automatons; there is no recognition that the formal curriculum, the official intended curriculum, is only a small part of curriculum itself—or generalisations are made on the basis of partial evidence, such as last Saturday when in a national paper a columnist reported:

... as noted in the federal government-funded survey Parents' Attitudes to Schooling, on being asked to give their views about the quality of school education, only 58.3 per cent of parents of primary school-aged children expressed satisfaction, while at the secondary level that figure was 39.9 per cent

I am just giving this as an example. What that report fails to indicate is the full story. I went to the report and looked at the conclusion, which was:

The study of parents of school-aged children has indicated that the community is broadly satisfied with the quality of education and the standard of teaching at their child's school, with approximately three in four parents indicating that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied'. This same level of satisfaction, however, did not carry through to parents' general views of the school system ...

And the percentage was quoted. What this disparity throws up is an interesting research question: why are people satisfied with what they experience at their local school with their children but somewhat dissatisfied, it seems, with the education system at large, because that is not generally based on any immediate experience? You could postulate a whole set of things, but I would suggest that one of the strong reasons would be the sort of campaign that is being waged in the media, which would tend to influence people, and yet their experience at the local level, quite clearly, is highly satisfactory.

I am arguing here that a precondition for a quality education system—that is, if we are looking at academic standards—is an education debate which value-adds to the complex task that educators face in schools. Teachers in schools are dealing with ever more complex and diverse student populations. They are dealing with young people staying on longer than ever before; they are dealing with a changing curriculum which has to change because of the changing nature of the world for which they are preparing young people. There are no simple answers here, especially to the question about those young people who vote with their feet and leave early—Indigenous young people, those from low SES groups.

Grappling with the complexity of such issues, building on and sharing the many great things that are happening in Australian schools, but also learning from mistakes, means engaging in thoughtful discussion and debate, not resorting to slogans or simple responses like, 'Study more Shakespeare.' It seems to me that the quality of education debate in Australia is fundamental to the notion of building academic standards. That is my first point.

My second point is that we need to attend to the quality of the processes of curriculum design and development. This is a precondition for high academic standards. I have a number of concerns—and ACSA has too—about what is currently happening in relation to national curriculum work. It is important to make these points because, for the first time in Australian education, it does appear that we are moving to a national approach; therefore, it is crucial to get it right.

I want to preface these remarks by saying that I am a supporter of national approaches to curriculum, but these are the concerns I have. There are five and I will go through them very quickly. First of all, I am concerned that there is an urgent need now to clarify what is meant by ‘national curriculum’. We hear people talk about ‘national curriculum’, ‘national approaches to curriculum’, but when you sort it all out they are talking about at least three broad things. One is about sharing resources, professional development, like the Australian Government Quality Teaching Program, AGQTP; like the Curriculum Corporation developing a resource on assessment; like the Asia Education Foundation developing PD resources. That sharing of materials and resources across the country is a national approach to curriculum.

The second one is collaboration, where the states and territories and the federal government collaborate on developing maybe a greater consistency in the formal curriculum, and the work around the statements of learning falls into that category. A third—and this is often what people are meaning when they talk about ‘national curriculum’—is a single, formal, official curriculum at the national level, with subjects and associated assessment regime. It seems to me that that is the current focus certainly of the governments and, I think, the opposition. That is the way in which the national curriculum is being currently conceived.

But, of course, if we are going to choose one particular approach—the question is, ‘Why?’—it could in fact naturally be all of the above; none preclude the other. There may be alternatives, but we have not had that debate. So my first concern is that we have not clarified what it is we mean when we talk about ‘national curriculum’ or ‘approaches to national curriculum’, and I cannot see how we can have a national discussion unless that is done.

We also need to enhance the coherence of what is happening. Currently I would call what is in place ‘a coercive federalism’ in education, where money is threatened to be withdrawn unless the states and territories put in place certain things. So we have developments like: the imposition of A to E reporting; the need for every school to have a functioning flagpole; history must be compulsory, history of a particular variety; we should have a core curriculum at year 10, at years 11 and 12; all schools should hang values posters; and there should be benchmarking of literacy, numeracy and so on.

My concern is that this is a sort of potpourri of initiatives, usually started individually without any connection to the other—disconnected, disparate—and because of that, it seems to me, there are a number of conceptual confusions. We can look inside some of these developments and see different ideologies at work, different philosophies at work, and clearly this is not a coherent approach to developing a national curriculum. There is no overall design.

My third point is that there is an urgent need for a rationale for a national curriculum. The rationale obviously will derive a form, a process, a content of the national curriculum that we want to develop, and I would argue that we need to go beyond the old railway gauge metaphor where we simply say, ‘We need national curriculum for consistency purposes,’ or because the children of the military are moving around. Whilst they may be important reasons, it seems to me that they are kind of technical; they are not an exciting rationale for something as important as a national curriculum.

We need to ask, ‘What is it about the contemporary circumstances that demands a national approach?’ and I would argue that thinking about a national curriculum should involve thinking

about nation building and nation rebuilding. That should be the debate. It is our answer to: 'What might constitute a curriculum of the 21st century that will help us to work nationally?' I think it is really important that there is a well-developed rationale that goes beyond a sort of technicalist consistency argument.

My fourth point is that we need greater attention to curriculum process. The reason that the national curriculum work faltered in the early nineties is because we did not sufficiently ensure that the teacher voice was included in the conceptualisation and the development of curriculum. How do we ensure that what we know about curriculum design and learning theory is brought to bear on developments? I want to use the example of the history summit which was held last year. In one day, 23 people—three of whom were practising teachers—decided that we needed compulsory history. They not only decided that; they decided on a particular sort of history and a particular approach to history, ignoring—it seemed to me—the decades of discussion and debate amongst history teachers and academics in education about learning theory and curriculum design in this fundamentally important area.

Recently, when a panel of four people was appointed to look at what had been developed as a result of that process, there was debate around who was on the panel. You might notice that the debate was around, for example, Gerard Henderson and whether he was sufficiently qualified as an historian. There was no debate about the educational qualifications of the panel, no debate about whether or not these people had been engaged in curriculum design and understood learning theory, and yet these people are going to be determining what a compulsory curriculum is about.

If we are going to have one official national curriculum, what are the principles that should inform the design and the content of that curriculum? Professor Allan Luke from QUT, Queensland University of Technology, has looked closely at curricula around the world and argues that those countries that do best have what he calls a 'low-definition, high-trust approach to the formal curriculum'. He says that the prescribed curriculum is not syllabuses with huge amounts of content; it is crisp and short and there is a great emphasis on the quality of teaching and professional development, and on pedagogy; it is working with teachers—low definition, high trust. It seems to me that if we are going to even think about moving to a national approach to curriculum, we should say, 'What are the principles of curriculum design that we are going to use?'

Finally, I think that we need to attend to equity issues. If the standardised tests show anything, they show that there is a long tail in Australian education, and these are students from particular backgrounds. We need to use the research work that has been done in Australian education by people like Professor Richard Teese from the University of Melbourne, who has done some wonderful work on trying to understand how it is that certain groups of students miss out in the official curriculum: to use that work, to try and describe and understand the nature of these unequal outcomes. We need to work on multiple fronts to address the causes of this lack of success. We need to look at motivation and support for students and why students are not engaged, and pedagogy and assessment and resources, as well as curriculum, but not simply jump to one aspect of it and come up with a simple solution. It is not just a matter of getting the official text right: there is far more to it than that.

In conclusion, I have argued that there are two important inputs that I think contribute to enhancing the quality of Australian education and therefore high academic standards: we need to build a healthier public discussion or debate about education in general and curriculum specifically, and we need to attend to what we know about curriculum design and development. I have used the current approaches to national curriculum work to argue that I do not think at the moment that the direction we are taking will enhance or build standards. Tony can talk briefly about the sort of work that ACSA has been doing. So that is a bit of a critique to say positively the sort of stuff that we have been doing, and that might be one way that you could look at it.

Mr Mackay—My postscript would be that the beginning of a more robust and rigorous debate is emerging in real time, so the first condition that Alan speaks of, I think, is starting to be experienced in the last 12 months.

As a professional association, we have wanted to encourage, influence and to somewhat define the nature of that debate. Let me say three things about that: firstly, we wanted to establish some principles for productive approaches to national curriculum work, and you will have that as an addendum to our submission. Secondly, we wanted to work collaboratively with 14 other peak professional associations to look very carefully at the way in which we might be able to influence a 21st century curriculum that is more adequate for the kinds of needs, understanding, knowledge, skills, attributes and dispositions that all young people need to have to participate fully within the economy, the society, and at a personal level.

This is not new material, but it has a sharper focus, I think, in a 21st century context and has a sharper focus, given the debate that we are having now, at a national level. These debates have been taking place, as you well know, at a jurisdiction level; they have been taking place within professional associations and within school communities. But I think the positive thing is that we are, through the inquiry and through the politics at the moment, elevating this to a debate that the nation itself—as you say, Alan—needs to have.

The third thing to say is that we have been picking up on an environment that has led to, for example, the Council for the Australian Federation, from a state-territory perspective, to develop their own statement about the future of schooling, and much of federalist paper No. 2 we would endorse. It is interesting that the politics of curriculum, as it plays itself out in the forum of MCEETYA, Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, has seen, I think, an opportunity for us to have a proper debate around what a national curriculum might look like.

The senior secondary committee of MCEETYA is taking forward this work and it will not simply be a decision that, ‘We’ll take four or five subjects and we will take the common elements and automatically we have a national curriculum.’ Rather, there is going to be a serious debate around already the cooperative work that Alan talks about in terms of statements of learning. Already the national cooperation and collaboration has led to common approaches. I think all of that feels very positive.

We at this moment in time recognise that, in an election year, as you move forward, both the government and the opposition have made it clear that education is an absolute No. 1 priority, so the golden opportunity, I think, is for us to tackle Alan’s condition 1: we really do have a debate that goes beyond a narrow definition of what is important in schooling but at the same time

recognises, as we do in our own principles statement, that if you do not attend to the foundational skills and knowledge, you are not in a position to be able to develop the kinds of capacities and dispositions that you need to be a 21st century global citizen. There is no debate about that: we do not want to get into the binaries. It is not either/or, or taken for granted. Literacy, numeracy, science, IT and cultural understanding are absolutely fundamental, as are a range of other skill sets, in order to tackle the challenges.

Recently I think many of us have been saying to ourselves, ‘Even if we get into the same category as a Finland or particular provinces within Canada, or a Singapore, or a Korea, in terms of our performance on both excellence and equity’—and we must—if there is one thing that has emerged from all of this debate it is that in this country, like in Germany, we should have had a high-profile debate about the absolute unacceptability of the equity situation and explore the reasons for it fully, openly, in a democratic society.

But even if we get to that point where we get up into the quadrant of high equity and high excellence, the question is, ‘Will that be adequate to tackle 21st century problems at a local, national and global level?’ Absolutely not. We are talking now about an education system for this generation of young people that has to go beyond anything that we have experienced in our own schooling and our own conception of what education needs to deliver. It is such a national priority.

The question about how you enter that debate surely has to be along the lines that Alan talks about—issues around the quality of teaching; issues around the nature of the public debate; issues around the quality of curriculum development; issues around the support for ongoing professional learning that is going to be necessary; issues around a cooperative approach that brings in parents, young people, teachers, other community agents as part of a broader educated workforce. Without that, it seems to me that the aspirations of a Senate inquiry that is wanting to go to the point of academic standards that are adequate for a 21st century can never be realised.

The very positive thing that we feel as the Australian Curriculum Studies Association is that we have been, in a sense, given the opportunity to really make a contribution, not at the margins of a debate around schooling and education but at the centre.

CHAIR—Good.

Senator MARSHALL—In relation to the debate itself, I think there should be an ongoing and constant debate about education as it grows, as society changes. You are saying that we should be having the debate and you want to enter the debate, but are we having the debate because there is a fundamental flaw in our education system at the moment so the debate is to fix that, or is the debate maybe as I characterised it earlier: simply a constant review and check and making sure that education is pointed in the right direction as our community and society develops? To put that simply: I probably want to know your view of education at the moment. Is it broken, is that why we are having the debate, and we need desperate action and a desperate debate to fix it? Is it something different to that?

Prof. Reid—My view is that it is not broken. I have spent a lot of time going into schools, and there are some wonderful things happening. That sense never comes out in those newspaper articles that critique the Australian education system. There are some absolutely wonderful

things happening with dedicated teachers working with students and turning them on and loving it.

I think that the focus of the debate is wrong. Quite clearly, we are successful against other countries, by any measure. I have been heavily involved in the review of the South Australian Certificate of Education, and we have found that in a typical year 8 cohort, only 55 per cent of young people finish up getting their formal qualification. Numbers of those young people leave for productive employment and so on, so that is not as low as it sounds. But there are still a number of young people that are dropping out too early, disengaging from school and so on, and they happen to be young people from particular groups.

I think the focus of the debate in an affluent society like Australia should be: how do we ensure that every young person has high-quality education? I would want to shift the education debate to one around equity, not making bland generalisations about the quality of Australian education, which, as I say, I would argue that by any standard was up there with the best in all sorts of subject areas, discipline areas and so on.

Mr Mackay—I think we have a simultaneous challenge here. At one level you would want to characterise this work now as going from good to great. We have got a very good education schooling system by multiple measures, nationally and internationally. The challenge to make it better, in order to be adequate for what we have talked about as 21st century challenges, ought to be at the forefront of all developed countries at the moment because without it our opportunity to work both competitively and cooperatively within that environment is absolutely diminished.

It is beyond continuous and incremental improvement. There is a serious question: ‘How does a society/economy ensure that its education system is of the highest possible standard to be able to meet that kind of ambition?’ Simultaneously, we should recognise that there are fundamental weaknesses in the current performance, so this is a variation on the good, or predominantly good. But when you still have equity issues of the kinds that Alan has talked about—you have not been able to shift off a 75, 80 per cent retention rate in terms of end of secondary, when you know that young people who take an extra couple of years of further study have huge advantages as they go through life—then it seems to me that this country needs to say, ‘Simultaneously, we’ve got to get to great and we’ve got to do it for all.’

That, to me, is an empowering, an energising, and a positive national debate to have, and it is the one that other clever countries are attempting to have, rather than a deficit model. You have this sort of conversation at times within an English context, within the UK. It still tends to be around the fact that we have a significantly underperforming system. Quite frankly, on measures at the moment, we are doing as well as, and better than, in England. But it seems to me that when other countries in the Asia-Pacific area—whether it be Korea, Hong Kong or Singapore—or the Nordic countries or Canada start having these debates, and they are, they tend to have it with a different level of ‘trust’, to quote you, in terms of the capacity of all of the players—professionally, publicly, politically—to come together to realise a better outcome. There is an issue about the language we use around this debate.

Senator MARSHALL—Professor Reid talked about those countries that do the best. I would like to get a picture of which countries they are and why they do better than us. You mention a whole range of things which they do, but I am still a bit unclear about whether they do those

things and we do not or whether we do them but not as well. I understand the equity issue as a need. I understand that Finland have similar scores to us but the scores are across the board so they have much less of a tail. This may not have anything to do with the curriculum or education itself; it may be more of a society thing in Finland. I do not know and I would not try to make that sort of judgement. What can you point us to in those countries that do the best? Why aren't we in that group of the best, or are we in the group of the best?

Mr Mackay—We are in the group of the best, but we are not in the group of the best if you take excellence and equity. The tail that you refer to, Senator, is very long. Let us say for the moment that we know that that goes to the heart of socioeconomic background in this country, it goes to the heart of issues around particular ethnic groups, it goes to the heart of Indigenous young people, so we know where our challenges are. It is not as if we are not attempting to address them; we are. Just take Finland, and think about the diversity of the population of Finland compared to our own at this moment in time—although things are about to change in Finland: they are getting a much more diverse population through immigration and also through a more dynamic and emerging society with connections taking place. But, up to this point, you could say that the homogeneity of that population and the history and the culture privilege education and schooling. There is a high-trust environment; there is a sense in which curriculum standards, both content and achievement, as Alan says, are set centrally, in collaboration with the profession, but then a belief that in fact a highly qualified professional workforce has the capacity to be able to deliver those standards.

They are delivering those within a more hospitable environment, with fewer challenges around diversity at this point. But the investment that they have made in the early years of schooling, the investment that they have made in diagnosing early problems and ensuring investment in intervention programs to ensure that literacy and numeracy problems at the earliest stage are identified and tackled, the investment that they make in the preparation of their teachers—we are talking about the vast majority of the teaching force at masters level—

CHAIR—Yes. That is something I want to discuss with you.

Mr Mackay—We are talking about applications for positions within teacher education that are greater than the number of places. We are not talking about huge financial rewards, I might say, amongst the teaching profession, but it is a highly valued, high-status profession. There are some things that I think we can learn from: the nature of the trust environment; the way in which you create the kind of social capital within a community that values education; the investment in the early years in intervention programs; the investment in quality teacher preparation.

Many countries have been in and out of Helsinki, trying to sort it out, but they will say to you at the moment: 'There's not a magic formula, if you try and simply take the way in which we operate things here. But at least take from our environment a commitment to high-quality education, a commitment to status and to a community level of engagement in this work.' And it is not just in the schools: it is the parents and the caregivers, it is the local community, it is the political and public environment in which you work, which are all supportive.

You could do exactly the same comparison across a whole range of other countries, but for Australia, if you want to do one other comparison, I think you ought to go to somewhere like Canada, where a couple of the provinces would match to Australian states and territories in all

dimensions and yet they do not have the tail. I reckon you have to ask a serious question about what they do within certain provinces of Canada to get that result. We could have a big debate about this, but let us face it: they have exactly the same constitutional responsibility at the provincial level that we have at the jurisdictional level. The settlement about the way in which that is handled at the provincial level is an interesting one, and the other thing is the investment that has been made in recent years. There are some political dimensions, there are some resource dimensions within the comparison.

Senator MARSHALL—Investment as in the teacher quality training?

Mr Mackay—Yes, absolutely.

Senator MARSHALL—When we talk about ‘investment’, we are not talking about buildings?

Mr Mackay—No.

CHAIR—No. But, even with similarities of a strongly settled east coast and west coast, a sparse population in between—

Mr Mackay—Precisely.

CHAIR—and with mining, outback, primary industry, and a very diverse range of settlement, those problems that you mention of the tail and flaws in teacher training have not occurred?

Mr Mackay—If we take Ontario as an example, five years ago there was a lot of industrial unrest, and the truth of the matter is that it actually had a negative effect on schools, the levels of confidence in the system, on morale levels of the teaching force. There has been an attempt in the last five years under the current jurisdiction to move back into a partnership, where in fact you start to trust each other. You could parallel this with New Zealand in recent years where there has been a definite attempt to try and get community to come together around this work: invest strategically—as you say, Senator—in teacher preparation, in early intervention programs, in national strategies, which appear at one level to be top-down but in fact they are not top-down as imposed command and control. They are a genuine attempt to get the profession working alongside bureaucracies and understanding the importance of the different levels of local, regional, provincial and national. There is a lot to be learnt there.

It is not as if Canadian provinces have not had their challenges—they have—but it seems to me that they have emerged with more positive settlements, better relationships and, as a result, if you have a look at the results of literacy and numeracy in the state of Ontario over the last three years, they have done in three years what it has taken the Blair government 10 years to achieve. These are the sorts of studies that we should be looking at: the Allan Luke stuff about high definition and low definition.

Prof. Reid—It is that focus on teachers and their expertise and supporting teachers that is fundamental to quality. For me, that is the issue. We have never had a more experienced teaching force than we have now and yet we are not using that experience. We are, in the main, cutting

them out of curriculum development, cutting them out of making major decisions; seeing them as the implementers of other people's decisions. For me, it is about bringing the teachers in.

CHAIR—We did have very strong representations from the particular subject associations, such as English, history, mathematics, science, geography et cetera. As you say, they are very willing to be involved and that is probably crucial. Can I set your mind at rest about the three varieties of national curriculum. If I had any power at all, I would be inclined towards the middle one, certainly not the latter one that you mentioned with all curriculum expressed and driven and enforced from Canberra. That is not on in a country like ours.

Mr Mackay—That is very reassuring.

CHAIR—If it is any consolation, I would certainly be looking for something much more flexible; something more like the middle. On the issue of teacher training, we have not had complaints but we have certainly had adverse comment on deficiencies in teaching training—the lack of time that they get to spend in the classroom as part of their dip. ed. year or whatever teacher training they have—and also the overall factor that because teaching as a career is probably undervalued in this country, both from a monetary sense, I would think, and from a cultural sense, people who go into teaching take that path in university because they cannot get into anything else, by and large—to put it quite baldly.

Prof. Reid—Yes.

CHAIR—How do you see any government providing a remedy for that situation?

Prof. Reid—That is a good question. I will come up with some disparate observations. One would be the way in which teachers are talked about: I think they can be talked about far more respectfully for the complex job that they are doing than they have been talked about over recent times. The *Top of the class* report also argued that student teachers should spend more time in schools. One danger with the old practicum model of course is that, if we think that teaching needs to change and education needs to change, simply aping what currently happens or simply reproducing what is there is not necessarily the way forward, but neither is a divide of theory and practice. The old model where you did some theory at university and practice in the classroom I think is gone.

So I think there are two things that are needed. We do need to engage more strongly and more fully with schools, but the nature of the practicum has to change. We have been playing around with models in our university where student teachers and the teachers and the academics work together on an issue, a problem, a concern, a dilemma: sometimes it is the student teachers who are leading that because of the theoretical base that they are getting at the university; sometimes it is the teachers because of their knowledge and background and experience; sometimes the academics can come in.

It is sort of saying, 'We're in this together,' and the model of connecting students to schools, getting them to spend more time in schools where they can do their formal teaching practice but also be engaged in working sometimes as research leaders, sometimes as research assistants around issues, is a different approach to the practicum that gets them connected into schools but is not the old reproductive model. We have to be more creative about the models that we use but,

like we were saying about the tail in education, there are aspects of teacher education that have to improve and we have to break this notion that we teach theory and they do the practice. There is theory and practice in both.

Having said all of that, I think it is too easy sometimes to say that they are cosseted away in academe, removed from the real world. If we are going to raise the status of the profession, it seems to me that there really does need to be a well-grounded theoretical and research base and students, embryonic teachers, need to be introduced to that. We see our jobs not as sending out finished and completed teachers but young people that have views about the purposes of education, are skilled in teaching, have a deep understanding of particular content areas and the capacity to inquire and research their professional practice so that they see themselves as always learning. They never finish learning.

CHAIR—That is right.

Prof. Reid—I think that is the challenge.

CHAIR—Another thing that came up was that, for many teachers, it is possible to reach their professional peak by their late 30s, and then they are either condemned to teaching at senior teacher level or they go on to administration and become principals.

Senator MARSHALL—I do not know that they are condemned to it, are they?

CHAIR—Well, it depends how you view it. I loved teaching and I loved being in the classroom, but then you do not get the monetary rewards, if any, and the prestige of a senior position.

Prof. Reid—No.

CHAIR—It was suggested to us that, if there were more gradation in the levels of teaching and also that it was remunerated at a better rate, that would be a greater—

Mr Mackay—This is where we need some more significant thinking. I take Alan's point that teacher education will never deliver the finished product but I do not think that we as a profession—and particularly the leadership of the profession—have been prepared to invest the amount of time, energy and resource into the ongoing development of the professional part of the education workforce. I will make two other comments: the first is that we should learn a lot from other organisations and industries who are serious about recruitment, induction, continuing learning, monitoring, performance, rewards and the whole way in which a professional services firm goes about developing and managing its workforce—and I do mean a professional workforce. That is something that I think we need to take on board in education.

That is in no way underestimating that it is of a different order at times and the kind of professional learning that needs to take place and the continued investment in research and in evidence base is absolutely crucial, but so too is it for the medical profession or legal profession. Therefore, No. 1, we need to shift our heads around the nature of the ongoing commitment that we make to performance and development of the workforce. When I say the 'workforce', we need to start saying that it is not just a matter of different levels within a profession itself; it is a

broader education workforce; it is those who come in as assistants and support, how we are going to train them and ensure that we use those people effectively and, beyond the school setting, how we are going to build connections to a wider workforce across other agencies that are absolutely fundamental to delivery of learning—whether it be health or social justice or a range of other public service sectors. Then you think about the connection into community where we have access to a range of other teachers of a different order.

If we do not harness all of that in a more sensible way and if our own profession does not recognise that those partnerships are absolutely fundamental to the success of a different level of expectation and aspiration, we will fix up certain weaknesses in the current system but we will never get to great. It seems to me that this inquiry is an opportunity to say, ‘Yes, strengthen the current system; that is absolutely necessary, but it is by no means sufficient.’ I would love to feel that the debate that you are encouraging here takes us to another level.

CHAIR—We do want to make it a significant report, I assure you, otherwise we will have expended a lot of resources and the goodwill of people. I assure you that our hearts and minds are certainly in that.

Prof. Reid—I want to add something about teacher morale and self-image which is exuded and potential teachers pick that up. You would have to say that morale at the moment is not incredibly high, both anecdotally and from research. I think being properly financially rewarded is really important and I want to make that clear. But part of the reason, too, is the nature of the way in which teachers’ work has been organised, because many people do not go into education—I certainly did not—to become rich. We went in because it is one of those rare areas in society where there are contesting ideas; there are different ways to approach things.

The reason I loved it, and continue to love it, is because it is about discussion and debate, where you have to take decisions at any point in time but they are always tentative, and so on. It seems to me that, certainly in the last 15 years, education systems have tended to treat the teachers simply as technicians; people that are going to put in place other people’s ideas. So the excitement of conceptualising ideas, of thinking and debating, has been withdrawn from them. Part of making teaching a really attractive profession is bringing back to it the sense of intellectual excitement, which gets taken out when it is top-down and untrusting.

CHAIR—Functionary.

Prof. Reid—Yes, functionary.

Senator MARSHALL—I want to digress a little to talk about some of the things that we have heard on the committee. There has been a strong view expressed to the committee that the absence of an external exam in Queensland impacts upon the quality of education in Queensland. Do you have a view on external examinations and the role that they play?

Prof. Reid—You would have to produce evidence to demonstrate that the outcomes in Queensland were less than the outcomes in other states and territories. My sense is that examinations are but one form of assessment. You do assessments for a number of reasons, but there are two major reasons: to contribute to student learning—and exams might help you with that, but so do lots of other forms of assessment; and to make judgements about student learning

for the purposes of certification and so on. It is quite clear that examinations are not the only way that you can do that. We know enough about curriculum and curriculum design to know that the way in which you assess student work needs to be consistent with the purpose of the work and what you hope the outcomes are going to be.

Sometimes it might be best for students to both work collaboratively and present things collaboratively—either verbally or in a performance of some sort, or through artefacts of some sort and so on—to an external audience where judgements are made. One way to do it is to get them sitting on their own in a room where they have to answer questions. But that is only one form of assessment. To me, the existence or non-existence of an exam in a particular education system would not condemn it. It is about the nature of the curriculum, student engagement and outcomes.

Mr Mackay—My postscript to that would be that we should look, in comparative terms, at a Queensland approach, an ACT approach, a Victorian approach and New South Wales approach. We should ask, ‘What is the regime of assessment, reporting and certification which is in place?’ to ensure that we have forms of assessment and reporting that are seen as valid and reliable and that generate confidence within that community that we are getting, in accountability terms, a sense of some certainty about the quality of the work that is going on.

If you ask that question in Queensland, they will tell you that they have a regime which in many dimensions is external. They have common generic skill testing and they have forms of consensus moderation. They have ways of ensuring that the selection processes are done with common approaches. We need to ensure that we are having a conversation about the entire curriculum assessment, reporting and certification arrangements rather than simply saying, ‘What percentage of the course content is tested by a three-hour external examination?’ My answer would be: let us look at each of those arrangements in the states and territories. As Alan says, there is not an evidence base that would give an answer of yes to your question.

Prof. Reid—The other thing is the term ‘exam’. There is external assessment, where you have somebody outside the teaching situation making judgements about students’ work, and it is quite important, especially at the senior secondary end, that that should happen, so that it is not just the teacher making the judgement. A larger percentage of the work should be teacher judgement, but by somebody outside. That does not mean that the judgement has to be done through an examination; it could be done in any number of ways. I know that in Queensland that is the case.

In the SACE review with which I was involved, we went to Queensland and looked at their model. I can say that we were quite jealous of the moderation model involving teachers. We were jealous of it because of the extent of teacher professional development that was involved in teachers getting together in those district groups and talking about work. When they talked about the work and made judgements about it, they were also looking at each other’s practice and learning about different approaches to pedagogy and so on. We actually went back and recommended that the Queensland model of moderation be adopted at stage 2, but we also recommended that, unlike Queensland, there be 30 per cent external assessment. We went for 70 per cent school assessment and 30 per cent external assessment. We made it very clear that external assessment did not have to be an examination, but that somebody outside the learning situation should be making a judgement.

Senator MARSHALL—In terms of potential overcrowding of the curriculum, there seems to be a view that we should teach everything—and we would love to teach everything, but there is a limit in terms of student contact hours and the ability to learn in different areas. How do we deal with the overcrowding issue?

Mr Mackay—Frankly, I think the profession is reasonably knowledgeable about this. There is absolutely no hesitation amongst the profession to recognise the importance and power of the disciplines. Equally, the profession understands that, if we are going to get the kind of skill set, dispositions, understanding and knowledge base that young people need, we had better commit ourselves to cross-disciplinary work. I think all of us understand the need for levels of motivation and engagement and deeper levels of personal understanding. If we do not commit ourselves to areas around personal and social development then we are not going to have the complete education that we want.

The question is: how do you do that in the delivery of a curriculum that has been specified? Let us say that it is specified as ‘middle years’—and therefore you would feel confident about what it is that is being held out as an agreement about a curriculum framework and what is important. The question then about how you implement that is a highly professional exercise, and the capacity to move from within a discipline to cross-disciplinary, to pick up on personal and social dimensions of learning, is why you want the highest professional workforce.

To me, the overcrowding that we are talking about is a consequence of not understanding the role of the skilled practitioner within an environment where you determine the allocation of time, space and people in appropriate ways—and I am not suggesting for one moment that we have got that right, but more schools are getting it right. They understand that, if you do not have pedagogy and space working together, you will have an overcrowded curriculum. If you do not manage your time resource in appropriate ways and have sufficient time on task, you will just get superficial learning. If you do not seriously plan for interdisciplinary work and the use of teams of professionals working together so that you can bring multiple perspectives together, you will never get deeper levels of knowledge and learning.

It seems to me that the big debate that you are encouraging us to have is based on a curriculum specification that does not prevent you from working in ways which are smarter and a profession that understands that its conditions of work, its place of work and its way of working can tackle the problems of the time demands and, as you say, the overcrowded curriculum. A lot of jurisdictions have figured out in recent years that the overspecification of content and achievement standards is counterproductive.

CHAIR—What has to be taught.

Mr Mackay—Absolutely. Surely we are talking here about big ideas at a level with sufficient specification for professionals to understand what to do—so a codification at certain levels, but certainly not at the level of outcome statements, bullet point after bullet point. I am not a technician; I am a professional. I know how to do that work, and I will solve many of the crowded curriculum problems in the way in which I go about—to use the language—my pedagogical work.

Prof. Reid—It is important, when talking about the overcrowded curriculum, to understand the sorts of points that Tony is making. It is not simply about reducing the number of subjects; it is about the nature of the official curriculum. I would go for a curriculum that comprised key ideas and key concepts—and you might have resources for teachers whereby some of the content that you might use to explore those key ideas and key concepts could be there as a resource. It would not be just a list of fact after fact after fact. I would have a curriculum design specification that you need a balance of theory and application, no matter what the subject is. For example, many kids feel that physics is just too abstract, yet it is a subject that obviously lends itself to application—how does it play out in the real world? Just as obvious, vocational education should have a theoretical component to it and not just be about application.

I was talking before about having this national curriculum debate—picking this, choosing that and doing this—but there has been no discussion about what the curriculum design principles are.

Mr Mackay—The big picture.

Prof. Reid—The big picture. Making education decisions is fundamental, and those are the kinds of things that contribute to the overcrowded curriculum. We just keep pouring stuff in rather than trying to work out—

Mr Mackay—The postscript on a really good example of overreaching on the curriculum would be England. We have had three lots of slimming back of the curriculum in England over the last 15 years, and the latest announcement was last week at key stage 3, which is the equivalent of our middle years. Going forward, if you are going to create an environment for learning which is appropriate for 21st century learners, then overspecification—constant attention to all of the discipline areas and big blocks of time—will never get you there..

The current system has reached its limit and we must now identify the cross-cutting skills, dispositions, attributes; and you will have to figure out as a country how you are going to do that within the curriculum time at your disposal. The other recognition is that we are talking about in school and out of school. If we are talking about the amount of learning that is taking place out of school and new ways in which learning takes place—the earlier discussion that Alan had was stimulating—that is the debate that we need to have. How do you harness in school and out of school learning in the best interests of young people? We need to think about the curriculum in broader terms. That is the debate that I think an inquiry of this kind could stimulate.

CHAIR—I want to ask you, more specifically, about several comments that we have had about the universities dropping compulsory entrance subjects for maths and science and how, because of this, the schools then do not teach the more abstract maths and science and, as a result, there has been a general dumbing down of school education in maths and science, particularly moving up to the highest levels. Would you have a comment on that?

Prof. Reid—That argument seems to be premised on the supposition that science and maths need to be highly abstract. I think that all kids should be scientifically literate and mathematically literate and therefore that is an important component of the school curriculum. But my guess is that it is not the Association of Mathematics Teachers and the Science Teachers Association who are saying this—but you are getting those comments from mathematicians and

scientists who are not necessarily educators. The professional associations will tell you that to really engage kids, to motivate them, to turn them on, it is about mathematics in the real world; it is about science in the real world.

Quite clearly, there is a place for highly abstract science and mathematical study and there should be pathways left open for students to take them, but if we are genuinely to have a mathematically and scientifically literate population we have to think about how we can engage students. That is not going back and teaching in abstract and highly theoretical ways to the whole student population. That, to me, is the inconsistency of the argument. Here are these people wanting more kids to do maths and yet at the same time not understanding that their approach would turn them off.

Mr Mackay—To me it is the elephant in the room syndrome. Here we are, a country at the moment demonstrably underprepared in terms of scientific literacy, as a result of the way in which we have gone about teaching science in schools. If we need to do something—as we must—about deficiency in science graduates, I take Alan’s point entirely about, ‘Let’s have that conversation,’ in exactly the same way as we should be having a conversation about language learning. The areas that should be really confronting us, if we feel that we are going to be a highly educated community, are the ones that you are raising that I think educators and the public and the political process should be encouraging and incentivising in particular ways. But that is not a going back.

Senator MARSHALL—Yet the market does not seem to be concerned about maths and science shortages. In this morning’s *Age* there is a survey of first-year graduate wages and graduates with mathematics degrees are amongst the lowest paid of all.

Mr Mackay—Yes, very interesting. I think science might be a different argument at the moment, but I take your point. There is conflicting evidence about this.

Senator MARSHALL—I was not trying to draw a conclusion from it. I was just thinking that the market does not seem to be putting that pressure on. Following on from what Senator Troeth said: we did get a proposition from the James Cook University, and they basically said that they have had to keep lowering their standard.

CHAIR—And have remedial classes in year 1.

Senator MARSHALL—Their remedial class in year 2 starts with the question of a half plus a third. On reflection, they did not actually say that no-one could answer that question, but they said that the remedial class starts with that question. It did take a number of the senators quite some time to work out the answer.

CHAIR—We did manage it the same day!

Senator MARSHALL—We should ask you to answer it first and, if you can answer it, you can comment on it.

Prof. Reid—For a long time there has been an argument about the lowering of educational standards. The evidence is usually anecdotal like that. I am not sure if the research evidence shows that.

Mr Mackay—There is a bigger issue here about levels of engagement and motivation in the middle years that we should be having a good look at. If we are talking about participation rates in maths and science, we do know what the statistics are in terms of post-compulsory years and we do see what is happening. Here we are next door to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Walk next door and say, ‘Give us a look at your statistics over the last five years in terms of the percentage population of young people subscribing and enrolling for physics, chemistry, high-level maths.’ You will see a downward slope. There is an issue here about, I think, the relative draw power of other subjects and studies and the incentives for doing them, in terms of bonuses or selection advantage. There are issues there. But there are deep issues about the construction of those subjects, the pedagogy, and the assessment regimes that attend them.

I think that the good debate around skill deficiency, however that might be reflected in market supply and demand forces, is that we are saying that there are a set of literacies that are required for all young people, certainly in the compulsory years of schooling, and there are some areas which we are woefully undervaluing. I would come back to languages: it is unbelievable that this country believes that in fact having five per cent of its population enrolled at the moment in classes of Japanese is an adequate way in which we prepare ourselves to be regional players. It is incredible.

I think the good thing about this debate is not that there are easy answers but at least we, as a more mature society, are starting to confront this and say, ‘We expect more from our education system and we’re going to make it a priority. We’re going to invest in it because we want those kinds of outcomes.’ That is what is valuable, it seems to me, about the last 12 months of the debate and, whatever the Senate inquiry can do, will be positive in promoting this kind of dialogue.

CHAIR—I am very sorry, I will have to go, but I am very happy for you to continue, if you would like to.

Senator MARSHALL—No, I think I have done everything, unless there is anything else that you think we have missed and we need to know.

CHAIR—It has been a most valuable discussion, very stimulating, and thank you for your enthusiasm for the cause because it is very heartening to us.

Mr Mackay—Thank you for the opportunity.

Committee adjourned at 12.18 pm