

**SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ACADEMIC  
STANDARDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION**

**CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE  
ADELAIDE**

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## **Introduction**

The *Vision Statement* for Catholic schools in South Australia speaks of “educating young people for participation in the Church and world communities today” and “developing the whole person”, where we invite the young person to “grow in responsibility and freedom” and encourage “the pursuit of excellence”.

With this foundation, the Catholic Education Office has been involved in a range of recent State and Australian Government initiatives directed towards improvement and greater opportunities for students. All of these are major educational developments.

At local level, as part of its State Strategic Plan, the South Australian Government has been focussing on the Early Years of Education. Another key initiative has been the Ministerial Review of Senior Secondary Education in South Australia, the release of the panel’s final report, *Success for all* and the subsequent, current development of a future South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) for senior years students.

At national level, the Catholic Education Office has been involved in contributing to the curriculum reform debate and has also been very active in supporting schools to be fully accountable, for example in relation to all aspects of the Schools Assistance Act.

This response will focus on one of the above; the review of the current SACE and the development of a future SACE. In this way it is hoped to address aspects of Terms of Reference 1 and 2.

## **Context**

The last major review of senior secondary education in South Australia was completed in 1989 and resulted in the introduction of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) in 1992.

Given the time elapsed since that review, there was a compelling case for this further review which was completed in 2006.

As the Review report *Success for All* (2006) points out, there has been great change in the world in the last 15-20 years. (p.19). Among other changes cited, the report names the rapid growth of Asian economies and globalisation in trade and commerce where Australia is playing a more active role. There is greater environmental

awareness and concern about environmental issues such as global warming. There is a demand for a more highly skilled workforce as “new economies and technologies are changing the nature of work and the skills required of the workforce”. The report also mentions the way in which the internet has “democratised access to information” in a way previously unimaginable and the way in which other communication technologies have “increased the capacity for individuals to remain connected while at the same time remaining physically isolated”. (p 20.).

Given this broad backdrop, the ministerial review team had to take into account a range of other factors including the differential impact of change where knowledge based economies can exacerbate existing social inequalities. (p.20) It was also important to consider “the changing nature of the lives of many young people” who live “adult lives” while undertaking the SACE and juggle study, work and training and the way in which educational institutions have already tried to respond to these changing circumstances, such as through vocational learning.

In Catholic schools in South Australia there has been a huge growth in VET stand alone units and embedded approaches. Both the State and Australian Government have responsibilities in this area which can lead to disjointed services or at least fewer opportunities for synergy between the two provisions.

It is also the case that various trends or patterns would indicate that the current SACE is meeting the needs of some groups of students, but that it has not and is not suitable for many other students. A number of widely reported trends act as evidence to put a case for reform and a future SACE that meets the needs of all senior secondary students in South Australia. Four key trends are summarised below drawing on the *Success for all; SACE Review at a glance* document (p.6).

- School retention rates have declined since 1992, falling to 67% from Yr 8 to Yr 12 by the mid 1990s. Currently, those students achieving their SACE is about 55% of the number of students who were enrolled in Year 8 in South Australian schools 4 years earlier and this percentage has been about the same over the period since the current SACE was introduced in 1992.
- The rate of school leaving increases markedly between the tenth and the twelfth year and has done so every year for more than 10 years, suggesting

that the current SACE arrangements are certainly not meeting the needs of all students.

- Since 1999 the “proportion of young South Australians (15-19 years) not engaged in fulltime learning or work or an equivalent amount of part time learning and part time work has ranged between 14 and 20 percent”.
- The Overview report also asserts that: “Young people in South Australia are generally less well qualified than their equivalents in other states. Continuing low rates of SACE completions are a contributing factor”. About 40 percent of South Australians who left school in 2002 had not progressed beyond Year 11 and about a quarter had not progressed beyond Year 10. The report also points out that in May 2003, more than 37 percent of those who left and had not progressed beyond Year 11 in 2002 were unemployed, whereas among those who had completed Year 12, the unemployment rate was a much lower 17.5 percent. It is also the case that “a disproportionate number of early school leavers in South Australia come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and particular cultural groups and areas of the state”.

As a result of its consultation and research, the Ministerial Review Panel developed seven principles to guide subsequent redesign of the new senior certificate which would capture the best of the old credential while responding to the identified needs for a new generation. (This redesign is to be a fundamental; reform, rather than a superficial change). These principles would also guide the direction of the development of a new Act relating to the delivery of senior secondary education in South Australia into the future.

The future SACE will be research and evidenced based and will draw on the wisdom and advice of teachers, principals and the wider community. Detailed writing is under way, piloting of the framework and various units will follow shortly as well as significant professional development for teachers. Students currently in Year 8 will be the first cohort to fully experience the future SACE as aspects are introduced in an evolutionary way.

## **Response to Terms of Reference**

The Terms of Reference for the *Senate Enquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education* are indeed broad and all four of the initiatives mentioned in the Introduction, two state and two national, could be further explored.

It has been decided however to confine comment to Senior Years Education and preparation of young people for work and further learning, all within the context of the review of the current SACE and development of the future SACE as a result of the review. Comment will largely address Term of Reference 1b and to some extent Term of Reference 2.

It is clear from research evidence into the senior years in South Australia (*Success for all*, 2006), that change is needed in terms of providing “students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community”. The current SACE has met the needs of some but far from all senior secondary students. The *Success for all* ministerial review document provides a blueprint for the detailed development of future senior years provision for learning and an accompanying senior years certificate.

The principles incorporated in the document, and on which future provision is based, articulate a preferred philosophical and educational orientation to learning for young people which resonates with young people today and with a contemporary understanding of the world and the future needs of our community and nation.

The rest of this submission explores the seven principles as a way of describing how Catholic schools intend to provide “students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training and as members of the community”.

It is also the case that the principles expand the notion that while success for all is the aim, rigour will not be sacrificed. Thus we hope to address Term or Reference 2 to some extent.

The core term of reference given to the ministerial SACE review panel was to “achieve a curriculum and assessment framework that will meet the diverse needs of all students and result in high and more socially equitable levels of retention,

completion and pathways beyond school” and in that context “to identify the characteristics of a relevant and contemporary certificate of education” (p.83)

**The first principle developed is that the future SACE be flexible and responsive** to all students’ needs and circumstances. This will mean that schools will be able to “develop and adapt curriculum to meet students’ learning needs and aspirations” and that accreditation processes will “facilitate and support customisation of the curriculum at local school level”. (p.84). As a result it is hoped that student engagement with the SACE and senior secondary education will increase.

This is a significant principle in that it reflects the key underpinning educational philosophy of the South Australian Curriculum and Standards Accountability (SACSA) Birth to Year 10 framework; that is a Constructivist approach, where students’ background, needs, knowledge, interests and strengths are taken as the starting point to build further knowledge, skills and understandings. To have such congruence in approach across all the years of schooling will be a significant step forward in the provision of education in South Australia for improvement for all students.

In summary, all aspects of this responsive curriculum will be flexible enough to meet local need and the identification of student/s interests. As such it will not be “dominated by excessive rules and regulations”. (p.85)

**The second principle is that the SACE must be credible**, where high standards are used to assess and report learning and where the measures used are appropriate to the learning being assessed. Clearly too, the information will be useful for employers and, over time, to be found reliable. The SACE must be “internationally portable” and recognised by other accrediting authorities. (p 85).

High standards are a given, but so also is the notion that the SACE should be accessible to all young people. The *Success for all* report states that “high standards are not synonymous with common or uniform standards” and that “all studies and study pathways within the SACE are valid and to be valued”. Standards and the methods to assess them are necessarily contextual. As the report explains “A one-size-fits-all approach to assessment, through, for example, public examinations, may give the semblance of maintaining standards and therefore credibility, but in fact

provide little information of value, about the depth of a student's knowledge...or the student's ability to apply the knowledge in practical ways." (p.86).

In summary, "the structures and processes for a credible curriculum must be rigorous and promote high standards for all"(p.86). If it's credible, it cannot value some pathways and directions over others. High Standards are expected of all senior secondary students, whatever their study pathway for a future life direction.

At the heart of the *Success for all* report is **principle three which asserts that the SACE must be socially inclusive**. All students will be supported with culturally appropriate curriculum, relevant to individual learning needs and aspirations and the curriculum will be monitored in an ongoing way for social inclusiveness. All study pathways and studies will be valued and resourced appropriately. The report summarises this principle in the following way:

"...in order to develop a socially inclusive curriculum it must be accessible to all and ensure that all students, despite their individual differences, are equipped with the *skills for participation and engagement* in the curriculum. The principle also demands a curriculum that is appropriate to all students, not one that is shaped to meet the needs of students from particular groups and that is incompatible with the backgrounds and experiences of students from other groups. It should promote *unity in difference* rather than disunity through sameness. In that respect all study paths should be accorded equal value." (p.86).

This idea of inclusiveness and equal respect for all individuals is of course at the heart of the Christian message and Catholic schools will continue to actively embrace this principle to the best of their ability and resources.

**Principle four is that the SACE must be connected**. Connectedness is a principle which promotes student engagement and motivation, as they see the context, sequence and purpose for their learning.

Paraphrasing the report, students perceive that senior years learning will build on what has come before and particularly Year 10. Then of course coherence and integration are also experienced within the senior years and beyond to education, training and employment. Their learning will also have links to the wider community and the students themselves will be broadening their understandings and knowledge

about the relationships between local and global communities and appreciating the value of other cultures and languages. (p.87).

In sum, a connected curriculum will promote “rich community partnerships between school communities, employers, unions, further education and training providers, and other communities external to the school.... Curriculum structures and processes need to be .....consistent with the unified system of national qualifications (Australian Qualifications Framework) of which senior secondary certificates are a part.

In Catholic Education teacher professional development (R-10) provided by the CEO, we have been striving to find ways to practically demonstrate constructivist and connected pedagogies. We have explored at some length, in various forums, the *Productive Pedagogies* developed by Education Queensland and see great congruence with the productive pedagogy labelled as “Connectedness” and this future SACE principle, so it is our confident hope that when many current primary students reach their secondary schooling, they will experience little change in pedagogical approach.

**Principle five is that the SACE must be worthwhile.** All students seeing the relevance of their studies will engage with them. Young people “must be able to see the benefits – social, personal, economic and cultural- from... successful participation in learning at the senior secondary level.” To some extent this principle interlocks with principle two; that the SACE be credible. While meeting students’ expectations the curriculum also needs to be valued by the community, business, industry and further education. Studies should be so structured that students obtain a sense of “real contribution to their school and their role in the broader community” (p.87).

It is also the case that this principle interlocks with constructivist theory and also the notion in the *Catholic Education Vision Statement* that we strive to “develop the whole person... and take into account the student’s intellectual, moral, spiritual, religious, physical and social capacities”. In the past many students have not necessarily felt included by the current SACE or seen anything in it as being directly worthwhile or relevant enough for them to continue in the schooling system.

**Principle six directs that the SACE must be futures oriented.** Students need to have confidence that the curriculum is relevant for their current and future lives. Students also need to be supported to understand and evaluate broad social and other



trends as and see the relevance for their futures. Most of all students need to be equipped through the SACE with a broad and flexible repertoire of capabilities which will assist them “to become active and confident participants in their society now and in the future”.

The *Success for all* report summarises in the following way:

“... if the curriculum is to remain futures oriented, it must be able to respond dynamically to experience, research and new knowledge. This means that the curriculum and the structures and processes of schools need to have the capacity to accommodate new challenges quickly and efficiently. Above all, the curriculum must be capable of anticipating the future and adjusting to it, so that graduates from senior secondary education have the capabilities they will need, not just to survive in a globally competitive world, but to shape it”. (p.88).

The SACSAs Birth to Year 10 curriculum in South Australia has as one of its five Essential Learnings the notion of Futures. Again, it is pleasing to see an alignment here between senior years planning for curriculum and the current R-10 curriculum. It may be that a senior years imperative for Futures education and connected pedagogies will encourage curriculum reform at junior secondary level where the SACSAs may not always have been taken up as strongly as it may have been.

**Principle seven is that the SACE must support quality teaching and learning.**

None of the previous principles can be put into practical application without quality learning and teaching. In some ways, the previous principles do define aspects of quality teaching and learning. It will be useful here to outline key elements which CEO Adelaide believes are essential for quality teaching and learning in the senior secondary years to ensure that the Senior Secondary SACE certificate is a credible certificate for all students. We concur with the *Success for all* report which says that quality teaching and learning:

- are learner centred
- promote integration of knowledge
- are enquiry-and problem-based, and engaging
- promote both collaborative and independent learning
- recognise the problematic nature of knowledge

- develop students' broad capabilities for being active citizens, workers and members of communities
- connect knowledge in a way that blends theory and practice to the backgrounds and experience of students
- are explicit about purposes and the direction being taken and about the criteria used to assess performance and success
- recognise and value the diversity of learners in any learning setting
- develop higher order thinking and deep knowledge and understanding

We note that these indicators are found or implied in many curricula around the nation and would urge that any discussion about national or core curriculum, as well as focussing on some discipline knowledge in common, should also focus on what we know to be true about quality teaching and learning. In Catholic Education, we believe our students to be created in the image and likeness of God. A rich, complex and deep curriculum respecting the dignity and individuality of our students is therefore the only option from this point of view.

### **Summary**

- some students are currently well served by the senior secondary schooling system and are well prepared for life beyond Year 12 in the world of employment or training or further study.
- clearly significant numbers of students have not been well prepared and there is compelling evidence for change in senior secondary education in South Australia as summarised and cited earlier in this submission.
- this change ought to be based on the principles outlined in the *Success for all* report and further discussed in this submission. In particular change should be based on:
  - sound educational philosophy and research
  - contemporary pedagogies particularly constructivism
  - participation and engagement of all students
  - diversity of learners and pathways
  - planned, coordinated and sustained teacher professional development

- school sectors, schools, state and Australian Governments need to find new ways to build on defensible learning programs towards improvement for all students.

## **References**

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