



**AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION**

**AEU RESPONSE TO THE REPORT  
*AUSTRALIAN CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION*  
– *EXPLORING A WAY FORWARD***

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## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 The Australian Education Union is an industrial and professional organisation representing approximately 165,000 members nationally. Membership of the AEU includes teachers and other educators working in TAFE, public schools and early childhood centres.
- 1.2 The AEU notes that the Questionnaire prepared by DEST is intended primarily for individuals. The AEU has therefore chosen to respond in submission format rather than use the Questionnaire.
- 1.3 This submission will first make some general comments regarding its attitude towards national consistency and conformity and an Australian Certificate of Education. These are general comments which do not necessarily refer to suggestions within the Report itself. The AEU accepts that the report does not call for national conformity, rather than consistency. It would be opposed to any such moves.
- 1.4 Each of the recommendations will then be responded to.

## **2 General comments**

- 2.1 The AEU accepts that there may be some logic in evolving towards greater consistency and comparability of state and territory leaving certificates over time.
- 2.2 The AEU does not favour a single national curriculum which seeks uniformity at the expense of a diversity of approaches. However, the AEU would support a steady and considered evolution towards a national framework for more consistent senior secondary curricula and credentials provided it supports the higher quality, more democratic curricula and credentials existing or being developed in some states and territories.
- 2.3 One of the great strengths and values of Australian society has been its respect for diversity and its ability to build community on individual differences. We do not support a single education system which demands regimentation and conformity and is antithetic to that basic Australian value.
- 2.4 The AEU also believes that that the need for a national leaving certificate (ACE) is being greatly exaggerated. The current imperative towards national standardisation is largely a construct of the Federal Minister and Government and their desire to centralise and control what is constitutionally the responsibility of the states and territories.
- 2.5 The current ENTER arrangements appear to satisfactorily meet the needs of Universities, and no real evidence has been produced to substantiate the need for greater uniformity in other areas.

- 2.6 Whilst minimising the disruption for students changing jurisdictions is a valid consideration, the reality is that short of massive uniformity both within and across systems, moving schools even within a single jurisdiction as the leaving certificate approaches is something which most parents and students will wisely want to avoid.
- 2.7 The current different leaving certificates in the states and territories reflect different philosophies which have evolved through different histories and approaches. Australian education as a whole has benefited from this diversity of approaches and the opportunity for states and territories to learn from each other whilst not being bound by uniformity.
- 2.8 Any pressure towards national conformity would create conflicts between the differences and require judgements about the most preferable which are unnecessary and undesirable. It would also stifle innovation. The consequences would be greater for schools and students in some jurisdictions than others, depending on the nature of the favoured option.
- 2.9 It is therefore really important that consistency be understood in terms of the common content that is identified being general concepts not specific content. The more specific the content the less room for movement schools have to make the learning experiences suit the students' context. In states where Year 12 assessment is external, the syllabuses are and need to be specific. It would be impossible, then, for states which have different assessment regimes to share syllabuses.
- 2.10 All states and territories have adopted or are adopting approaches to education which recognise the need to respect and respond to individual learning styles, needs, cultural and social contexts and treat students as far as possible as unique individuals. A reversal to a rigid national curriculum or syllabus would be extremely dysfunctional.
- 2.11 Another sudden change would create further heavy workloads and instability. Most state and territory systems have experienced considerable change in recent years and further major upheaval is highly undesirable.
- 2.12 The AEU would not support a lowest common denominator approach, and rejects approaches based on Standardised Achievement Tests (SAT). SAT tests have been shown to be culturally biased and to disadvantage students from lower SES backgrounds. They are open to abuse by being used for inappropriate comparisons between schools, measuring the nature of student intake rather than the genuine work of the schools.
- 2.13 The AEU believes there is a need for widespread consultation urges before decisions are made and urges State and Territory Ministers to resist calls which seek to rush to greater uniformity, to consider all relevant issues, and to consult widely with the education community.
- 2.14 The AEU rejects any attempts to suggest in any way that the current differences are a sign of inadequate standards in any jurisdiction, or that consistency and comparability is a pre-condition for ensuring adequate standards.

## Response to Specific Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

*That curriculum essentials be identified—at least in some nominated mathematics, English, science and social science/humanities subjects—to ensure that all Australian students have opportunities to engage with the fundamental knowledge, principles and ideas that make up these disciplines. Essential elements of subject curricula should be identified by national subject panels comprising subject matter and assessment experts and members of the relevant professional subject associations.*

The AEU has no objection in principle to the ideas in this Recommendation. Support for specific proposals would, however, be dependent upon the resolution of a number of caveats, including the composition and control of the standards body (see below) and thus consideration of:

- The composition of the subject panels, particularly the extent to which they included practicing teachers and reflected judgments based on actual classroom experience.
- The extent to which it avoids the danger of it becoming a reductionist exercise, providing lowest common denominator curriculum and supporting poor educational practices.
- Ensuring that it reflects state and territory input and is based on aligning what already exists, not imposing a “Federal” standard based upon some flawed concept.
- Whether it overcomes the difficulty of implementation in a way that does not force some to greater compliance difficulties than others.
- The extent to which it maintains and supports a broad and balanced curriculum rather than being politically manipulated, as has already happened in regard to Australian history being selected as an early project for ACER investigation.
- The consultative mechanisms with teachers and involvement of teachers and practitioners in the deliberations at all levels.

### Recommendation 2

*That achievement standards be developed—at least in some nominated English, mathematics, science and social science/humanities subjects—to ensure that students’ results in these subjects can be compared throughout Australia. Achievement standards should be benchmarked internationally and could take the form of A to E grades in a subject.*

Again, the AEU is not opposed in principle, but would:

- Have considerable concerns about the implementation processes.
- Not be opposed to the notion of a common scale nationally (A-E or equivalent) despite other connotations, but believes the means of achieving it could be very problematic.
- Be concerned at the potential to create a large bureaucracy which would be more likely to impose standardisation and restrict content, teaching and assessment methods.
- Want to see the extent of teacher involvement.
- Again, underline that the composition and method of operation of the standards body would be key to the final perspective.

### **Recommendation 3**

*That, as part of the Australian Certificate of Education, all students undertake a national Key Capabilities Assessment part way through Year 12 of a number of key skills.*

The AEU is strongly opposed to this recommendation because:

- This is essentially a basic skills test which would have the effect of placing an emphasis on the lower order learning tasks at the expense of the higher order concepts and skills which should be very especially important at the point where students are about to leave school.
- If there are to be generic elements it would be preferable for them to be based on higher order cross-curricular skills and concepts such as problem solving and critical thinking.
- There is concern that decisions about key capabilities will be politically motivated and reflect the views of particular interest groups such as employers and be imposed without consultation with practicing teachers to make them educationally valid.
- The selection of key capabilities will privilege some content rather than ensure a balanced curriculum. This is already evident in the report which identifies “engineering, technology, science, economics and mathematics “as the disciplines important to “Australia’s future economic prosperity””. (p. 2)
- It is difficult to see how such assessment can avoid the danger of it becoming an “alternative” to the leaving certificate. Schools could put different emphases on the extent to which they teach to these tests rather than the normal leaving examinations, and employers and others using the outcomes may select the results in these tests rather than the leaving certificates.

The result could become an alternative curriculum based on these low level skills and reactionary perceptions of what should be taught and learned.

- There are already a number of existing tests in a number of jurisdictions which are integrated into the broader curriculum and used for moderation. Without aligning all curricula it is difficult to envisage how these could be replaced by a national Standardised test.
- Year 12 is recognized as a crowded and high pressure year for students. Adding to this is totally undesirable.