

Australian Certificate of



Education: Exploring a way forward



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Geoff Masters explains why Australia needs greater national consistency in senior school certificates and how an Australian Certificate of Education would likely benefit all Australian students.

Q. Your Year 12 son tells you he received a final mark of 19 for English.

How should you respond?

A. It all depends on where you live.

In New South Wales, marks are reported out of 100, making 19 a very low score.

In Victoria, the maximum score is 50, making 19 a slightly better result.

But in South Australia, where marks are reported out of 20, a score of 19 is worth celebrating.

Most other states do not report marks at all, and use A to E grades or achievement levels such as 'sound' and 'commendable'.

Confused? Many employers say they are. It's like changing currency every time you cross a border. Except it's worse: it's easy to convert Euros to Pounds or Dollars to Yen, but there is no obvious way of comparing Year 12 results across state boundaries. It is not clear whether a score of 80/100 in Accounting in NSW represents a higher or lower level of accounting knowledge and skill than a score of 40/50 in Victoria or how either of these compares to an 'exceptional' result in Tasmania or 'very high' achievement in Queensland.

With a population less than some American states, Australia now has ten different senior secondary certificates. Each of the six states and two territories provides a senior secondary qualification and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning is available

Current Australian senior school certificates:

ACT	ACT Year 12 Certificate
NSW	Higher School Certificate
NT	Northern Territory Certificate of Education ¹
QLD	Senior Certificate ²
SA	The South Australian Certificate of Education
TAS	Tasmanian Certificate of Education
VIC	Victorian Certificate of Education Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
WA	Western Australian Certificate of Education



¹ based on procedures of the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia

² to be replaced by the Queensland Certificate of Education in 2008

for students planning to undertake apprenticeships, study at TAFE or enter employment directly from school. A tenth certificate, the International Baccalaureate Diploma, is offered in a number of schools. (See table above.)

Most state/territory certificates have evolved over many years, usually from a set of final-year subject examinations conducted for university entrance. Current arrangements are the result of locally negotiated 'settlements' and reflect different state/territory histories, educational philosophies, local schools of thought, and the influence of particular individuals and committees in each jurisdiction.

In all this variety, the states and territories are staunch defenders of their own systems. Some appear to consider their Year 12 arrangements superior to those of the rest of the country, which are variously described as lacking in academic rigour, unresponsive to local and student needs, too rigid and bureaucratic, based on narrow and limited forms of assessment, and captured by educational fads. It seems that a number of states would support a national approach if it meant others adopting their arrangements. In reality, there is a very limited basis for accepting any claim to superiority.

Contrast this with what is happening in Europe where the states of the European Union are collaborating to enhance the consistency and comparability of their educational qualifications. The aim is to increase the international competitiveness of European education, to promote mutual recognition of qualifications across nation

states and to facilitate student mobility. Under the so-called Bologna Process, considerable progress has been made towards the development of more consistent higher education arrangements and qualifications.

In 2005 the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) commissioned ACER to investigate and report on models and implementation arrangements for an Australian Certificate of Education. The report was released in May 2006.

The report, *Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring a Way Forward*, proposes the introduction of an ACE based on national standards for what is taught in Years 11 and 12 and for how well students should be expected to learn what is taught. These standards are captured in three key recommendations:

- The first recommendation calls for national agreement on what should be taught. Regardless of where they live in Australia, students should be able to engage with school subjects in similar depth and with similar academic rigour. In individual subjects (such as Economics, Biology and Advanced Mathematics) the identification of a core of essential knowledge, skills, ideas and principles was recommended.

The proposal is not that the entire curriculum for a subject should be the same across the country. Schools must be able to respond to local needs and circumstances and there is value in a degree of diversity in what and how students are taught and in opportunities for experimentation and innovation.

But in most senior school subjects, students should have guaranteed access to an agreed core of essential content.

- The second recommendation calls for students throughout Australia to be assessed against the same standards. Currently it is not possible to compare achievements in a subject such as Accounting from one jurisdiction to another. There is no way of knowing whether a 'Band 6' performance in NSW represents a lower or higher level of achievement than a 'Very High Achievement' in Queensland, or a study score of 40/50 in Victoria.

The report stopped short of recommending the introduction of national Year 12 examinations. If results in a subject are reported in terms of the same set of achievement standards, then a level of comparability across jurisdictions will follow. Of course, to the extent that states and territories share examination and other assessment materials in a subject, this level of comparability will be improved.

- The third recommendation is that, to be awarded the ACE, students should be required to demonstrate acceptable levels of a few key capabilities: the ability to write in English; to read with understanding; to apply mathematical concepts to everyday problems; and to use computer technology. This recommendation was made because of claims that some students being awarded senior certificates have only limited mastery of these skills and because of research evidence that failure to master

How Year 12 subject results are reported:

ACT	a grade	(E, D, C, B, A); school assigned marks (mean 70; S.D. 12) not reported on certificate
NSW	a mark out of 100, placing the student's result in one of six 'bands'	(Band 1, Band 2, Band 3, Band 4, Band 5, 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

Source: ACER (An Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring A Way Forward)

these basics (especially reading and writing) is correlated with poorer employment, health and social outcomes.

Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers of education recently decided to establish a working party to examine the feasibility of developing a common scale for reporting all senior secondary subject results. This proposal, led by Victoria, is a welcome development if it leads to a common language for reporting Year 12 results.

But a common language (such as A to E grades) is only a first step. The bigger challenge – and one that the ministers appear to have taken up – is to ensure that it is just as difficult to achieve an 'A' in, say, advanced mathematics in NSW as it is to achieve an 'A' in WA. This level of consistency requires agreement on how much knowledge, understanding and skill students need to have, and the quality or depth of understanding they need to demonstrate, to receive an 'A' in each state and territory.

And this highlights the next difficulty. Money is money, whether measured in Dollars, Euros or Yen. But can Chemistry results be compared meaningfully from one state to another? The answer to this question depends on how similar Chemistry curricula are across Australia. To the extent that Year 12 curricula vary from one state to another, any attempt to introduce a common reporting language and to compare grades or marks across the country is likely to be of limited value.

For students wishing to enter university, an attempt is made to provide nationally

comparable tertiary entrance ranks (ENTER scores). But the process used to do this makes the assumption that students in each state/territory have the same overall distribution of achievement: a necessary but dubious assumption in the light of other evidence about interstate differences. Some university selection officers now believe that students from some states are less well prepared than their ENTER scores suggest.

Surprisingly, very few attempts have been made to investigate what students are taught in the final years of school in Australia. Some authorities are able to develop and maintain detailed syllabuses and annual examinations in dozens of subjects; others have no option but to leave curriculum development and student assessment in the hands of schools.

At present, there is considerable duplication of effort across Australia. For a subject such as Physics, seven authorities develop seven different syllabuses/curriculum frameworks and their associated examinations/assessment procedures for essentially the same group of (tertiary bound) students. In community language subjects with small candidatures, jurisdictions already collaborate to make more efficient use of scarce resources, raising the question of whether a similar sharing of effort and materials might be possible in a subject such as Physics.

Earlier this year, the Australian Government initiated an ACER investigation into what is being taught in senior school English, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Australian History courses. This investigation will tell us whether curricula in these subjects are sufficiently similar to permit the kind of consistency in reporting that the

ministers are seeking. It also will provide a basis for thinking about what should be taught, and especially what core content all students taking a subject should have an opportunity to learn. On this question there's bound to be vigorous debate, as there should be in relation to curriculum matters.

Throughout Australia, common challenges are being addressed in the senior secondary school. These include meeting the needs of the more diverse group of students now participating in this phase of schooling; providing a broader range of curriculum offerings; facilitating pathways between school, training, higher education and work; and ensuring that all young people have the skills required for life and work beyond school. Some of these challenges may benefit from increased national collaboration.

Is there a case for an ACE? The recent investigation highlighted the extent of interstate differences, inconsistencies and duplication in senior secondary arrangements. These differences do not reflect differences in student needs. Although any move towards an Australian Certificate of Education must recognise and build on to the strengths of existing state/territory arrangements and must enable experimentation and innovation to meet local needs, greater national consistency in expectations and standards, improved comparability, and reduced duplication are likely to benefit all Australian students. ■

The report is available at www.dest.gov.au/ace.