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## Submission Inquiry into Academic Standards in Schools

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For the Council of AACCS

### Executive Summary

AACCS appreciates the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry.

Overall, AACCS would recommend considerable caution in relation to the primary focus on “standards” as statistical measures. In relation to the perception that “standards” may be declining, AACCS would urge the Inquiry to look for causes beyond statistical measures alone. In seeking to protect Australia’s competitiveness, AACCS would urge the Inquiry to respect the “standards” that are already being achieved by many schools as a result of the philosophy of education that they embed in the delivery of curriculum.

AACCS welcomes an increasing focus on Quality Teaching and Leadership in education and believes that, in the long run, these initiatives have the capacity to do far more for academic “standards” than a greater focus on measurement and accountability. In this regard, it is the universities that must be made more accountable for the training that they provide. They must be less independent in their approaches to training and be more accountable. Until now, they have had too much capacity to impose theories and pedagogies onto syllabus committees, policy advisers and bureaucrats that have turned out to be short-lived and, all too often, a huge disruption in schools and a retrograde step for students.

National academic “standards” will not be guaranteed by the political machinery of government prescribing accountability targets and relying on statistical measures as evidence of success or failure. At the heart of quality education, and therefore academic “standards” that really deliver, there is a cluster of attitudes and dispositions to learning itself that are the engine room of improved outcomes. These are so complex as to require that school-based curriculum and local policy determinations be promoted and supported as a critical component of achieving and sustaining excellence in education.

R Johnston  
30 April 2007

## The Current Level of Academic Standards of School Education

Views on the current level of academic standards of school education vary significantly according to the “expert” evidence that one relies upon. Irrespective of the position one takes, it is important to monitor the issue and critically weigh the evidence presented.

Broadly speaking, the concerns and interests surrounding the subject of Standards appear to revolve principally around the following:

- The consistency of standards between states and territories
- The comparability of Australian standards with those in both OECD and Developing economies
- The specific trends within each of the states and territories over recent years
- The relevance and adequacy of standards for employment
- The relevance and adequacy of standards for further education
- The relevance and adequacy of standards for responsible citizenship
- The success of transitions across each of the stages from K to 12
- The consistency of the momentum of learning across all of the stages from K - 12.

In the heartfelt debates that abound on the subject, “Academic Standards in Schools” (hereinafter mainly referred to as “standards”) appear to be primarily constructs of convenience that express themselves mainly in statistical terms (eg benchmarks) and they reflect certain expectations of those who have a special interest in the capabilities of the graduates moving out of the respective stages of the schooling process (ie Yr 2, Yr 6, Yr 10, Yr 12).

The claim that there is a specific, objective “standard” is, we believe, somewhat misleading. In reality, it is more a “zone” that represents a general sense of security than it is a “line” or a “point” and it is located somewhere between:

- The aspirations of parents and students
- The requirements of employers
- The competitive attitudes of teachers and schools
- The perceptions of the community
- The ambitions of university academics
- The competition for limited tertiary training spaces
- The concerns of politicians
- The populist agendas of the media

In the great majority of cases where people refer to them, “standards” are presented as *utilitarian* (a means to an end) and *aspirational* (something worth striving for) and, for good or ill, they tend to reflect the goals, values, worldviews and/or life experiences of those who name them.

But, even if one holds strong reservations about the notion and/or definition of a “standard”, AACS is supportive of the issue being considered from time to time, even if only because it may serve to approximate some agreed targets against which certain *minimum* syllabus content might be prescribed and some *basic* performance competencies (desirable benchmarks) identified.

### Terms of Reference 1

#### 1. Summary of AACS Concerns

In relation to the first Term of Reference, AACCS has real concerns about the following matters:

- The notion that a single body of **knowledge and skills** can even hope to serve the many purposes outlined in the second paragraph of this submission (page 1).
- The notion that there can ever be a core body of **knowledge** that can purport to be *essential learning* for every school student as a building block for all of the many outcomes of their education.
- The notion of a **successful transition** when the needs, circumstances and capacities of students are so variable.
- The view of **education** implied by the notion of *schools providing students* with a *single core* of knowledge and skills.

## 2. Standards as Minimum Statistical Measures

One caution that AACCS would want the Inquiry to carefully question is the observed tendency for so-called “standards” to be fixed in some minimum statistical measures. We find this approach troubling, simplistic and misleading. To presume that a “standard” can be located in some measured mastery over a limited sampling of information, understanding and skill alone is very narrow and is more reflective of a desire to guarantee utilitarian outcomes than a vision to inspire

- a joy in learning,
- a commitment to rigour or
- a personal discipline to integrate and apply the objects of one’s learning.

But as education becomes increasingly politicized, competing ideas over the issue of “standards” have, more often than not, done just that – i.e. focused on shoring up improved educational outcomes. Of even greater concern, this emphasis has too often been used to simply locate blame for a populist perception that results are declining rather than stimulating a more searching analysis of what lies behind observed changes. Unfortunately, the public rhetoric has sometimes lead to a serious destabilization of productive teaching practices.

Point-scoring over the purported failure or success of certain policy settings and teaching methods to deliver statistical targets (i.e. “Standards”) has largely distracted attention away from the deeper consideration of the value and nature of sound education. The real worth of an education is much more comprehensive than a collection of scores for literacy, numeracy, science, ICT and civics or even a School Certificate, grade point average or UAI score at the end of the school years.

While not altogether unimportant, statistical measures are, at most, barely indicative of the many qualities, insights and capacities with which students will enter the next stage of their education or their post-school years. What child remembers, let alone depends on a result in a literacy test taken a year earlier? What young adult remembers and relies on a UAI after the allocation of their university placement? How many employers rely on statistical measures alone when engaging staff? How many schools restrict their focus to test results alone in reporting on the progress and development of students to parents and/or prospective employers?

### 3. Trends and Standards

In the face of reported downward trends against perceived “standards”, it becomes easy and expedient to lament poor teaching standards, weak teacher training, inappropriate curriculum content, flawed pedagogies and the like. And while, to some extent, it is possible that such factors may be localized components of a decline in performance measures, it would be misleading, even destabilizing, to rely alone on flimsy statistical evidence to draw definitive conclusions as a basis for new policy settings.

If performance measures alone are not reliable evidence of the causes of declining “standards”, what other evidence might exist and what significance should be given to that evidence? In the view of AACCS, this is a very important question that has not been given sufficient consideration in the debate over “standards”. It is a question that strikes at the very heart of the debate over the trend towards “centralization” and away from “school-based” alternatives.

Parallel to trends in performance measures that *appear* to be coursing down are well-documented changes in society that are impacting significantly upon children and adolescents in our schools. These bear careful consideration as possible sources of localized and generalized changes in performance statistics, especially those that reflect declining results.

Take, for example, the devastating impacts of family breakdown, domestic dysfunction, work-life imbalances, ethnic tensions, substance abuse, etc. Consider also the impacts of the social and cultural shifts that reflect the inroads of postmodernism, deconstructionism, relativism and pragmatism on motivation, values, personal security and aspirations.

With values trending from stable and predictable to situational, it is no longer possible to assume that students will value qualities like application, ambition and achievement as their predecessors may have done in the past. The well-documented emergence amongst adolescents of a deep caution, even cynicism, about institutions, authority, government and education are, almost certainly, incrementally taking their toll on student performance. Though certainly not universal in their impacts, the valuing of work and the setting of personal goals is giving way to short-term self-focused living for many adolescents and, with it, the motivation for learning and the commitment to pursuing academic targets have both come under considerable pressure.

Further, whereas in the past, personal beliefs may have served the function of an anchor point for developing a sense of purpose and meaning in life, a unifying framework for building an understanding of “the whole” (a world-life view), post-modernism and deconstructionism have joined forces to fragment learning and this, in turn, has had a significant impact on the confidence of students in making sense of their world and on their interest in making, especially judgments about moral and ethical issues and judgments about the future. Without the anchor points of previous generations, many see little point in merely pursuing someone else’s goals for them.

Christian schools have actively responded to this emerging malaise that appears to be eroding the morale and motivation of teenagers and young adults. We believe that, without a strong sense of purpose being inculcated and modeled as a foundational framework for learning, students will increasingly drift with peer and media influences towards greater disengagement. This, in turn, will inevitably erode performance measures in national and international tests.

Without addressing these core concerns, a simplistic focus on narrow notions of “standards” may simply load increased responsibility and/or blame on an overworked teaching profession and over-stretched schools and, in doing so, further undermine the confidence of the community in the teaching profession, both locally or nationally. This would be a gross injustice to an overwhelmed and overburdened profession who are already sagging under the burden of compliance, overcrowded and constantly changing curricula and a perception that their work is undervalued by their society.

#### **4. Standards and the Differences Within and Between Schools**

It is imperative that the Inquiry recognize that schools vary enormously depending on factors such as:

- social homogeneity
- ethnic mix
- socio-economic influences
- size and composition of student population
- geographic isolation
- the value placed on education by the majority of parents
- the educational background of parents
- the social stability of the school community
- enrolment policy (i.e. selective or non-selective)
- staffing policy (eg experience vs inexperience, student to staff ratio), etc

It is only reasonable to expect therefore that, under such diverse circumstances, outcomes, measured in statistical terms alone, may vary wildly from class to class, school to school and year to year. In non-selective, heterogeneous communities there can be substantial fluctuations in statistical measures in successive years simply as a result of the composition of a cohort. A large number of children from dysfunctional families combined with a significant number of others with, say, non-specific learning disabilities can not only negatively impact on the potential for the class to score well against “standards”, but may also markedly reduce the capacity of the teacher to adequately address the learning needs of the full range of students, thus producing a negative multiplier effect.

To draw simplistic conclusions in the face of such dynamic variables (i.e. that a school/class with low scores is failing or sub-standard) when the standard itself is somewhat questionable and arbitrary, is a dangerous yet oft-expressed and damaging judgment. Nevertheless, such conclusions are a common occurrence and are often made without reference to the breadth of different sorts of schools and/or without an adequate understanding of the complexity of moving a cohort of students (or a whole school) from a depressed standard to an improved overall performance. The reality is, to lift academic performance is a complex of government policy, school culture, school policy, school morale, teacher experience, school leadership, community support, resource levels and much, much more.

So, if so-called “standards” are to serve any purpose at all, they must be as an approximation only of a very narrow cluster of goals to which a limited number of indicative learning tasks are focused. Even then, these goals must be kept in perspective as very temporary means to ends, and nothing more.

## 5. Standards as a Function of Many Variables

On another tack, “academic standards” are the function of a wide range of factors including:

- The well-being of students
- The training of staff
- The personal qualities of staff
- The culture of the school
- The entry standards for teacher training at universities
- The impact of university academics on school pedagogies
- School leadership
- Professional development
- School resource levels
- The quality of support from parents
- The philosophy of education of the school

In the meeting ground between Quality Teaching, Quality Leadership, National Curriculum, National Benchmarks, National Testing and Accountability Requirements there has been a strong tendency towards centralization governing content and, with it, an assumed capacity for schools to deliver almost homogeneous minimum outcomes. The centerpiece in all of this has been “standards”. Yet this single point focus masks the reality that the core endeavour of effective educational practice is not even being considered, let alone promoted and celebrated. The culmination of one’s learning that reflects its full purpose is *a disposition to applying the outcomes of one’s learning to the multitude of real-life contexts that will punctuate one’s life.*

## 6. Standards – Some Philosophical Footnotes

On a philosophical note, the concept **core knowledge** must never be allowed to be reduced to mere fragments of data mechanically stored for recall. From our perspective, AACS would contend that knowledge is as much *an intellectual disposition drawing on a vast array of information which finds its relevance, power and purpose in the context of real-life situations and challenges.* To imply that any school can **provide** students with **the core knowledge** that will universally serve all students is a bold call indeed – in fact a major concern. AACS believes that the intellectual notion that might broadly be referred to as **knowledge** is more a product of school leadership, quality teaching paradigms, school philosophy, a strong learning culture, strong support from parents and a positive student climate than it is the product of centralized curricula and narrow notions of “standards”.

To separate knowledge into core and non-core categories flies in the face of the nature of reality that all humans experience. In the real world, we don’t separate knowledge into data and understanding; important and unimportant. Rather, we trade in information that is rooted in the multiple contexts of life’s experiences and is weighed, interpreted and applied against a background of world-life frameworks.

Skills too, though undoubtedly more utilitarian in nature, find their true value when applied to the challenges of life. To value them only as ends in their own right frequently leads students to ask: "What's the point?"

On the whole, we believe that AACCS schools have a strong commitment to an *integrated approach* to curriculum and pedagogy and we would contend that this approach is best served by allowing for significant school-based inputs. We are therefore strongly opposed to increasing centralization that relies principally on a shallow statistical notion of "standards".

## **Terms of Reference 2**

### **1. Uniform Standards for Senior School Certification**

Teaching that is pitched primarily to a somewhat utilitarian "standard" is, in the view of AACCS, teaching stripped of its power to integrate and inspire learning. Learning that integrates is learning that inspires and empowers. Learning that disintegrates into fragments of data is frequently shallow and uninspiring.

Whatever advantages there might be in defining uniform standards for senior school certification across all Australian states and territories, these must be carefully weighed against the disadvantages of destroying, at least in some schools, effective school-based practices that have, for many years, produced strong outcomes at the senior school level.

This particularly applies in the non-government sector where, for philosophical and religious reasons, learning may not be primarily pragmatic and utilitarian in its focus. Where a "world and life view" is integrated into the delivery of curriculum, senior students are encouraged to adopt an attitude to learning that locates the objects of their learning in a much broader context. This disposition is, in itself, a skill that equips them not only for tertiary studies, but also for effective functioning in the many contexts of society. AACCS has serious misgivings that the further centralization of education in the federal sphere will come at a price that attacks the very characteristics that make many independent schools independent. We believe that any legitimate concerns that might exist with regard to some states/territories should be addressed without significant interference with the current arrangements that provide for independent schools to teach according to their distinctive philosophies of education.

## **Terms of Reference 3**

### **1. Standards and Australia's Global Significance**

While AACCS acknowledges that there is merit, in economic and strategic terms, in maintaining Australia's competitiveness with other countries by ensuring that our graduating students can compete effectively within the domestic and overseas contexts for positions in industry, commerce, academia and research, this argument must be kept in perspective.

We refer to comments already made above about the methods of assessing the comparability of standards between nations and between states and territories and we would urge great caution in relying on statistical measures alone.

If Australia does find itself losing ground in terms of its competitiveness at the school education level, it is important that careful consideration be given to the reasons for changing motivation amongst our students and not just to their performance in national and international tests and competitions.