



**Submission to the
Senate inquiry into academic standards of school education:**

**Made on behalf of the schools and systems
operated by the Lutheran Church of Australia**

Introduction

The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) through Lutheran Education Australia operates 83 primary and secondary schools and 31 early childhood centres, educating some 35,500 students. These schools are under the control of, and administered by, three systems. There are Lutheran schools in each state. Lutheran schools intentionally provide for students from a wide range of backgrounds.

Like other non-government schools, Lutheran schools compete in the education market place for students and therefore need to demonstrate that they offer education that is of the highest quality and that they maintain high standards in all areas of schooling.

This response has been developed through consultation with people who work in Lutheran schools, and the Terms of Reference have been broadly interpreted in line with additional information made available through the Inquiry website.

Term of Reference 1

Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including but not limited to:

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 to the next stage

and

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

1. Systemically and individually, Lutheran schools acknowledge the value of each child as an individual and the value of educating that child as a whole person. The Lutheran Education Australia mission statement states:

The Lutheran school is committed to serving its students by providing quality education which meets the requirements of the state. Such quality education also responds to the needs of students and develops their God-given abilities as fully as possible within the resource limits of the school community.

This commitment to quality is taken seriously by teachers and therefore includes striving for the highest possible standards of achievement.

2. Lutheran schools also recognise the need to form effective educational partnerships for the purpose of equipping students not only for further education but also for *all* aspects of life beyond formal schooling. The 2003 Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) report states:

The concept of skill can no longer be defined in terms of the knowledge and skill required for a job or occupation. The new concept includes an array of general and personal capacities and attitudes deemed essential for the contemporary world of work.¹

Consequently, required knowledge and skills includes not only academic knowledge but also the development of values, spiritual awareness, emotional intelligence, social skills and the like. Therefore this submission suggests that more time needs to be spent on defining some of the concepts in the terms of reference.

Recommendation 1

That there be a forum for much more debate, discussion and consultation on what constitutes "required learning", "core knowledge and skills" and "academic success" and that spiritual and values development, emotional intelligence, social skills also be seen as required knowledge and skills. This "required learning" should then be described in a document that sits alongside the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century.

3. Through this submission, Lutheran Education Australia highlights the value of the work of teachers in preparing students for further education and preparing them for their life as members of society. Teaching is a much more challenging job than it was in the past, and the media in particular is more ready to criticize teachers than to praise them! The majority of teachers are highly professional, committed, knowledgeable and hard-working and their efforts need to be encouraged. Ultimately, standards of achievement do not relate to content, whether the curriculum is national or not, the existence of benchmarks or not but to the quality of relationships and learning partnerships developed between teachers and their students.

Recommendation 2

That the Commonwealth government build on the National Awards for Quality Schooling to actively and regularly affirm teachers and the value of the work they do in what is a challenging profession that is vital for the nation.

4. Teachers generally have a very clear understanding of what is needed to prepare their students for the next stage of their education, of the standards that need to be reached. They also demonstrate real commitment to ensuring that these goals are reached. However their work is often made more difficult by a barrage of new requirements and initiatives. The expectation that teachers can incorporate each new initiative, no matter how worthwhile, into the curriculum without the additional expectations impacting on the time available for learning in other areas, and the maintenance of high standards, is not a reasonable one! The overall impact of all these initiatives is a curriculum that is fragmented and cluttered.

Recommendation 3

That the frequency and extent of imposed new developments and requirements that impact upon schools and the classroom teacher is monitored and balanced.

5. Those having input into this submission also questioned the thoroughness of the consultation process used by governments in developing and implementing policy. At present there seems to be a range of imperatives being issued and legislation introduced without the opportunity for people at the coalface to participate in debate and discussion. This is both disempowering and de-motivating at a time when more encouragement is needed for people to remain in and to enter the teaching profession.

Recommendation 4

That governments ensure that the consultation process involved in developing significant policy change or legislation that impacts upon schools, is genuine, extensive and involves those who are impacted by it.

6. Current educational provisions do not necessarily take into account the changing nature of the student cohort. For example retention rates are significantly higher than, say, 30 years ago. In 2006 the retention rate of all secondary students in post-compulsory schooling was 75% nationally and 85% in independent schools. The growth of technology, the impact of globalization and social changes have led to a more diverse student population with a wider range of learning needs. Societal norms and expectations impact on the nature of students and their attitudes to learning and achievement, and to some extent reflect generational change. Subjects like Physics, Chemistry and some academic Mathematics courses may be seen by students as "too hard" and therefore experience a decline in popularity. We refer members of this inquiry to the work of social researcher, Mark McCrindle, for more evidence of this generational change. Schools are now comprehensive and need to provide a range of pathways to cater for student needs; teachers need to teach using a wider range of teaching techniques. These factors all provide unique challenges in maintaining high standards.
7. Meeting different educational needs requires a focus on process, not content. Consequently it is felt that an emphasis on competitive academic curricula can have significant limitations for many students. Inquiry based learning (for example as required in the International Baccalaureate Middle and Primary years programmes) offers more opportunity for students to develop skills that will both encourage and equip them to be life-long learners. Students need learning experiences that are both meaningful to their world and that extend them beyond it.
8. Learning support
Lutheran schools are very aware of the need to cater for all students and have a range of programmes both for students needing learning support and for the gifted and talented.

However, early intervention in learning is a critical issue. The foundations of learning occur in the pre-primary schooling. The best performing students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were often those that benefited from 2 years of pre-primary education². Therefore there is a need for additional government support and resources for Early Childhood

Education generally, and specifically for health professionals to work within early childhood centres and schools at least up to Year 2, providing assistance with the range of needs that, if not addressed, impact on learning – for example, Occupational & Speech Therapists, Nutritionists, Parent Guidance. It is not realistic to expect educators to address all these needs and still ensure that essential skills are also developed effectively.

If the government is serious about catering for the needs of all students and providing parents with genuine choice, then it also needs to provide adequate resources and make them accessible to all students as a matter of course. There is an urgent need to deal with the adequate funding of students with disabilities across all sectors. At present, significant time, effort and staffing has to be allocated to funding applications, often for small grants. There are also differences from state to state in the availability of, and procedures for, obtaining resources.

At present learning difficulty does not attract the same level of financial support as physical disability. Current funding for learning assistance is a deficit model – students need to first get a poor result on a benchmark test before attracting funding support.

Recommendation 5

That the government support for students with disabilities in non-government schools be at the same level as for students in government schools.

Recommendation 6

That students with disabilities, no matter what school sector they attend, be assessed on the basis of common definitions, and then be entitled to appropriate levels of professional support, resources and funding. This entitlement should be portable if they should move schools.

9. Post-secondary education bodies, and universities in particular, should set their own standards and entrance examinations. At present they drive too much of the curriculum and assessment agenda in schools. Given that not all students want or need a university education, greater legitimacy and value should be placed on TAFE and other pathways that students choose. There are discrepancies between TAFE provisions and expectations, yet secondary schools have to work through TAFE for certification of Vocational Education courses and traineeships. Assistance for schools to become Registered Training Organisations for some VET modules could assist them to provide better opportunities for their students. Some schools that have a genuine commitment to providing alternative pathways and have worked very diligently to set up courses for their students have been disadvantaged by the recent introduction of Australian Technical Colleges close to them. It is hard for schools to plan effectively and strategically for their students when significant changes are made without proper notice.
10. Population wise, Australia is a relatively small country and therefore a national curriculum framework that defines core subjects and content, sets consistent national standards and national assessment and reporting requirements, is desirable. However to ensure current high standards are maintained, schools require the freedom to ensure that curriculum offerings fit the local context and the learning needs of students within their community. A prescriptive, one size fits all curriculum is counter-productive to

genuine learning. Any standardized framework should also include sequencing of concepts into increasing complexity with learning activities that encourage the progressive development of knowledge and skills.

11. Teachers and curriculum planners also need more information about the stages of brain growth and the subsequent impact on students' learning styles and needs, as well as the implications for teachers' knowledge of methodologies to cater for these needs. The current lock-step requirements of educational systems and standardized testing neither acknowledge nor cater for these needs.

Recommendation 7

That in any national curriculum framework, schools be given the flexibility to cater for local needs and to incorporate local content and enable the sequencing of concepts into increasing complexity with learning activities that encourage the progressive development of knowledge and skills.

Term of Reference 2

The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for senior secondary school certificate in each state and territory

1. Through this submission, Lutheran Education Australia expresses a real concern that governments seem to be trying to reduce what happens in schools to things that can be measured and that the human factor is not given high enough priority. We believe this reductionist approach is to be resisted and reiterate that the measure of a student's achievement and success is not simply a grade or a number.
2. Standards of academic achievement are too often defined in a narrow, quantitative way. Standards should be clearly justified, defined and criterion-referenced and as a general rule, exist to support authentic and deep learning.
3. The South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Assessment (SACSA) framework defines curriculum standards as:
performance milestones that depict what we would reasonably expect of learners along a continuum of ever-improving performance. They represent fixed and common points of reference for describing the progress of learners³.
Year 12 is a critical year in referencing the performance of students along a continuum of learning. This submission supports a senior secondary education certificate that encourages equity in the standards required of Year 12 exit students.

Recommendation 8

That the development of any national senior secondary certificate has as its basis academic standards that are clearly defined, justified and criterion referenced.

Recommendation 9

That the government make a clear statement acknowledging that achievement is not only grades and scores based on academic tests and that the effectiveness of schools not be compared and judged solely on that basis.

4. Assessment and reporting of standards
While the need to measure and report on academic achievement is acknowledged, the current accountability requirements are perceived to be onerous and make significant additional demands on teachers' time. Assessment should be beneficial to students' learning and the reporting of achievement should be informative to their parents. The norm-based standards of assessment required by the government only focus on a very limited aspect of the assessment of learning. Students need to be given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways.
5. Many school achievements are not measurable, and the value of the journey, as well as the end point, needs to be acknowledged. Lutheran schools provide pastoral care for each student and this is valued as much as academic achievement. This is a major factor in their success as learning institutions. Life skills (like public speaking, career education, financial literacy, professional and social relationships) are also important to overall development.

However, skills test benchmarking indicates that students in Lutheran schools are meeting, and often exceeding, the standards of students in comparable schools. This achievement is the result of a combination of factors including the closeness of partnerships formed with parents, the professionalism of teachers, and the assistance of support staff, school leadership and a focus on excellence in the fullest sense.

6. Groups who are charged with the responsibility for developing national curriculum and standards should be non-partisan and also resourced until the completion of their work. National subject associations should be included in, and preferably the main drivers of, such development.

Recommendation 10

That the development of national curriculum, core content, standards and assessment processes be driven by a group that is representative of all stakeholders, especially national subject associations.

7. Academic standards depend heavily on the quality of teachers and the ability of schools to recruit and retain suitably qualified teachers for the range of courses offered. While most Lutheran schools are in a strong position in their ability to attract quality staff, shortages of teachers in some education sectors may impact on standards or a school's capacity to offer subjects.

Term of Reference 3

How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries

1. This submission acknowledges the importance of ensuring that standards are consistent across the states. While states and territories use different processes to measure and assess student learning at senior level, there is a belief that ultimately very similar end points are achieved – that is, the overall level of achievement from one state to another is equitable. The anecdotal experience of students who have changed from a Lutheran school in one state to another supports this.

2. Contrary to the impression that is sometimes given, Australia performs well when benchmarked against other countries. This submission points to the results from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Maths and Science Studies (TIMSS) as evidence. The recently released Council for the Australian Federation (CAF) 'Report on the Future of Schooling in Australia' says that "OECD's PISA results paint a good picture of the overall performance of Australian 15-year olds" ⁴ . It does however also identify a need to reduce the impact of social background on educational achievement, and also acknowledges that the competition is not standing still.
3. Education systems in other countries can provide helpful ideas for improvement, but anything we learn needs to be adapted to 'fit' our country and society and also resourced in a similar way if we want to see results.
4. Care also needs to be taken that data from other countries measures the outcomes that we want to achieve. For example, are we making comparisons of thinking skills or simply the ability to regurgitate content. Again this comes back to defining what is meant by "required learning", "core knowledge and skills" and "academic success". There are also dangers inherent in comparing standards in Australia with those of countries where standards are higher but are in fact slipping.

Recommendation 11

That the significant and high performance of Australian schools, when compared to other countries, in international OECD tests be celebrated and more intentionally publicized.

Recommendation 12

That special attention is given to helping schools deal with the equity issues identified in OECD tests through increased funding for students with severe learning difficulties.

Summary of recommendations

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(Dr) Adrienne Jericho
Executive Director
Lutheran Education Australia

197 Archer Street
North Adelaide SA 5006
Tel 61 8 8267 7318
Fax 61 8 8267 7320
Email lea@lca.org.au

May 2007

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2. Bernard Hugonnier, *Improving school effectiveness and efficiency: the OECD contribution*, Keynote presentation at the International Congress of School Effectiveness and Innovation, annual conference, Portoroz, Slovenia, January 2007
3. South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Assessment Framework, Section 'Curriculum Accountability' p.7
4. Council for the Australian Federation (2007), Federalist Paper 2: The Future of Schooling in Australia, p.9