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Report to

Senate Employment,
Workplace Relations and
Education Committee

Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education

Association of Independent Schools of SA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This response is presented by the Association of Independent schools of South Australia (AISSA). AISSA represents the interests of 97 South Australian Independent schools with an enrolment in excess of 40,000. The AISSA response is based on consultation with a sample of principals and other school leaders from its member schools and AISSA staff. It is primarily focussed around Terms of Reference 1a and 1b.

In preparing this submission we have considered the issues of comparability of student performance across Australia and the debate about the 'academic standards' across Australia. A number of key points are made throughout the submission. They include the following:

- 1) In relation to the debate about the level of academic standards the AISSA raises the question as to what research based evidence is available to support the claim that education standards have fallen across Australian schools.
- 2) There is considerable confusion across the community about the issues and array of views associated with the debate on academic standards. It is unlikely that there is a common understanding of what constitutes academic standards by those who engage in the debate. This situation has been made more complex by the politicisation of the debate on national curriculum and standards as politicians and others argue their position based on views embedded in a particular ideology. There should be an agreed understanding of the use of the term academic standards (or education standards) and the underpinning principles that guide the development of standards.
- 3) The debate about 'academic standards' must acknowledge the diversity of accredited pathways now available to young people in the post-compulsory years of schooling. Approaches to assessment and reporting vary across these pathways.
- 4) There are ever increasing demands being placed on schools to resolve the social and economic problems of local communities (drug abuse, gambling, child abuse, values education) and the nation (e.g. skill shortages). Whilst schools have a key role in educating children and young people the above approach has led to the development of a vast array of separate issue based project/program initiatives and in many cases curriculum. This has placed competing demands on schools as they attempt to respond to ad-hoc requirements from governments and other agencies. This has created a crowded curriculum and increased compliance requirements. A deficit or negative approach to curriculum has also emerged that does not place any emphasis on excellence or high standards.
- 5) Member schools on previous occasions have indicated their concerns about the poor quality of teacher graduates in relation to their particular discipline or field of study.

- 6) There is a general consensus among member schools who provided feedback for this submission that in the main students are well prepared to progress through the various stages of schooling though some students, for example with special needs, require additional support through targeted government initiatives. Importantly, the significant majority of students appear to enjoy school and look forward to progressing through each stage of schooling.
- 7) Results from Australia's participation in international testing programs such as PISA would seem to support the view that Australian students are well prepared. Over the long term the standards of literacy and numeracy have also improved across the student population. However further and higher education institutions consider young people do not have at an adequate standard to enable them to cope successfully with their studies and employment beyond school. Overall Independent schools in particular achieve well in both international and national testing.
- 8) The eight States and Territories offer a range of curriculum frameworks which attempt to provide coherency to the curriculum across the years of schooling and to provide an indication of the "standards" required. Feedback from member schools indicates the SA curriculum framework provides an overall picture of the curriculum design but is not satisfactory for the actual delivery at the classroom level. It is designed for curriculum designers not teachers.

Nationally there is no comparability in the reporting used to describe levels of academic achievement. Hence, any comparison and assessment of 'standards' across Australian States and Territories will be largely meaningless unless there is consistency in the approach to standards, the overall approach to assessment and hence reporting of "standards". It should be noted, however, that whilst there are significant differences in the reporting of achievement across the jurisdictions this does not provide evidence of the lowering of education or 'academic' standards.

- 9) Teachers are spending increased amounts of time fulfilling government compliance requirements in addition to undertaking their core duty of educating students. This raises the question as to what research based evidence there is which links a greater compliance burden with increased education standards? There needs to be a more coherent approach to accountability and legislative measures, particularly in the area of curriculum.
- 10) The AISSA notes that both major Federal political parties have indicated support for a national curriculum, though in slightly different contexts, and this is impacting on debates about curriculum and standards. The AISSA has no formal policy position on the issue of a national curriculum and there are diverse views on the subject within the sector. However, any move towards a national curriculum should not stifle innovation in pedagogy and should be broad enough to address context specific learning. It is also essential that the needs of

schools underpinned by educational philosophies which have internationally recognised education standards, such as Montessori and Waldorf Steiner and offering internationally accredited and recognised programs, such as the International Baccalaureate, must be addressed.

- 11) Feedback from member schools indicates that there is a lack of clear definition from Universities with regard to the standards required for particular courses. In some cases it was felt that students were unlikely to take particular subjects, such as specific higher level maths subjects, if this was not a prerequisite for course entry. Universities have a responsibility to explicitly define the core subjects and the content of subjects and standards which are pre-requisites for particular courses.
- 12) Concern was also expressed with regard to claims that schools are not producing students with the necessary level of employment skills. The expectation that students come to employment with all the required skills negates the key role that employers play in developing the skills of their employees. We are aware that peak employer groups have identified "employability skills"; however there needs to be further consultation between these groups and school communities about how they may be incorporated into the school curriculum.
- 13) South Australian Independent schools have a long-established history of promoting active citizenship and community service as part of their school ethos. Independent schools undertake a range of activities which promote citizenship including pastoral care programs, volunteer work in community organisations, participation in a variety of national and international youth forums and financial and active support for charitable organisations.
- 14) While there continue to be political declarations that standards in schools have 'dropped' there is a lack of research based evidence to support these claims. Indeed, Australia's participation in international testing would seem to counter these arguments.
- 15) The AISSA believes that the policy debate around education standards should be focussed around how Australia can implement a policy environment in which there is a focus on schooling for the future, innovation and continual striving for excellence. Discussions around how standards can be continually enhanced should be marked by collaboration and cooperation among the key stakeholders.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Outline of Submission

This response is presented by the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA). The AISSA response is based on consultation with principals and leaders from its member schools and AISSA staff. It is focussed most specifically around Terms of Reference 1a and 1b. The submission also provides a profile of the Independent school sector and an overview of the context in which the current debates about 'standards' are taking place.

1.2. Profile of the Sector

1.2.1. Overview

The AISSA represents the interests of 97 South Australian Independent schools with an enrolment in excess of 40,000. The AISSA has a formal Committee structure that incorporates the key school authorities and interest groups within the Independent school sector.

South Australian Independent schools educate students within a curriculum underpinned by a diverse range of religious affiliations (Anglican, Baptist, Christian, Christadelphian, Greek Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Uniting) and educational philosophies (Montessori, Waldorf Steiner). The sector also includes a number of secular schools and a special school which educates students with severe intellectual disabilities. A number of Independent schools are also members of a system, for example, the Lutheran Schools Association and Adventist Schools Australia.

Enrolments within Independent schools have significantly increased since 1994. This growth has been most prominent in schools located in the outer suburbs and regional centres across South Australia.¹ Throughout this period the sector has also witnessed increased enrolments of students with special needs including students with disabilities and students with learning difficulties.

1.2.2. Governance Model

Independent schools are distinguished by a model of governance based on local management through school boards and accountability to school communities. Autonomy is an essential principle underpinning non-systemic Independent schools. Some schools are members of a school system (e.g. Lutheran and Seventh Day Adventist) and hence have collective accountability to that recognized school authority.

Independent schools are accountable to government through the requirements for school registration and on a number of other legislative levels, for example, the *Children's Services Act 1985*, *Children's Protection Act 1993*, the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and the *Schools Assistance (Learning Together-Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004*.

¹ A more detailed sector profile is contained in Appendix 1.

The direct accountability of Independent schools to parents is a key strength of the Independent school sector.

1.2.3. Registration of Non-Government Schools in South Australia

South Australian Independent schools are required to be registered under Part 5 of the Education Act 1972. To receive registration schools must demonstrate to the Non-Government Schools Registration Board that they meet the following criteria:

- (1) 'Instruction which is satisfactory in nature and content.
- (2) Adequate protection for the safety, health and welfare of students.
- (3) Sufficient financial resources to ensure continued provision of the above two criteria.'

Applicants and existing schools (through the re-registration process) must be at least cover the eight key learning areas as outlined in the National Goals for Schooling and the National Statements and Profiles. The registration of non-government schools is required to be reviewed and renewed by the Board at least once in every five years.

The AISSA considers that the Non-Government Schools Registration Board is the appropriate body to monitor the registration of Independent schools. The AISSA does not support duplication of regulatory processes across levels of Government or other agencies.

It is important to note that no such external quality assurance (registration) process exists for government schools in South Australia.

1.2.4. International Accreditation

A number of South Australian Independent schools are accredited to offer the International Baccalaureate. A significant process must be undertaken in order to be authorised to offer the International Baccalaureate.

In addition to meeting government registration requirements some South Australian Independent schools have also received accreditation from the Council of International Schools. Schools must meet a range of benchmarks including in the areas of curriculum and governance to receive this accreditation.

Accreditation for both programs requires that schools demonstrate that they can achieve high education standards.

These options provide an international perspective in relation to curriculum assessment, reporting and education standards. Given the global nature of the economy and Australia's positioning in this context these approaches should be encouraged. Schools and their associated authorities should be more supportive in promoting excellence and high standards in education. These objectives are not necessarily in conflict with some of the social inclusion and social justice objectives of governments.

2.0 CONTEXT

2.1. Overview

Prior to addressing specifically the Terms of Reference it is essential to give some context to the debate about 'academic standards'. There is a high degree of politicisation in the current discussions on education standards, which is in part being generated by the policy positions of both major federal political parties on the issue of national curriculum and standards. In addition, a range of experts in various disciplines, including industry bodies, continue to make pronouncements about the quality and directions of education and training.

The debate about 'academic standards' needs also to be seen in the context of the changing nature of schooling and the current pressures placed on schools. The AISSA considers there needs to be a significant enhancement in the collaboration between teacher education faculties and schools to ensure that higher education institutions are aware of the changing nature of schools and schooling and the wide range of government policy initiatives that impact on schools.

It is the view of some member schools that Education faculties in higher education institutions are not aware of the range of policy initiatives and compliance requirements impacting on schools.

2.2. Changing Role of Schooling

2.2.1. Overview

Schools represent one of the remaining stable institutions in society. As a consequence the community, employers and governments are placing increased demands on schools (Power 2000). Schools are faced with trying to meet rapidly changing, and at times quite contradictory, demands from an increasing number of stakeholders.

Increasingly the 'blame' for social problems is laid at individual schools or the school system, a focus which deflects attention away from the responsibilities of government (Commonwealth and State/ Territory) and the wider community to address many of the underlying issues – social and economic – which underpin negative behaviours.

Schools are no longer the only location of formal learning for school education. Workplaces, the community and other agencies (e.g. Red Cross) are now key partners in the education process, leading to tension between the traditional approaches to teaching and learning (and standards in that context) and different approaches to the delivery, assessment and reporting of learning and hence standards.

2.2.2. Government Policy Initiatives

Schools are increasingly being pressured to play a more proactive role in solving the social problems of society such as social exclusion, drug and gambling abuse, violence, health, youth suicide and the dislocation of young people from their families and communities. Independent school communities face the same challenges as their government school counterparts as the socio-economic profile of the former sector changes with the greater accessibility.

In this context, schools are facing pressure from an increasing range of ad-hoc policy initiatives (drug education, child protection, values education, boys education, civics and citizenship, road safety, anti-gambling education etc) essentially driven by governments. This segments the curriculum and requires access to a wider range of expertise, often outside the regulatory requirements for teachers' registration, and necessitate changes to school organisation and structures.

While the underpinning capabilities of many of these programs are similar, there is little if any coherent approach to the development and implementation of these programs. Schools can and should play a key role in delivering social outcomes. However, they should not be held solely responsible for, or expected to solve, wider societal problems.

There appears to be an expectation that these programs can be simply incorporated into the curriculum with no impact on curriculum content or 'standards'. Member schools expressed a concern that the continual crowding of the curriculum is leading to some subjects being taught at a superficial level and some core content being removed from key disciplines, (e.g. science).

2.2.3. Retention in Education and Training

Targets to improve school retention rates have been a policy objective of Federal and State governments for some time and are often part of government strategic plans. For instance, the South Australian State Government has recently announced that it will increase the school leaving age from 16 years to 17 years in 2009. Independent school retention rates to Year 12 have been over 95% over the past decade. Increased retention rates have impacted on schools with innovative approaches required to engage those students who would in previous years have left prior to completion Year 12.

Some students leave school prior to completion of Year 12 for a range of reasons, including undertaking employment. A more appropriate definition of retention should be agreed nationally that takes into account the possible pathways now available to young people, including school, school/training, training/ employment and or employment. The notion of education standards (not academic standards) will need to be clarified in this more current context for post-compulsory education. Tension has emerged between the need to ensure students achieve high standards in core skills in appropriate subject disciplines and meeting the needs and aspirations of students who do not wish

to pursue an 'academic pathway'. Government policies which have focussed on increasing the diversity and choice of curriculum, in order to keep disengaged (at risk) students in schooling, have in some cases led to a decrease in the number of students undertaking particular subjects such as mathematics and the science disciplines.

The concepts of standards, quality and excellence should be applied to all appropriately accredited pathways not just to the 'academic pathway'.

Student lifestyles have changed markedly in recent years with a significant number of young people involved in part-time work unrelated to their studies, but integral to their lifestyle decisions. Innovative approaches to cater for these students are needed. Many schools have, for instance, modified school attendance requirements to suit the school/work pattern of their students. Schools have also modified their programs to meet the changing needs of students, in particular, ensuring that students are provided with a range of pathways to further education and employment with recognised standards for these pathways.

2.2.4. Parental Involvement

The Independent sector has witnessed an increase in the level of involvement that parents want in the education of their children. Parents want to be involved in their child's education not dictated to by a larger bureaucracy. Anecdotal evidence provided to the AISSA has also confirmed that parents are choosing, or shifting to, Independent schools in South Australia because they offer parents a high level of involvement and consultation in the education of their children and because of their relative success according to any publicly available measure of education standards.

The development of new education language that emerges with nearly every review of curriculum and the complexity of education pathways now available to young people adds to community confusion around the debates about standards, curriculum and assessment.

Schools authorities and curriculum agencies have a responsibility to engage parents in the key policy debates and to present the discussion and outcomes in plain English.

2.3. National Curriculum and Standards

2.3.1. Overview

Recently the major political parties have supported the development of national curriculum as a mechanism for improving appropriate 'academic standards,' national curriculum consistency and student reporting.

Since the mid 1990's the Australian Government has enhanced its influence over school curriculum through a wide range of policy initiatives and specific projects.

A national perspective on many curriculum related policy matters has been focused through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) which consists of all relevant State/ Territory and Australian Government Ministers.

Examples of national related curriculum projects that have been implemented in the 1990's include National Statements and Profiles for the eight Key Learning Areas (1993), National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century (1999), Mayer Key Competencies (1992) and National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools.

However, while States/Territories agreed to cooperate in the development of the above projects Ministers did not endorse uniform implementation across the States/Territories. It was left to each State/Territory as to how these national initiatives might be incorporated into the local curriculum.

This outcome was a reflection of the constitutional powers of the State governments in relation to school education and the associated suspicion of a centralist-Canberra driven approach to school education. Each State/Territory also has a well established infrastructure to support the development and accreditation of curriculum.

Other major Federal policy initiatives such as the National Equity Program for Schools and more recently the Australian Government Targeted Programmes have also influenced curriculum across schools.

The Schools Assistance (Learning Together-Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004 has signalled a stronger national intervention in school education. This legislation and associated regulations requires schools and school authorities to make a commitment to participating in a wide range of nationally driven initiatives including the National Goals for Schooling, development and implementation of the national Statements of Learning, participation in the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks, science, ICT and civics and citizenship testing program, implementation of a prescribed student reporting arrangements (A-E or equivalents), publication of school performance information, at least two hours of physical activity in each school week and implementation of the National Safe Schools Framework. Implementing these requirements is a condition of receiving Commonwealth funds. All of these requirements have either direct or indirect impact on school curriculum.

The attention of national curriculum has more recently focussed on the senior secondary years of schooling. In 2005 the Australian Government sought advice from the Australian Council of Educational Research on options for an Australian Certificate of Education for the senior secondary years of schooling. The investigation indicated that there are significant inconsistencies in senior secondary approaches across Australia in terminology, assessment and reporting, requirements for the award of the senior certificate, what is taught in particular subjects, how vocational learning is incorporated into school programs, how student achievement is assessed and how student results are reported. The report recommended the development of an Australian Certificate of Education based on the identification of curriculum essentials

(core curriculum), achievement standards and national testing of a set of general/employability skills administered through a national standards body. At the July 2006 MCEETYA meeting the State/Territory Ministers did not endorse the recommendations of the above project. Further national projects (Year 12 Curriculum and Achievement Standards and the ASEOC Working Party on Senior Secondary Reporting) represent extensions of a national perspective to senior secondary curriculum.

Other national education initiatives include mental health (Mind Matters), drug education, values education, boy's education, Teaching and Learning Federation on-line resources, Indigenous education and teacher professional development. The development of teacher and school leadership standards are further illustrations of this national perspective on school education which have implications for school curriculum.

In late 2006 and in 2007 the debate about national curriculum became further entwined in national politics as the Federal Coalition Government and Australian Labour Party attempted to seek the support of the community for a national curriculum.

In October 2006 Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training (Julie Bishop) called for the development of national curriculum and the establishment of a National Board of Studies comprised of educators from the "sensible centre".

The above arguments can be summarized in the following quote from the current Federal Minister:

The community is demanding an end to fads and wants a return to a commonsense curriculum, with agreed core subjects, like Australian History and a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy. The curriculum must be challenging, aiming for high standards and not accepting the lowest common denominator... *We need* to take school curriculum out of the hands of ideologues in the State and Territory education bureaucracies and give it to say a national board of studies, comprising the sensible centre of educators – with representatives of our States and Territories, bringing to the table the very best examples of all the States have to offer.

The Minister has indicated compliance to a national curriculum will be a condition of receiving funding from the Federal Government for the 2009-12 funding period.

In February 2007 the ALP also announced its support for a national curriculum (New Directions for Our schools- Establishing a National Curriculum to improve *our children's educational outcomes*) in a number of core areas (maths, English, sciences and history) from Kindergarten to Year 12. The policy statement also proposed a National Curriculum Board consisting of educational experts. The national curriculum would be developed in consultation with States and Territories with flexibility for local, regional and State variations.

Both major political parties have emphasized the need for rigor, national consistency and high standards to support a national integrated economy and

mobile workforce. Both appear to be supporting a more traditional subject/discipline based approach to curriculum design and assessment and overall improvements in the quality of teaching.

Some academics have entered the debate accusing State/Territory school authorities of dumbing down the curriculum via an outcomes based approach to curriculum, assessment and reporting of student results, neglecting the basics and allowing left wing ideologies to dominate the pedagogy supporting curriculum design and delivery.

The proposals from the current Australian Government and the Federal ALP have met mixed reactions from States/Territories and school leaders across the three school sectors. There still remain concerns about the intrusion of the national government into an area of State/Territory responsibility and the inability of a uniform national curriculum to meet the diversity of student pathways.

Teachers unions have also expressed reservations about national uniformity and the loss of teacher participation in the development of curriculum.

Countering these arguments is a strong belief that Australia must develop a national perspective on education and training in order to be an integral part of the global economy and international community. Greater national consistency is also seen to support the increasing mobility of the Australian workforce across States/Territories.

The supporters of a national curriculum approach argue there will be significant resource savings via this approach for the development of curriculum; however, highly centralized infrastructure associated with the development and accreditation of national curriculum could also place more complex demands on schools. It may also distance teachers from the development process.

Nonetheless greater national consistency in relation to curriculum and associated standards does not automatically deliver higher **'academic' standards. Nor** does the establishment of a highly centralised curriculum development and accreditation agency.

It is essential that any enhanced approach to national curriculum must not inhibit the ability of schools to generate a diversity of study pathways for students. The focus at this stage seems to be on the skills/knowledge included in traditional subjects required for a University pathway. It is also imperative the debate about a national curriculum (and standards) encompass the broader range of pathways and approaches to education across all levels of schooling.

Some criteria the Senate Committee may wish to consider in progressing the debate about national curriculum assessment, student reporting accreditation and certification are outlined below.

- National curriculum should provide young people with the skills and knowledge for the 21st century and also meets the expectations of

further education and training institutions, employers, parents, the wider public and governments;

- Benchmark standards and national consistency in core/essential skills and knowledge across the eight key learning areas should be identified;
- Choice and diversity in school curriculum should be an underpinning principle- hence sufficient flexibility should be incorporated into national curriculum to provide a variety of study pathways for students;
- The autonomy of each school and school system in designing their curriculum for local needs should remain;
- Cooperation with national authorities and involvement in the development of national curriculum initiatives should underpin the management of the project;
- Efficient and educationally effective approaches to reporting student results and school performance data should be developed;
- The teaching profession must be engaged in the development of national curriculum;
- Effective and efficient compliance requirements associated with implementation of national curriculum should be developed and reviewed on a regular basis;
- Curriculum documents should be developed for use by teachers not by curriculum developers for curriculum developers;
- Any move towards a national curriculum should not stifle innovation in pedagogy and schools. Moreover, a national curriculum should be broad enough to address context (local, international) specific learning, for example viticulture in wine regions and marine industries such as oyster farming.

2.3.2. Educational Diversity

The AISSA considers it is essential that the special educational requirements of schools underpinned by educational philosophies such as Montessori and Waldorf Steiner are addressed in any move toward a national curriculum. Both Montessori and Waldorf Steiner are educational philosophies with internationally recognised education standards. Parents make a choice to educate their children within these educational philosophies. This choice should be respected.

In addition, schools should have the flexibility to offer other curricula which have internationally and Australian recognised education standards. As noted previously a number of Independent schools offer the International Baccalaureate.

3.0 PREPARATION OF STUDENTS FOR FURTHER EDUCATION, TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT

3.1. Academic Standards

3.1.1. Overview

The terms of reference to this Inquiry give no guidance about the notion of 'academic standards'. It is not clear if the term is to be understood in a narrow context; for instance, should it focus on traditional knowledge and skills in specific recognised discipline areas such as science, mathematics and English as it applies to the well recognised 'academic pathway' or in a broader context which encompasses a range of educational opportunities for young people? In general, discussion around the concept of standards is characterised by a confusing and complicated education and political debate.

The debate about academic standards must recognize the wider goals of schooling and the diversity of pathways and learning contexts now available to children and young people. This is consistent with the MCEETYA National Goals of Schooling in the Twenty-First Century which emphasise the importance of social and spiritual capacities alongside more specific academic and employment related skills and acknowledges that young people already have a range of education and training opportunities available to them. In this context the AISSA prefers the term education standards rather than academic standards.

The AISSA calls on the Senate Committee to state explicitly in its **report how it conceptualises 'academic standards' and to** recognise the contested nature of this term.

3.2. Standards Across Australia

3.2.1. Overview

The eight States and Territories offer a range of curriculum frameworks in an attempt to provide some coherency to their offerings across year levels and levels of schooling. The documents also apply varying definitions of standards/outcomes. There is no comparability in the reporting used to describe levels of academic achievement. Hence, any comparison and assessment of 'standards' across Australian States and Territories will be largely meaningless unless the above situation can be overcome.

For example, Geoff Masters (2006) has identified significant differences in the reporting of student achievement against education standards across the jurisdictions particularly at Year 12:

ACT	a grade (E, D, C, B, A)
NSW	a mark out of 100, placing the student's result in one of six 'bands' (Band 1, Band 2,... Band 6)
QLD	an 'achievement level' (Very Limited, Limited, Sound, High, Very High Achievement)
SA/NT	a score out of 20, placing the student's result in one of five grades (E, D, C, B, A)
TAS	an 'achievement level' (Preliminary, Satisfactory, Commendable, High, Exceptional Achievement)
VIC	a score out of 50
WA	currently: a grade (E, D, C, B, A) proposed: a 'level' (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) and a 'band' (first/medium/high) within that level

In their study, Year 12 Curriculum Content and Achievement, Matters and Masters (2007) note that it was not possible 'to compare the standards of achievement expected of students in the different States and Territories of Australia. While the study established significant consistency in what is assessed, differences in terminology and the lack of access to students' assessment responses and work made it impossible to compare the standards required to achieve the highest available grade in each state and territory'.

While the above pattern supports the argument for national consistency (including the terminology); however there is no guarantee that a move to a national approach to curriculum will improve academic standards.

3.2.2. Assessment Models

There are a range of assessment models and approaches that are used across Australia by various jurisdictions. They include:

- Comparative and non-comparative assessment
- Normative assessment
- Standards referenced
- Criterion referenced – graded and un-graded
- Descriptive – outcomes based, goal-based or work-based

Schools and curriculum authorities also employ a range of strategies to ensure common education standards are applied including moderation and scaling at

Years 11 and 12. The implementation of a diversity of pathways for young people has generated varying approaches to assessment and reporting associated with the each pathway and attempts to equate these different approaches. (E.g. VET contribution to the TER). This situation has added to the perception that the traditional academic pathways are associated with more highly valued forms of assessment (E.g external exams) and reporting.

The profile of the cohort of students has changed markedly across the three school sectors as school retention rates have risen. Further, the ability of schools to identify differences and associated needs of children and young people has improved. The wider range of capabilities within the student cohort could be contributing to the perception that 'academic standards have declined over the past two–three decades. Schools are attempting to accommodate the diversity by offering a wider range of curriculum and associated approaches to teaching and learning ,often with the support of various interest groups that consider schools are still dominated by the 'academic' pathway.

Achieving consistency in the approach to assessment and reporting of student results will to a large degree be determined by an agreed understanding of 'academic standards'.

Many changes to assessment methods are based on sound research to accommodate the diversity of curriculum and delivery methods now available to students and teachers. Many new and traditional subjects are assessed in non-traditional ways; these approaches are valid.

The debate about standards should not be confused with a debate about the validity of different methods of assessment.

It is also important to recognize that there are a range of purposes of assessment including checking student learning, to inform future learning, to identify strategies to assist student learning, to monitor education standards, to certify that a level of achievement has been attained and to provide evidence that is used for future pathways including promotion to another level of learning or selection to a university course or a further education course, apprenticeship or employment.

3.2.3. Impact of Public Policy on Curriculum and Assessment

The AISSA notes that there has been a range of government policies designed to increase the comparability of standards. The introduction by the Australian Government of A-E (or equivalent) reporting is one such example. However, schools retain flexibility in setting the standards necessary to achieve each grade.

School students currently undertake benchmark testing in the areas of literacy and numeracy at Years 3, 5 and 7. However, it should be noted that the benchmark in this instance refers to a minimum standard and the link to curriculum at various Year levels is unclear. In other countries (e.g. the UK) assessment is also about identifying the highest standard.

Under the Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004 from 2008 schools will be required to participate in national testing at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. These tests are likely to provide some comparative data across the states/territories.

In addition, school authorities are required to implement the national Statements of Learning within the curriculum. It is unclear how these new statements progress the policy direction to establish nationally consistent curriculum. There is little or no sense of connectivity between a common understanding of national curriculum (inclusive of standard) and these new curriculum statements.

Feedback from schools indicates that the current emphasis on compliance requirements as they apply to assessment and reporting has increased the administrative burden on teachers and school leaders. Consequently, teachers are spending increased amounts of time administering government requirements in addition to undertaking their core duty of educating students.

The AISSA questions what evidence there is of a correlation between a greater compliance burden and improved '**academic**' standards'.

The AISSA supports accountability and the provision of clear information for parents; however, it considers that there needs to be a more coherent approach to accountability, particularly in the area of curriculum. Accountability measures in regard to school education should be underpinned by the goals of improving the educational outcomes of students and improving the effectiveness in the use of government funds.

3.3. 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

3.3.1. Overview

Given the diversity of students in Australian schools a successful progression for individual students may be based on different criteria. In addition, parents may have a different view of what constitutes a successful progression than governments and other stakeholders.

Feedback from member schools indicated that in general students were well prepared by schools to progress to the next stage. The results of Australia's participation in international testing programs such as PISA would seem to support this view.

Some students (E.g. students with disabilities or learning difficulties), however, require additional support to make a successful transition. Independent schools are heavily reliant on the Commonwealth government for the provision of funding to support these students. Programs such as those funded through Targeted Programs are essential in assisting these students.

3.3.2. Early Childhood

The AISSA recognises that early childhood is not a focus of this inquiry; however the OECD report Education at a Glance OECD Indicators 2003 notes 'Investing in early childhood education is of key importance in order to build a strong foundation for lifelong learning and to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities later in school' (OECD 2003: 203). Its relationship to the early years of schooling is important in discussion about the purpose of early childhood care and education and primary education.

Early childhood education is a rapidly expanding part of the education sector; however until recently it has generated limited debate in relation to education policy. Therefore whilst there has been a strong commitment to early childhood development and education from the major political parties there has been little effort to create a national perspective to the education programs associated with this area. A recent report prepared by the Australian Council for Educational Research (Early Childhood Education- Pathways to quality and equity for all children, 2006) describes the provision of education and care services for early childhood as a "... confusing mix of types of provision, regulatory regimes and policy contexts..." The report emphasizes the positive impact that high quality childcare and pre-school education can make to children's language and cognitive development. Currently there is little consistency and continuity between learning programs from one centre to another. The authors recommend the development of a national agenda for early childhood and the implementation of a universally available quality early childhood provision that accommodates both care and education needs.

There have been some recent attempts to establish a national perspective to early childhood education. In May 2005 MCEETYA established an Early Childhood Reference Group to examine opportunities that will enhance the development of a coordinated national approach to improving the learning, development, health and wellbeing of children from birth to eight. The terms of reference refer to a National Agenda for Early Childhood. This document stressed the importance of addressing the needs of young children across government portfolios (community services, education and health) and building partnerships with families, communities and business. However the document gives little guidance beyond the level of a set of goals and principles about the type of education programs that should be associated with early childhood education and the importance of early learning and care from birth to lay the foundation for a smooth transition to school and better life chances. The national framework document also refers access to an early learning program for all children, particularly disadvantaged children for a minimum of one year prior to school entry.

The Federal ALP announced in March 2007 that it would establish a universal right to access early play based learning and development programs delivered by degree-qualified teachers. (New Directions for early Childhood education: Universal Access to Early Learning for Four Year Olds) This would be achieved through a Commonwealth Early Childhood Education Act.

The Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) agreed in April 2007 to develop by 2008 an intergovernmental agreement on a national approach to

quality assurance and regulations for early childhood education and care. This is designed to remove duplication between State and Commonwealth regulations.

At this stage there is no more detailed development associated with curriculum in this area. How will the concept of 'academic standards' or education standards apply to early childhood services? How will this area of care and education link to primary education?

The AISSA considers that all children should receive an equitable distribution of resources through funding arrangements to enable access to the early learning centre or preschool of their choice. Independent preschools and early learning centres receive income from private fees and currently have no access to Commonwealth or State funding and support services. This limits the ability of some families to access places in these centres because of cost.

The current funding arrangements in regard to early childhood do not, at present, support the desired outcome of higher levels of literacy and numeracy. For example, under Australian Government Guidelines, Targeted Program funds providing support for improving the development of literacy and numeracy are specifically targeted at primary and secondary students. If higher levels of literacy and numeracy (in particular for Indigenous children and children with special needs) are to be an outcome of the current debate about standards and the preparation of students then the criteria by which funds to support these objectives can be accessed must be widened. This should be matched by a corresponding increase in Targeted Program funds.

3.3.3. Primary and Secondary Education

There is a general consensus among member schools that in the main students are well prepared to progress through the various stages of schooling.

Member schools indicated that through focussed programs standards of literacy and numeracy have improved. Moreover, students appear to enjoy school and look forward to progressing through each stage of schooling. This was considered to be a significant benefit of current educational practices.

Primary schools have also indicated an increasing pressure on them to meet expanding expectations of government and the community and a lack of expertise available within their schools to appropriately handle the needs of all students (e.g. counsellors, mental health, welfare etc). Peak advocates for Primary schools have recently drawn attention to the urgent need to clarify the core role of primary education.

3.3.4. Students with Special Needs

Students with special needs/disabilities often require additional support to successfully progress through school. In some cases they need individualised learning plans to accommodate their disability or specific disadvantage.

The needs of these students must be an integral part of the debate **on 'academic standards'**.

Government funding (Commonwealth and State) has not kept pace with the differing needs of these students. Independent schools are heavily reliant on the Australian Government for funding of students with special needs. The AISSA considers that additional funding for students with disabilities should follow the student regardless of the school sector they attend.

3.4. 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.

3.4.1. Pathways of Independent School Students

Independent schools offer a range of pathways for students to further education, employment and training including traditional subject based pathways and VET in Schools through the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). Students can also access university and other pathways through the International Baccalaureate and Waldorf Steiner models.

Destination studies indicate that while a significant proportion of young people who complete their Year 12 at an Independent school enrol at universities the destinations of students beyond school are becoming increasingly more diversified.

For example, graduates from 2003 who attended an outer metropolitan school were engaged in a diverse range of higher education and TAFE courses including Certificate III in Hospitality and Certificate IV in Professional Multimedia, apprenticeships (e.g. commercial cookery, carpentry) with industry and employment in areas such as retail, clerical and industry. A significant number of students were engaged in part-time work and full-time study. In some cases students were in the workforce with the aim of saving money to engage in overseas travel. In contrast the majority of students in one metropolitan Independent school proceeded to university study with a minority attending TAFE. 9.4% of the cohort did not apply for tertiary study. A third school, educating students from a lower socio-economic community indicated that approximately 36% of their 2003 Year 12 cohort entered university while 36% undertook a TAFE or equivalent course and the remaining 28% gained employment. Further details are provided in Appendix 2.

It is essential that valid and high quality pathways are maintained for all Australian students. The AISSA considers that it is possible to meet social justice and social inclusion policy objectives along with the objectives of achieving high standards across all accredited pathways.

3.4.2. Further Education

Feedback from member schools indicates that there is a lack of clear definition from Universities with regard to the entry standards required for particular

courses. In some cases it was felt that students were unlikely to take particular subjects, such as specific higher level maths subjects, if this was not a prerequisite for course entry.

Some member schools have indicated critical elements have been removed in from physics and chemistry.

The AISSA considers that Universities have a responsibility to explicitly define the core subjects and the content of subjects and standards which are pre-requisites for particular courses.

3.4.3. Employment and Training Pathways

VET in Schools has become a key pathway into employment and further training across the three school sectors. Approximately 4,000 students attending Independent schools in South Australia participate in accredited VET in Schools programs per year. All VET in Schools Programs are based upon industry agreed qualifications. VET is able to contribute to the SACE in three ways:

- VET can be embedded in subjects
- VET can be recognised as contributing to SACE in its own right
- VET can be organised into particular subjects called SSABSA-VET subjects.

The discussion about 'academic standards' and forms of assessment and reporting must include these now accepted pathways.

3.4.4. Contribution to Social Capital-Community Building

South Australian Independent schools have a long-established history of promoting active citizenship and community service as part of their school ethos. Independent schools undertake a range of activities which promote citizenship including pastoral care programs, volunteer work in community organisations, participation in a variety of national and international youth forums and financial and active support for charitable organisations.

In addition, a number of Independent schools also have Student Representative Councils or groups which offer students opportunities to engage in democratic processes.

The AISSA has recently produced a publication which focuses on the contributions that Independent schools make to local and international communities and the long term effects of that contribution on the students involved.

The National Goals for Schooling recognise the importance of the social goals of school education. Policy debate about 'academic standards' and national consistency must be inclusive of the role of schools in building the social and citizenship skills of young people.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Current discussions about 'academic standards' are characterised by a complicated debate and a lack of common understanding of their application. While there continue to be political declarations that standards have 'dropped' there is a lack of research based evidence to support these claims. Indeed, Australia's participation in international testing would seem to counter these claims.

The AISSA considers that the policy debate around education standards should be focussed on how Australia can implement a policy environment in which there is a focus on schooling for the future, innovation and continual striving for excellence, regardless of the pathways selected by students. Debates should be marked by collaboration and cooperation among the key stakeholders, including further education institutions and employer groups and recognise that schools must meet the needs of a diverse range of students.

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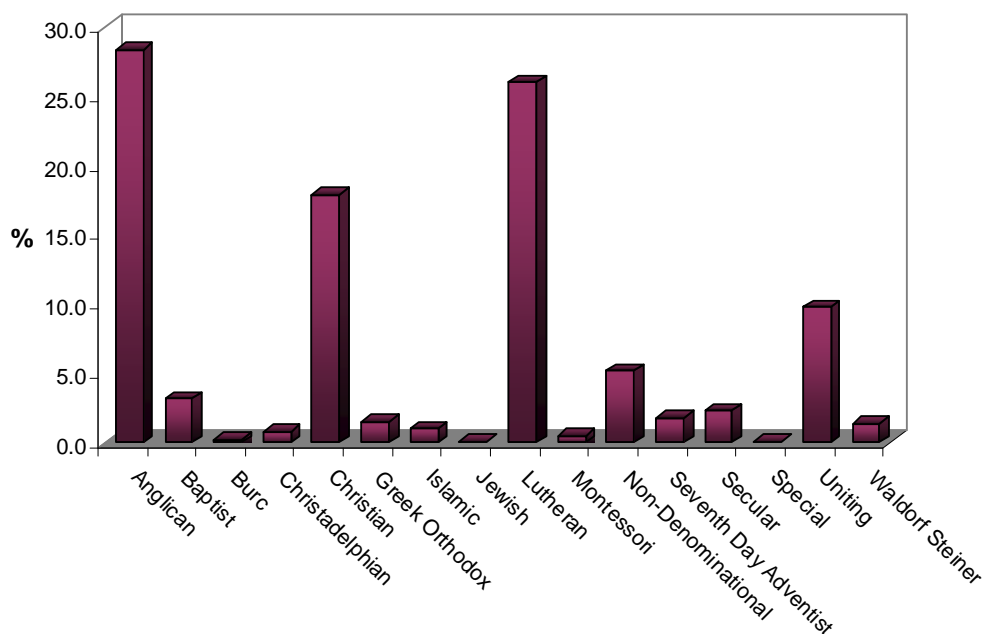
APPENDIX 1

The Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA) represents the interests of 97 (100% membership) South Australian Independent schools with an enrolment in excess of 40,000.

Diversity

South Australian Independent schools educate students within a curriculum underpinned by a diverse range of religious affiliations (Anglican, Baptist, Christian, Christadelphian, Greek Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish, Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist, Uniting) and educational philosophies (Montessori, Waldorf Steiner). The sector also includes a number of secular schools and a special school which educates students with severe intellectual disabilities.

Percentages of South Australian Independent school students by schools' religious affiliation and educational philosophy 2007
(Source: February Census, Non-Government Schools Secretariat 2007)

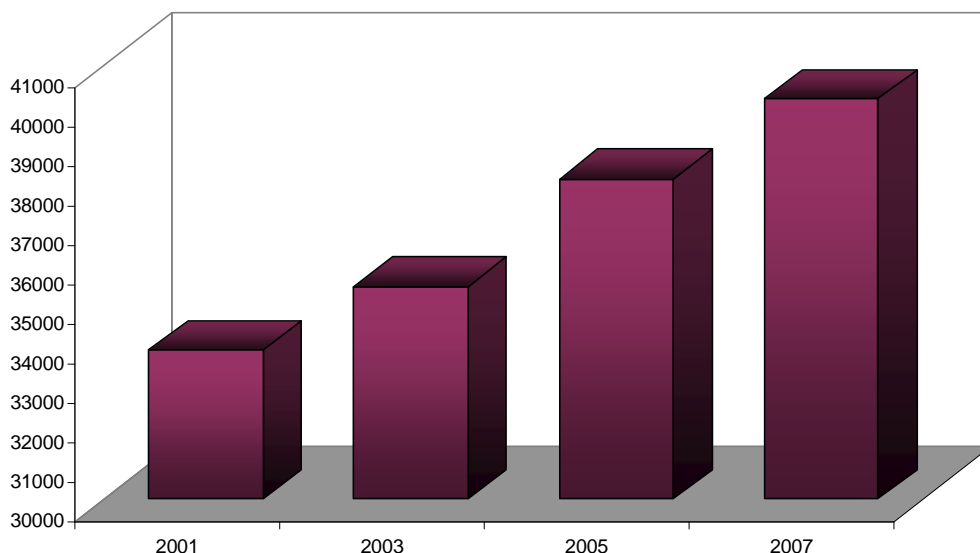


A number of Independent schools are also members of a system, for example, the Lutheran Schools Association and Adventist Schools Australia.

Enrolment

Enrolments within Independent schools have significantly increased since 1994. This growth has been most prominent in schools located in the outer suburbs and regional centres across South Australia.

South Australian Independent School Enrolments 2001-2007
(Source: February Census of Non-Government Schools 2001-2007)

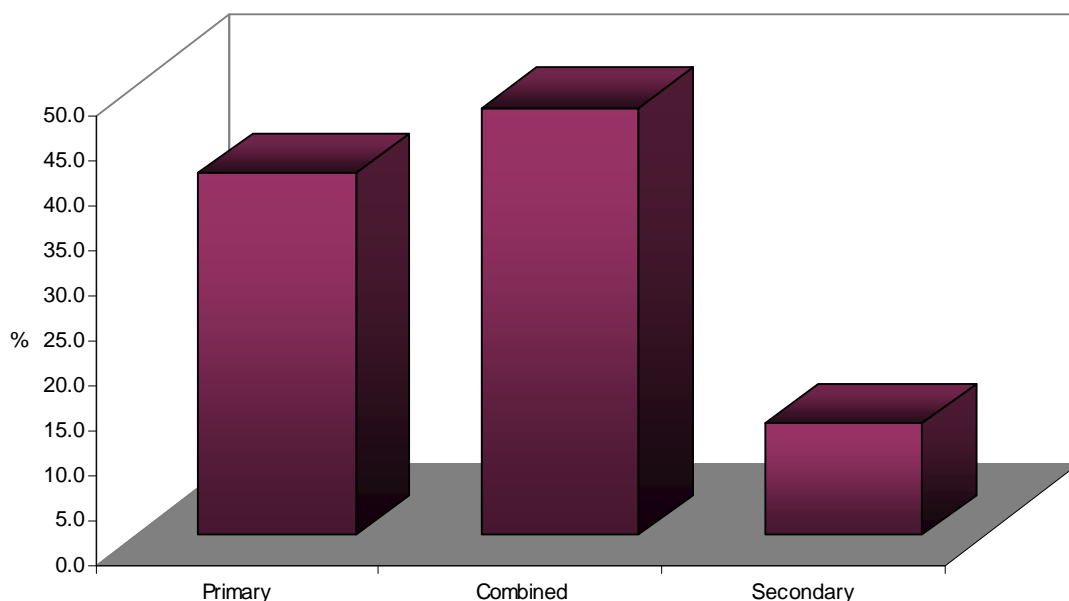


School Type

The majority of Independent schools are primary and combined schools.

Percentages of South Australian Independent Primary, Secondary and Combined Schools 2007

(Source: February Census, Non-Government Schools Secretariat 2007)



Students with Special Needs

There are 1224 students with disabilities, 6817 students with learning difficulties, 408 Indigenous students and 2152 students from a language background other than English.

Income

The ABS 2001 Census of Population and Housing identified the following key points:

- 16.8% of students in the Independent school sector are from families with an annual income of less than \$32,000
- Over one-third of Independent school students are from families with an annual income of less than \$52,000
- 25.5% of students from family income ranges of over \$78,000 are in Independent schools. The remaining 74.5% are distributed between the Government (22,673) and Catholic (10,358) sectors.

Funding

Parents are a major source of funding for SA Independent schools. According to the latest data parents (and the wider school community) contribute, on average, approximately 50% of their SA Independent school's income (ANR 2005).

APPENDIX 2

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL: DESTINATIONS FROM SACE 2002/2003 (three selected schools)

University

- Bachelor of Interior Architecture. Working part-time Checkout Operator for Woolworths.
- Bachelor of Computer Engineering.
- Bachelor of Arts.
- Bachelor of Arts and hoping to do Law in 2004.
- Bachelor of Nursing.
- Bachelor of Psychology.
- Bachelor of Engineering (Electrical & Mechatronics).
- Bachelor of Engineering (Electrical & Mechatronic).
- Bachelor of Business Management & Commercial Law.
- Bachelor of Engineering (Computer Systems).
- Bachelor of Medicine. (Year 13)
- Bachelor of Business Management with a major in Employee Relations and has a Traineeship with SA Water.
- Bachelor of Urban & Regional Planning.
- Bachelor of Chemical Engineering.
- Bachelor of Education (Secondary Science).
- Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary/Primary).
- Bachelor of Engineering (Mechanical & Manufacturing).
- Bachelor of Wine Marketing.
- Bachelor of Psychology in Edinburgh.
- Bachelor of Engineering (Mechatronic).
- Bachelor of Social Sciences. Hopes to transfer to Law in 2004.
- Bachelor of Arts (Asian Studies). Will be studying Japanese and Chinese. Also working at Bunnings on a casual basis.
- Bachelor of Business (Administration Management).
- Bachelor of Medical Radiation.
- Bachelor of Engineering (Telecommunications).
- Bachelor of Computer Science.
- Bachelor of Industrial Design.
- Bachelor of Arts in Communication & Television Production and teaching ballet.
- Bachelor of Arts.
- Bachelor of International Studies with a Diploma of Languages in German.
- Bachelor of Visual Arts. Working at McDonald's.
- Bachelor of Laws.
- Bachelor of Midwifery.
- Bachelor of Construction Management & Economics. Working in the electrical field for a heating business.
- Bachelor of Applied Science (Human Movement).
- Bachelor of Social Sciences.
- Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting). Working with an Accountant.
- Bachelor of Laboratory Medicine. Working at a cafe.
- Bachelor of Commerce.

- Bachelor of Industrial Design.
- Bachelor of Arts (Communication & Media Management).
- Bachelor of Behavioural Science.
- Bachelor of Science.
- Bachelor of Applied Science (Occupational Therapy).
- Bachelor of Business (Commercial Law).
- Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services).
- Bachelor of Arts. Working for a baker.
- Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary/Primary). Working in Aged Care and After School Care.
- Bachelor of Computer Science & Information Technology.
- Bachelor of Arts/working as a Cricket Umpire for SACA.
- Bachelor of Business & Bachelor of Laws. Working for KFC. Has moved to Darwin and is enjoying the new lifestyle
- Bachelor of Visual Arts. Working in a Newsagency.

TAFE/ Other Study Pathways

- Diploma of Business.
- Certificate IV in Professional Multimedia. Plans on doing a Diploma in 3D Animation in Sydney or Brisbane in 2004 or 2005.
- Certificate III in Aged Care.
- Studying Medical Reception at the Adelaide Legal and Commercial College
- Diploma in Applied Science (Animal Technology).
- Studying pre vocational course in Carpentry.
- Diploma in Electronics & Information Technology (Computer Systems Engineering). Looking for part-time or casual employment.
- Certificate III – Justice Studies.
- Certificate III in Hospitality. Working part-time for Fasta Pasta.
- Certificate III in Hospitality. Working at Fasta Pasta.
- Certificate III Information Technology (Network Administration).
- Advanced Diploma in Hospitality. Working for a SANFL Football Club.
- Certificate IV in Community Service. Working at Target and The Look.
- Multimedia at SAE College. Casual employee at a Hotel. Runs own mobile disco business and plays soccer for the Modbury Jets first team.
- Diploma in Hospitality.
- Studying French/Psychology and Drama at Marden.
- Studying Year 13 at University.
- Diploma in Children's Services.
- Diploma of Business & Information Technology.
- Studying a Justice Course at TAFE.
- Year 12 Construction Technology/working at IGA.
- Diploma in Multimedia – 3D Animation and Moved interstate to complete a Degree in 3D Animation in Digital Film.
- Advanced Diploma in Business Management & Hospitality.
- Studying at Tabor College. In 2005 will begin Bachelor of Recreation Planning & Management/is working at Zest Health Clubs.
- Diploma in Information Technology (Software Development)
- Diploma in Event Management. Working as a waitress at a Hotel.

Employment

- Working for a company and hopes to be given an Apprenticeship with them.
- Working at a Child Care Centre. On three months probation and then hopes to start a Traineeship in Child Care. At that time will be working four days at the centre and studying one day a week at TAFE.
- Working to save money before leaving for Camp America.
- Working at Woolworths and saving hard for a trip to England.
- Working and saving for a trip to England and USA.
- Working part-time.
- Diploma of Community Services (Childrens Services).
- Studying at Marden.
- Commercial Photography.
- Working as a Trainee Internet Support worker. Will continue with IT training.
- Working for a Finance Broker with Internet Loans. Still working at Hoyts and busy with band commitments.
- Working for the Bloodbank. Hopes to join the Police Force.
- Working in sales with a Newsagency.
- Working as a Receptionist for a Chiropractic clinic.
- Working full-time as a Waitress at a café.
- Working at Wendy's and saving to go overseas.
- Working at McDonald's and looking for full-time employment.
- Working in the toolmaking trade and hopes to study Refrigeration mid-year.
- Working in the airconditioning industry.
- Touring as a Backup Vocalist.
- Working as a Drum Teacher.
- Pharmacy Technician.
- Working full-time in café.
- Working for BigW/applying for TAFE mid-year.
- Working in the airconditioning industry.
- Working as a Clerk for Air Comfort Services.
- Working for an Accountant/Tax Consultant firm as a Receptionist/Office Assistant.
- Working part-time at Bi-Lo and looking for full-time work.
- Looking for full-time work. Working part-time at Foodland.

Apprenticeships/ Traineeships

- Apprenticeship with Baker's Delight.
- Apprenticeship in Diesel Mechanics.
- Engineering Traineeship with employer.
- Working as an Apple Picker near Hobart and trying to have a good look around Tasmania.
- Working at McDonald's. Won Crew of the Quarter recently.
- Communications Apprentice with MBA Communications. Plays B major darts and played first play-offs for the Under 18s State Team finishing in the top 8.

- Apprentice Carpenter with the Housing Industry Association. Before starting this Apprenticeship, student completed a 6 month Prevocational course in Carpentry.
- Apprentice Carpenter.
- Certificate II in Retail/has a Traineeship with a Bakery. In 2005 will study an Advanced Diploma in Hospitality & Management.

Other

- Waiting to hear from RAAF regarding acceptance.
- Touring in the UK, hopes to commence a Bachelor of Education at Tabor College.
- Looking for work.
- Deferred Masters of Psychology Programme. Will be leaving for the USA at the end of May, 2003 to assist at a Christian Camp.
- Attending another High School this year.
- Deferring Bachelor of Chemical Engineering for 12 months.
- Studying Children's Ministry at Hillsong (Sydney).
- Studying Youth Ministry at Hillsong (Sydney).
- May study Bachelor of Nursing in April. Working as Assistant Manager for Red Rooster. Sitting an aptitude test for the Police Force.
- Deferring Bachelor of Applied Science for 12 months whilst she studies Food Technology Certificate IV/working at Foodland.
- Unsure whether studying Bachelor of Computer & Information Science/Bachelor of Arts (Commercial Law) or Bachelor of Urban & Regional Planning.
- Deferring Bachelor of Medicine for 12 months. Working at Subway.
- Deferred Bachelor of Industrial Design. Working.
- Overseas.
- Deferred Bachelor of Applied Science (Human Movement). Working for Video Ezy. Hopes to travel later in the year.