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Committee Secretary  
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

20 April 2007

Dear Sir/Madam,

**RE: Inquiry into Academic standards of School Education**

Attached to this document is the submission compiled by Freya Norman on behalf of Mackillop Senior College, addressing the Senate's Inquiry into Academic Standards of School Education.

Mackillop Senior College is a secondary school that caters for students in year 11 and 12 who are interested in pursuing tertiary education. The nature of the school's system and structure has prompted interest specifically in the inquiry's first term of reference, in particular, part 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.

The submission covers the extent to which curriculums value basic literacy and numeracy skills, whether students are prepared for university, the Australian Technical College initiative, the concept of separate senior secondary campuses and the degree of student computer literacy.

Recommendations have also been made on each of these matters.

We would appreciate any information about the outcome of the Senate's consideration of the submission.

Yours Sincerely,

Freya Norman  
on behalf of Mackillop Senior College

# Inquiry into Academic Standards of Education

## Submission



Compiled on behalf of ***Mackillop Senior College***  
by Freya Norman  
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## **1. Executive Summary**

The submission will address the inquiry's first term of reference, whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, with a particular focus on part 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.

The submission will concentrate on student's lack of basic numeracy and literacy skills and how this affects them in the workforce, or as university students. Recommended compulsory senior English classes have been suggested to combat this issue.

The successful initiation of Australian Technical Colleges and their extensive opportunity for student choice is discussed. Further subjects and courses to be included in the curriculum to enable the college's to cater for a wider range of students have been recommended.

Separate senior secondary campuses that provide students with a more focused learning environment are a concept that has been raised. A case study has been included to demonstrate the advantages of separate senior campuses, incorporating academic and vocational focused schools.

Levels of student computer literacy, as well as standards which they must reach are explored, suggesting that compulsory Information Technology courses must be completed in all senior secondary certificates in order to prepare students adequately for further education and employment.

## **2. Introduction**

As a student who has recently completed the Higher School Certificate (2005), I am well aware of the difference between the perceptions of what is taught in schools, and the reality of what is taught.

Having studied at a school that caters for year 11 and 12 only, I am conscious of the benefits of separate senior campuses.

The nature of the school's structure and system, having prompted interest in the inquiry, indicates it's authority to make recommendations and comment on the inquiry's terms of reference.

The Australia Technical College initiative is a key issue raised in the submission, thus it is necessary to understand that Mackillop Senior College is partnered with one of these colleges. However, the Australia Technical College in Port

Macquarie has been operating for over two decades, under the name of the Vocational College. The college has been an established school for many years, unlike other Australia Technical Colleges which only began operation this year.

### **3. 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**

Education plays a key role in providing children with the fundamental skills, knowledge and values required to become fully functioning, professional members of society.

However, to prepare students adequately for higher education or the immediate workforce, learning must be put into context and made relevant to everyday life and culture.

Program initiatives that steer away from traditional curriculum subjects such as Aboriginal Education, Career Education, Drug Education, Environmental Education, Gender Education, Religious Education and Multicultural Education are being implemented in schools nationally however are often incorporated into traditional subjects that are no longer compulsory after year ten, such as Personal Development, Health and Physical Education and History.

These issues that affect students, and will continue to affect them as they become trades people, professionals and members of society, need to be addressed with more emphasis and become compulsory subjects throughout year 12.

Issues such as drug, alcohol and driver awareness, and information technology skills also need to be reassessed within the curriculum, and given more attention than simply a six week topic within a traditional subject in years nine or ten.

Assumed primary school level core knowledge such as basic Literacy and Numeracy skills are also being neglected, with many high school teachers ignoring spelling and grammatical mistakes, focusing on the quality of content instead.

These literacy skills need to be valued highly in senior high school, not only primary school, as they will reflect students' education level whether they go on to university, or straight into the workforce.

The new Australian Technical College initiative will provide students across Australia with access to skills training and apprenticeship opportunities while completing their senior years of secondary school, so that they may enter the

workforce immediately after school.

While this initiative provides excellent opportunity for students, it needs to be further developed to cater for more students in more areas.

### **3.2 University study – Are students prepared?**

University study should be an extension of knowledge and skills acquired by students throughout their schooling, particularly their senior secondary years. Students progressing to tertiary studies after year 12 should be able to apply their basic literacy, numeracy and analytical skills to their university course. However University tutors and lecturers, as well as employers, report that school graduates lack generic skills, like grammar, comprehension, and being able to perform simple math's equations such as dividing and multiplying without a calculator.

In her speech addressing Education and Economic Growth, Minister for Education, Science and Training, Hon Julie Bishop MP emphasised that growing numbers of remedial English and mathematics classes are being offered by the nation's universities to bring first year, and in some cases, PhD students up to appropriate English standards.

This unacceptable level of basic literacy and numeracy skills must be eliminated, whether it is through reassessing teaching methods and abilities or reviewing national curriculums.

Whether teachers are actually teaching, or simply facilitating a syllabus must be addressed, and the importance of basic skills, even at senior secondary level where they may not necessarily apply to the final certificate, must be re-emphasised.

As previously stated, the standard of a student's literacy level, whether they are at university or in the workforce, will reflect upon their level of education.

As these basic literacy skills such as comprehension, spelling, grammar and punctuation are valued highly in society, they must continue to be valued during the senior years of a student's schooling life.

Studying and completing an English course for senior secondary certificates across the nation needs to be a compulsory component of the final year, unlike in Queensland where students have a choice whether to study English or not. What is the point in writing an insightful essay about King Lear if the marker cannot read the sentences because of spelling errors? Courses such as professional and discursive writing (focusing on spelling, grammar, punctuation, comprehension, sentence structure etc) need to be introduced into the curriculum and become standard components of all English subjects.

### **3.3 Australian Technical College Initiative**

The Prime Minister's campaign to establish 24 technical trade colleges is an outstanding contribution to Australia's education system, providing students who do not wish to study at university with opportunities and choices to further their education by learning skills and becoming accredited members of society.

These specialist secondary schools enable students to learn vocational skills in one of the five priority industries (automotive, construction, metals and engineering, electro technology and commercial cookery) and undertake an apprenticeship while graduating with a year 12 certificate.

While the college locations have been chosen in areas across Australia where there is a need for skills in a particular industry, the government needs to plan for additional colleges in metropolitan areas as well – While there may not be a necessity for additional skills in certain urban areas, those with authority must recognise that not all students living in the city want to go to university.

The Australian Technical College's curriculum needs to be evaluated to determine whether it is catering for all types of students, with particular reference to girls. This issue, as well as recommended subjects will be discussed in the next section.

### **3.4 Separate Senior Campuses – CASE STUDY: Mackillop Senior College and the Vocational College Port Macquarie**

Like the Australian Technical Colleges, which cater for year 11 and 12 students only, many schools throughout Australia have taken the initiative to establish senior campuses, catering for students in their final years of education, separate from junior school years.

This separation between junior and senior years provides students with a more focused environment for learning, and allows school to be structured according to the maturity of the students, preparing them for life at university and in the workforce.

One school which encompasses this system, is St Joseph's High School Port Macquarie, consisting of four campuses; two junior campuses on opposite sides of town, catering for years seven to ten, and two senior campuses catering for years 11 and 12, one with an academic focus, the other with a vocational focus. This system allows diverse opportunities for senior students, giving them a choice between preparing for university and preparing to enter the workforce with accredited skills.

Mackillop Senior College is the campus which features an academically focused curriculum, providing subjects that are suitable for students interested in obtaining a NSW Higher School Certificate with a University Admissions Index and pursuing tertiary education.

The campus offers high level core subjects, including Extension Two Mathematics, Extension Two English and Extension History, as well as academic courses including French, Two-unit Studies of Religion, Chemistry and Physics. In the past few years, Mackillop Senior College has achieved results that are comparably higher to those schools in the region that cater for students in year seven to year 12. In 2005, the senior campus achieved 43 student University Admission Index's (UAI) in excess of 90, while the Year seven to 12 local high school achieved only 15 student UAI's over 90. Four students from Mackillop Senior College were also recognised in the Higher School Certificate All Rounder's List, compared to just one from the combined junior and senior high school.

These results indicate accelerated achievement by those students attending the school catering for only years 11 and 12.

The success of separate senior campuses must be recognised nationally, with the systems being implemented to a greater extent across Australia to create mature, adult learning environments for students, easing their transition from school to the community, university or workforce.

The other senior campus of St Joseph's High School Port Macquarie, which focuses on trade and retail employment preparation, is the Vocational College, now named as one of the nations Australian Technical College's.

While the senior campus has recently come under the Federal Government's Australian Technical College initiative, the school has been operating as vocational college for over two decades.

It has provided senior students with a curriculum that focuses on skill development in trade, commercial service and hospitality industries, preparing students for employment while completing the Higher School Certificate.

The school differs from newer Australian's Technical College's in that it does not simply focus on the five priority industries (automotive, construction, metals and engineering, electro technology and commercial cookery), but offers subjects that cater to other student's, particularly females, interests, such as Exploring Early Childhood, Retail Operations, Printmaking and Ceramics, Sport Lifestyle and Recreation and Business Services.

Australian Technical Colleges need a broader curriculum to create more options for students not interested in university study, so that Australia's students will be skilled members of society when they graduate year 12.



The concept of a high school that encompasses three campuses, a junior school catering for year seven to ten, and two senior schools catering for year 11 and 12, one with an academic focus and one with a vocational focus, needs to be considered for implementation across the nation.

### **3.5 Computer Literacy and Information Technology skills**

Today's students live in a fast paced, technological society. As technology changes and develops, so too should school curriculums, to encompass Information Technology skills necessary to achieve at university and in the workforce.

While computer literacy is addressed in primary school, with stage three students using computers in context across particular subjects and sitting a skills test in year six, attention needs to be focused on senior students and their ability. The mandatory computer skills test in New South Wales that students sit in year ten covers only basic computer literacy and does not sufficiently address areas such as spreadsheets and databases.

Senior students need a more comprehensive understanding of information technology, to equip them for university and the workplace.

A compulsory computer literacy course must be introduced to the senior secondary curriculum which should be examined in each state and territory's senior secondary certificate.

Online learning should also be encouraged and adopting a system such as Blackboard Academic Suite, which is used by many universities, is an initiative that should be included in high school curriculums.

Blackboard is a system that allows teachers to add an online component to traditional subjects. It also allows students to participate in discussion forums online, with particular topics or assessments as focus areas for the forums.

## **4. Conclusion**

To prepare students adequately for further education, training and becoming adult members of society, they must be given maximum opportunities and choices. The Australia Technical College initiative enables those who do not wish to study at university, to complete their senior secondary certificate while gaining accredited skills in a trade. However, the colleges must be expanded to cater for a wider range of students with different needs and interests, if they are to prevent students dropping out after year ten.

Ultimately, the ability to choose between schools that cater for different interests, will lead to greater and more focused career choices for students. Seeing an

increase in separate senior campuses will provide students with this choice and help them to mature into young adults, easing them into society.

While it is important that students have these opportunities, compulsory courses such as English literacy and basic Information Technology need to be introduced to provide students with the necessary skills to function in the workforce, university and the community.

## **5. Recommendations**

- That the government introduces compulsory English literacy and numeracy subjects and exams to the senior secondary curriculum.
- That the government expands the Australian Technical College curriculum to cater for a broader range of students with interests and skills other than in the five priority industries (such as Exploring Early Childhood, Retail Operations and Printmaking and Ceramics).
- That the government plans for and develops Australian Technical Colleges in areas other than those lacking skills in particular industries (such as metropolitan areas).
- That the government expands the number of senior secondary high schools catering for years 11 and 12 only, separate to junior schools.
- That the government introduces compulsory computer skills/ Information Technology subjects and exams to the senior secondary curriculum.
- That the government include online learning systems (such as Blackboard Academic Suit) into senior secondary curriculums across Australia.

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