

Australian Certificate of Education

OPTIONS PAPER

In May 2005 the Department of Education, Science and Training commissioned the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to investigate and report on models and implementation arrangements for an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE). In particular, ACER was asked to report on four options for the introduction of an ACE.

Current Arrangements

At present, state and territory curriculum, assessment and accreditation authorities offer senior secondary certificates of education under their own local titles (eg, *Queensland Senior Certificate*; *Tasmanian Certificate of Education*; *NSW Higher School Certificate*). Under the Australian Qualifications Framework, these certificates indicate completion of secondary education in each state/territory.

A priority in all states and territories in recent years has been to encourage young people to remain longer in education and training. With clear research evidence that early school leaving reinforces disadvantage, state/territory policies for the senior secondary years of schooling are increasingly reflecting a trend to encourage students to stay longer at school or to choose an alternative training pathway. Changes also are being made to senior secondary arrangements to facilitate students' transitions to further education, training and employment.

An objective of current senior secondary arrangements is to ensure that all students have access to, and an opportunity to experience success in, a curriculum that is relevant to their needs. Current reviews of certificates include options for the recognition of a broader range of achievement during the post-compulsory years, including achievement in alternative education pathways, the workplace and the community. There also has been an increasing emphasis in senior secondary schooling on the development of skills that will equip young people for the world of work, and on the provision of vocational education and training (VET).

Assessment data supporting senior certificates continue to provide the primary basis for the selection of applicants into most higher education courses in Australia.

Differences between existing senior secondary certificates include differences in:

- requirements for completion, eg
 - which subjects are compulsory
 - permitted subject choice/patterns
 - available pathways
 - number of required units of study
 - number of required hours of study for each subject/unit of study.

- processes for the award of the certificate and modes of assessment (eg, NSW has a 50% examination / 50% moderated school assessment system; Queensland and the ACT have systems of moderated school-based assessments).
- how achievements are reported (eg, grades, scores and/or achievement bands).
- how standards are specified in each jurisdiction and whether this information is included on the certificate.
- how VET is incorporated (separate subjects or integrated into general education subjects) and how VET achievements are explained on the certificate.

Background to the Current Project

The Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, raised the need for greater national consistency in schooling, including in relation to senior secondary certificates, at the meeting of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in July 2003. The Australian Government also indicated it would work towards a nationally consistent and high quality Australian Certificate of Education in its 2004 election policy document *Higher Standards and Values in Schools*.

In discussing the desirability of greater consistency and comparability across existing senior secondary certificates, the Minister has made reference to the difficulties faced by students and families who move between states and territories during the final years of school. A 2003 DEST survey concluded that 88 per cent of parents support 'national school qualifications', and 86 per cent support 'standard tertiary entrance requirements across Australia'. Employers also have promoted greater national consistency in education and training, and there is evidence that some employers find differences between current state certificates confusing.

Within the existing eight¹ senior certificates, there are differences in requirements for the completion of the certificate, syllabuses, assessment procedures, the ways in which results are reported, and terminology. Current differences across jurisdictions make the comparison of student results and achievement standards difficult. Different schemes for reporting student achievement (scores, grades, achievement bands) make comparisons especially difficult. At the present time it is not possible to compare results in particular subjects (eg, chemistry, Japanese) from one state/territory to another, although a statistical process is used to make tertiary entrance ranks directly comparable from one jurisdiction to another. And differences in the terminology used to describe subjects, courses, certificate requirements and achievement standards sometimes obscure what is common across jurisdictions.

These differences have led to a questioning of the need for such different arrangements across Australia. For example, is there a need for seven different senior school physics syllabuses and their seven different sets of assessment procedures? Are state-based differences in syllabuses and assessment methods a response to the different needs of

¹ In addition to these eight certificates, Victoria provides the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

students in different states/territories? Or do they reflect different philosophical positions and the influence of particular individuals and committees that have operated in each jurisdiction over time?

Others argue that, with Australia now offering senior certificates in an international market through the enrolment of international students in Australia and by offering certificates off-shore, an Australian ‘brand’ for senior secondary education would improve the country’s position in an expanding international education marketplace, including the higher education marketplace.

Finally, the introduction of an Australian Certificate of Education is seen by some as a national opportunity to rethink some aspects of senior secondary curricula and assessment for the 21st Century². Proponents of this argument point to the opportunity afforded by an Australia-wide senior certificate to give greater national priority to the kinds of generic capabilities—including employment related skills—that will be important for Australia’s young people and for its future.

This Project

The Department of Education, Science and Training commissioned the present study to investigate options for an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE), with a report to be prepared by the end of 2005.

The Department identified four (not necessarily mutually exclusive) options for developing and implementing an Australian Certificate of Education:

- an ACE offered as an alternative to, not a replacement for, the existing state and territory certificates;
- an ACE modelled on the internationally recognised International Baccalaureate Diploma;
- an ACE which evolves from the existing state and territory certificates;
- an ACE based on a general aptitude test, similar to the Scholastic Aptitude Test used in the United States.

These four options are described in more detail below.

The objectives of the current project are to:

- consider and report on existing arrangements, requirements and standards for senior secondary certificates of education in order to:
 - understand the implications of each option in the context of existing arrangements, requirements and standards;
 - understand the implications of implementing any of these options; and

² See, for example, Reid, A (2005). *Rethinking National Curriculum Collaboration: Towards an Australian Curriculum*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.

- investigate issues of comparability in relation to levels of achievement/standards, admission to further studies (VET and Higher Education) and employment.
- consider and report on overseas examples of senior secondary certificate systems; the overseas experience with the take up of the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program; and the use and structure of general aptitude tests such as the US Scholastic Aptitude Test.
- analyse a broad range of options for an ACE, including the options described below.
- consult with key stakeholders on options for the introduction of an Australian Certificate of Education.

OPTION 1. *ACE as an alternative to the current senior secondary certificates of education*

This option involves the introduction of a new certificate which would sit alongside the existing senior secondary certificates. Schools and students would choose to undertake this certificate in much the same way that some schools and students currently choose to undertake the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. Under this option, the ACE would be designed to meet the needs of a wide range of students, and to meet the information needs of employers, training institutions and universities.

In investigating Option 1, ACER has been asked to:

- propose an outline for an alternative ACE that could serve a multiplicity of purposes and aspirations, including further training, employment, university entrance, for a wide range of students;
- establish what requirements students would need to fulfil and provide the rationale for these requirements;
- identify how an appropriate standard(s) might be determined and a rationale for this process;
- identify how an ‘alternative ACE’ could be implemented and what resources would be needed to do this (including, for example, course accreditation processes, assessment, certification, teacher professional development requirements);
- identify how the implementation of an alternative ACE would relate to/impact on current arrangements in states and territories;
- establish what incentives could be provided to ensure its take-up by school communities;
- identify which students/groups this alternative ACE would benefit; and
- identify the benefit to students of an alternative ACE over current certificates.

OPTION 2. *ACE modelled on the internationally recognised International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma.*

This option is similar to Option 1 but would be modelled on the International Baccalaureate Diploma: an internationally recognised pre-university qualification. Under this option, the ACE would sit alongside the existing senior secondary certificates. Schools and students would choose to undertake the certificate. An ACE modelled on the IB would be developed primarily as preparation for university study.

The general objectives of the IB Diploma Program are to provide students with a balanced education, to facilitate geographic and cultural mobility, and to promote international understanding through a shared academic experience. In particular, the Diploma Program aims to: (i) provide an internationally accepted qualification for entry into higher education; (ii) promote international understanding; (iii) educate the whole person, emphasising intellectual, personal, emotional and social growth; and (iv) develop inquiry and thinking skills, and the capacity to reflect upon and to evaluate actions critically.

The IB is based on a ‘hexagon model’: a program core accompanied by six subject groups. The core consists of Theory of Knowledge (TOK), an extended essay (EE), and Creativity, Action, Service (CAS). The six subject groups are: Language, Second Language, Individuals and Societies, Experimental Sciences, Mathematics and Computer Science, and the Arts.

In investigating Option 2, ACER has been asked to:

- analyse the structure, curriculum and standards of the IB Diploma Program;
- identify the key differences between the IB Diploma and existing senior certificates;
- propose an outline for an ACE modelled on the IB Diploma and provide a rationale for using the IB Diploma as a model;
- identify how an ACE modelled along these lines could be implemented and what resources would be needed to do this (including, for example, course accreditation processes, assessment, certification, teacher professional development requirements); and
- identify whether an alternative ACE modelled on the IB Diploma could serve a multiplicity of purposes and aspirations, including further training, employment and university entrance.

OPTION 3. *ACE which evolves from the existing State and Territory SSCEs*

Under Option 3, the ACE would not be introduced as a new certificate to sit alongside existing certificates, but would evolve from the eight existing state/territory certificates. This option would involve renaming the existing certificates the ‘Australian Certificate of Education’, meaning that all eligible senior school students would receive the Australian Certificate of Education rather than the current local certificate (eg, South Australian Certificate of Education). There would thus be eight awarding bodies for the new ACE.

Although, initially, Option 3 might involve nothing more than a change of name, this option also would entail a commitment to move towards greater national consistency and comparability of certification requirements and standards over time. The development of more consistent certification requirements and the introduction of common standards against which student achievement is reported would not require the adoption of identical syllabuses and assessment procedures across states/territories.

In investigating Option 3, ACER has been asked to:

- identify existing commonalities and trends in Senior Secondary Certificates of Education (requirements, curriculum, standards) that could be built upon to achieve an ACE;
- propose an outline for an ACE and provide a rationale for this model;
- identify the processes required to achieve nationally uniform requirements, standards and processes and investigate the potential of the ACE to replace existing senior secondary certificates;
- identify how an ACE modelled along these lines could be implemented and what resources would be needed to do this (including, for example, course accreditation processes, assessment, certification, teacher professional development requirements); and
- identify and quantify potential economies to be achieved from having a single ACE as opposed to current State/Territory processes and certificates in terms of, for example, curriculum development, administration and certification processes, course development accreditation, impact on teacher/student/family mobility, more equitable access to post-secondary education and training.

OPTION 4. *An ACE as a general aptitude test*

Option 4 involves the introduction of an Australian Certificate of Education based on a national aptitude test. Under this option, some or all students in their final year of secondary school in Australia would sit the same test. Each eligible student would then receive an Australian Certificate of Education which would record the student's aptitude test results.

This option parallels the use of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the United States. Students in that country sit the SAT at the completion of secondary school and their results on the test are used in university admissions decisions. The current SAT I (Reasoning Test) measures verbal and mathematical abilities which develop over time; the SAT II (Subject Tests) measure knowledge and skills in English, mathematics, natural sciences, social studies and languages. Other similar tests include the Swedish National Aptitude Test which is taken by all higher education applicants and measures students' developed verbal and mathematical skills. Swedish students' test results are used alongside their school-leaving grades. The Israeli Psychometric Entrance Test consists of three sub-tests, Verbal Reasoning (V), Quantitative Reasoning (Q) and English (E) as a foreign language, and is used to estimate Israeli students' future success in academic studies.

In investigating Option 4, ACER has been asked to:

- identify the key purposes of a national general aptitude or ability test and the benefits of undertaking such a test;
- identify the types of skills and abilities (e.g. general competency skills, general knowledge, reasoning skills, higher order thinking skills etc) that a national general aptitude or ability test would assess;
- identify how such an ACE relates to existing aptitude/skills competency tests offered by jurisdictions, such as the General Ability Test (Victoria), the Queensland Core Skills Test and the ACT Scaling Test;
- propose an outline for an ACE including salient capabilities to be tested and appropriate standards;
- identify how such an ACE would relate to existing senior certificates and capabilities already assessed through current arrangements;
- identify how an ACE modelled along these lines could be implemented and what resources would be needed to do this (including, for example, assessment, certification, teacher professional development requirements);
- identify how an ACE as a general aptitude test could serve a multiplicity of purposes and aspirations, including further training, employment, university entrance, for a wide range of students; and
- identify whether this model could be used in conjunction with other options analysed in the course of this project.

Consultations

In undertaking this project, ACER is seeking the views of key stakeholders, including government and non-government school authorities, curriculum and assessment authorities in each state and territory, tertiary admissions centres, parent organisations, peak employer groups, school principal and teacher professional bodies, and a range of other education organisations. Face-to-face consultations will be conducted in each state and territory in August and September 2005.

The purpose of the consultations is to obtain opinions about the general concept of an Australian Certificate of Education and its possible advantages and about each of the four options that ACER has been asked to investigate. Through the consultations ACER is hoping to clarify the advantages and possible shortcomings of each option, and the challenges in implementing each. For each of the options, views are sought on:

- the purposes best served by that option;
- the advantages of the option over current arrangements;
- the disadvantages of the option over current arrangements;
- how the option might be modified to better meet the purposes of the ACE;
- how the option would impact on existing arrangements; and
- practical challenges in implementing that option.

We appreciate your assistance with this project.



(Prof) Geoff N Masters
CEO, Australian Council for Educational Research
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