

# Reporting on Literacy and Numeracy attainment in Victorian senior secondary qualifications - Consultation paper

## Introduction

The Victorian Minister for Education, the Hon James Merlino MP, wrote to the Chair of the Board of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), Mr Chris Wardlaw on 26 February 2018. He asked the VCAA to investigate whether there should be a more explicit requirement for students to meet minimum standards of literacy and numeracy in order to be awarded the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). He also requested that the VCAA consult widely with experts in the field, including teachers, students, and educators, and with the broader community, including employers, industry, unions, tertiary education providers and the welfare sector.

This paper provides the focus for that consultation and presents background information related to the reporting of literacy and numeracy attainment as part of senior secondary qualification. Later papers may include supplementary information based on initial feedback and additional research.

Any member of the education sector (including students, teachers, school leaders and principals) and others in the wider community (who are interested in or may use the information about senior secondary attainment by students) is invited to respond to this paper. There is no set format for responses and no requirement to address all of the consultation questions listed at the end of the paper. Responses can be provided on behalf of individuals or groups, institutions, education providers and organisations.

Responses can be emailed to [VCAA.Consultation@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:VCAA.Consultation@edumail.vic.gov.au), posted to *Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Level 7, 2 Lonsdale Street, East Melbourne, VIC, 3002*, or submitted using the online form at [www.engage.vic.gov.au](http://www.engage.vic.gov.au).

Responses must be received **no later than Friday 18 May 2018**.

## Issue definition

The key issues to be addressed through this consultation are:

- a) should literacy and/or numeracy attainment levels of all Victorian senior secondary students be reported as part of senior secondary qualifications; and
- b) should attainment of a minimum level of literacy and/or numeracy be a requirement for the awarding of a senior secondary qualification?

These issues are important because:

- all Victorian learners who complete secondary schooling are expected to attain at least adequate levels of literacy and numeracy proficiency, yet perceptions can arise that this goal is not universally being realised; and
- analysis of and commentary about the levels of senior secondary student literacy and numeracy skills are not currently based on common and explicit literacy and numeracy measures.

It is also important because completion of secondary schooling has been closely associated with improved student outcomes. Caution therefore needs to be exercised in considering the introduction of any measure that may be perceived or experienced as a further barrier to completion. Evidence from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) confirms the benefits of Year 12 participation and completion for individual students in terms of future labour market outcomes. International evidence, such as that cited in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s 2012 *Equity and Quality in Education* report, is consistent with the LSAY findings, confirms the value to individuals, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, and to societies at large, of policies that foster retention.

The central consideration therefore must be to determine whether new forms of reporting literacy and numeracy attainment levels as part of senior secondary qualification will improve outcomes for Victorian students.

One approach would be to make no change to current conditions of senior secondary qualifications as they relate to the demonstration of an explicit standardised measure of literacy and numeracy attainment. The key arguments in support of this include the following:

- there is sufficient information and associated community confidence that can already be derived from student results achieved through current assessment processes, including the General Achievement Test (GAT) as part of the VCE;
- there is no necessary correlation between increased assessment and reporting and improved outcomes; and
- the introduction of any new literacy and numeracy assessment and reporting may act as a strong disincentive for some young people to complete a senior secondary qualification.

An alternative approach would be to introduce a form of assessment and/or reporting of literacy and numeracy attainment. Were this to be considered beneficial, the following questions would need to be considered:

- can the assessment and reporting be derived from existing (or modified versions of existing) curriculum and assessment constructs?
- should reaching a minimum level of literacy and/or numeracy be a requirement of senior secondary graduation?
- is it cost effective to implement and sustain?
- is it able to be administered efficiently?
- is it a minimal additional assessment burden for schools and students?
- to what extent might the additional information generated from reporting literacy and numeracy attainment be used outside the process of certification, and by whom?
- what unintended consequences might emerge?

## Background

The VCE has a very strong reputation as a senior secondary qualification based on high and robust standards. VCE studies are regularly benchmarked against international equivalents and the VCE is currently offered in nine international locations and accepted as a tertiary entrance qualification widely across the world.

The VCAL is an alternative senior secondary qualification focused on applied learning. VCAL typically provides a direct pathway to training or employment and is widely regarded as an important alternative to the VCE that enables a significant number of young people to complete senior secondary education.

Nevertheless, employer groups and some in the broader community have called for a greater focus on ensuring that students have the necessary literacy and numeracy skills at the conclusion of their secondary schooling to enable full and successful participation in society and the economy.

There is a reasonable community expectation that at the conclusion of thirteen years of schooling students will have completed their secondary education and enter the workforce, further education or training with adequate levels of literacy and numeracy, amongst other skills and attributes.

Expectations about these foundational skills are relevant for all Victorian learners aged 15 through 19 in both the school and vocational education sector. The centrality of literacy and numeracy skills to student pathways and future learning and employment means that any measurement of these skills should be considered in the full range of educational pathways available to this cohort and not confined to particular certificates or qualifications.

For the purpose of this specific inquiry, however, the focus is limited to the VCE and VCAL.

There is a longstanding assumption that literacy and numeracy skills are key components of the senior secondary curriculum in Victoria: English group subjects remain a compulsory requirement of the VCE; close to 95% of VCE students undertake at least one unit of Mathematics and the VCAL requires students to complete compulsory literacy and numeracy units.

However, direct measurement and explicit reporting of literacy and numeracy attainment is not presently a feature of senior secondary certification in Victoria.

On completion of both the VCE and VCAL, students presently receive a senior secondary certificate that is tied to satisfactory completion of certificate units. The satisfactory completion of units requires the demonstration and utilization of an adequate level of literacy and, where relevant, numeracy. The description of this level is implied rather than explicit.

For the majority of students participating in senior secondary schooling, their most recent standardised assessment and reporting of literacy and numeracy attainment is NAPLAN in Year 9, three and a half years prior to certification.

Explicitly reported information about literacy and numeracy attainment may be an important addition to the information provided in senior secondary school qualifications.

## Context

Various recent international, national and state policy and program initiatives have focused attention on levels of literacy and numeracy attainment in both the school-aged and adult population.

These include the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the recently introduced Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education Students and NAPLAN assessment data.

On 19 July 2016 the NSW Minister for Education announced reforms to the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC). One of the reforms means that from 2020 NSW students will need to demonstrate that they have met a minimum standard in both literacy and numeracy to receive the HSC.

Other Australian jurisdictions, including Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia also stipulate minimum requirements for senior secondary student literacy and numeracy attainment. The Commonwealth Government has signaled an interest in reporting literacy and numeracy attainment more directly within senior secondary certificates.

Some jurisdictions, including Western Australia and Ontario, and now New South Wales, have developed bespoke testing programs for students to demonstrate minimum levels of literacy or numeracy skills for certification. The collection of evidence via these testing programs commences at Year 10 level, though pre-qualification in Western Australia is based on evidence produced in Year 9 NAPLAN. In Ontario, if students do not meet the minimum literacy benchmark, they become eligible to enrol in a targeted literacy course which, if passed, is given equivalent status to passing the test.

Similar to these testing programs, but as part of teacher education accreditation requirements, pre-service teachers now need to pass a literacy and numeracy test recently commissioned by the Commonwealth Government and developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The NSW, WA and pre-service teacher tests described above are each mapped to the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF). The ACSF is a tool which assists practitioners of specialist and non-specialist English language, literacy and numeracy, to describe an individual's performance in the five core skills of learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy. It provides a consistent national approach to identifying and developing the core skills in three diverse contexts; personal and community; workplace and employment; and education and training (more information is available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-core-skills-framework>). Where the ACSF has been used to set a standard for literacy and numeracy attainment, ACSF Level 3 has commonly been set as the minimum standard to be achieved by senior secondary students.

In most jurisdictions, a core English subject, being a compulsory requirement for certification, plays an important role as a proxy for literacy capabilities. In those jurisdictions where English or a related subject is compulsory, minimum standards do not always apply, and it can be the case that successful completion or participation is the sole requirement, as opposed to the demonstration of a minimum standard.

In some jurisdictions, like Queensland and South Australia, a range of proxies is used for each of literacy and numeracy. In Queensland these proxies include Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificates, generic skills test results, and results in a diverse range of senior secondary subjects. Students need to have met the specified standard for at least one proxy for each of literacy and numeracy to qualify for the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE). These proxies can emphasise different aspects of literacy and numeracy with different levels of demand.

In summary, the approaches that have been implemented in other jurisdictions vary, and include:

- bespoke standardised assessment instruments developed specifically for the capability reporting purpose;
- results on existing standardised tests in the relevant domain or a related domain;
- the use of proxy measures based on compulsory and possibly elective subjects and qualifications;
- different numbers of permitted attempts at standardised instruments, on different schedules, with different consequences; and
- discrete hurdles for individual proxy measures (such as results in a given subject or on a given test) as opposed to final literacy and numeracy scores or achievement levels.

In considering broad options for reporting on senior secondary literacy and numeracy attainment, should this be determined to be beneficial, the approaches identified so far can be grouped into two distinctive approaches: the NSW and WA solutions include a purpose-built standardised assessment program referenced against specific aspects of the ACSF; the Queensland and South Australian solutions rely upon existing assessment results in subjects and qualifications that have been benchmarked against specific aspects of the ACSF.

While this distinction is useful in that it defines two broad (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) options that Victoria might consider, it is also conceivable that other approaches to defining, measuring and reporting on literacy and numeracy skills could be pursued.

It is worth noting that the various approaches that operate in other jurisdictions are characterised by considerably different resource implications, varying levels of technical robustness, raise different concerns for stakeholders and may each elicit distinct unintended consequences.

It is also important to note that each of these approaches treats *attainment* of a minimum standard as a mandatory component of qualification. Another approach is to *report* the standard attained as part of senior secondary qualifications but not require attainment of a minimum standard as a condition of qualification.

In Victoria, in each senior secondary reporting period for both VCE and VCAL, enrolled students receive a separate statement of results summarising their attainment, irrespective of whether they are eligible to complete a senior secondary certificate at that time. Separating the reporting of attainment from the requirements for certificate completion would therefore be consistent with current senior secondary certification policy and practice.

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The following section sets out a series of Consultation Questions as a guide to structuring written responses to the issues set out in this paper. Written responses may address all or only some of these questions, or may provide a written response to the issues raised in the Consultation Paper without reference to the Consultation Questions.

## Consultation questions

### 1. Assessment and measurement of literacy and numeracy attainment

- a. Should explicit assessment and measurement of either/both literacy and numeracy attainment levels be introduced in the VCE and VCAL, in addition to that which can currently be implied or derived?
- b. If such explicit assessment and measurement were to be introduced, which aspects of literacy (e.g. reading, writing, speaking, listening) and/or numeracy (e.g. calculations, communicating concepts) should be measured and reported on?
- c. Should literacy and numeracy attainment be assessed and measured by:
  - i. a new bespoke externally assessed standardised test mandatory for either/both VCE and VCAL students?
  - ii. an expanded version of the current GAT undertaken by either/both VCE and VCAL students?
  - iii. assessment within new mandatory subjects in the VCE focussed on functional literacy and numeracy?
  - iv. other means, including a combination of the above?
- d. Should students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate literacy and/or numeracy attainment, or should literacy and/or numeracy attainment be measured at a single, common point-in-time?

### 2. Reporting of literacy and numeracy attainment

- a. Should literacy and/or numeracy attainment be reported in terms of:
  - i. a minimum standard being met or not met
  - ii. a level on a scale
  - iii. a score on a scale
  - iv. other
- b. Should such literacy and/or numeracy attainment be benchmarked and reported against the ACSF or alternative scale?
- c. What, if any, special consideration and/or exemptions, if any, should apply to any explicit assessment and reporting of literacy and/or numeracy attainment levels as part of VCE and VCAL?
- d. If such explicit reporting were to be introduced, what do you think are the anticipated potential benefits and uses of this information? What are the risks associated with the generation and provision of this information?

### 3. Requirement of literacy and numeracy attainment

- a. If such explicit reporting were introduced, should the attainment of a minimum literacy and/or numeracy standard be a requirement of qualification, or should the standards of attainment demonstrated be reported as part of the certification?