



VCOSS response

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

May 2018

Background

VCOSS welcomes the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's (VCAA) consultation on a more explicit requirement for students to meet minimum standards of literacy and numeracy to be awarded the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

VCOSS is the peak body of the social and community sector in Victoria. VCOSS members reflect the diversity of the sector and include large charities, peak organisations, small community services, advocacy groups, and individuals interested in social policy. In addition to supporting the sector, VCOSS represents the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians, including children and young people, in policy debates and advocates for the development of a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

Summary

In this response, VCOSS outlines our concerns on the proposal to requiring all students to pass a test to prove they have met minimum literacy and numeracy standards, including:

- Our preferred focus on creating an inclusive and equitable school system to improve student literacy and numeracy
- The potential for further student anxiety and disengagement resulting from additional high-stakes testing in schools
- Introducing a standardized testing hurdle very late in a student's education, with little time for subsequent response and improvement
- The limited evidence from other jurisdictions that this approach achieves improvement in literacy and numeracy outcomes.

Assessment and measurement of literacy and numeracy attainment

VCOSS supports all students attaining a proficient standard of literacy and numeracy during their progress through Victoria's education system. To effectively and actively participate in life after school, all students should be equipped with minimum literacy and numeracy skills. These will underpin both their employment prospects and their community and civic participation in the future.

VCOSS believes school staff should hold high expectations of every student, regardless of their personal or family circumstances, and assist all students to work towards these goals.

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Having high expectations for all students does not automatically mean directing them to higher education. Rather, it involves taking the time to understand students' interests and strengths, and supporting them to undertake subjects and senior secondary qualifications that will provide them with a pathway into secure, ongoing employment. Research shows that the successful completion of secondary school is associated with not only improved student outcomes, but better health, employment and financial outcomes.¹ As DET notes, *'[o]n average, someone who doesn't complete Year 12 will earn around half a million dollars less in their lifetime than someone who completes Year 12.'*²

In achieving improved minimum literacy and numeracy standards, the Victorian Government should focus on delivering an equitable and inclusive education system. Adequate support and resources are necessary to support students experiencing disadvantage and those with additional health and development needs, as well as those students that are at risk of or have already disengaged from schooling. Given approximately 10,000 secondary school students in Victoria have disengaged from education, our current education system still needs improvement to meet all students' needs.³

VCOSS members raise concerns that requiring students to undergo an additional and explicit assessment of literacy and numeracy may compound the levels of disadvantage they already experience, potentially increasing levels of student disengagement. They have broader concerns relating to the pressures and anxieties students currently face in completing standardised tests, including negative impacts on students' mental health. This approach is not always the most accurate measurement of achievement.⁴

VCOSS queries whether introducing this test in the final two years of school actually leads to improvements in student literacy and numeracy standards. The later the test is taken, the less likely schools can use the information to improve low performing students' literacy and numeracy skills, especially in the absence of additional funding and changes to the current senior secondary curriculum model. If held at the end of year 12, for example, there is limited opportunity to improve attainment while students are still in school.

In consultation with Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and other literacy and numeracy experts, VCAA should determine when a 'minimum standard' in literacy and numeracy should have been achieved in a student's education and clearly define specific benchmarks. VCOSS notes NSW's initial approach was that a student receiving a Band 8 at Year 9 was sufficient, although this pathway has recently been removed with students now only having an opportunity to undertake online tests in years 10, 11 and 12.⁵

Further, given that both Western Australia and NSW have introduced minimum standards tests in literacy and numeracy, we would recommend VCAA work with both Education Departments and VCAA counterparts to obtain data of its impact on student outcomes, and

¹ Victorian Government, Department of Education and Training, Leaving School Early, accessed at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/beyond/Pages/leaving.aspx>

² Ibid.

³ Victorian Government, The Education State: Consultation Paper, Melbourne, 2015, p.11

⁴ Greg Thompson and Allen G. Harbaugh, The Effects of NAPLAN: Teacher perceptions of the impact of NAPLAN on pedagogy and curriculum, School of Education, Murdoch University, Perth, accessed at <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/86167/1/86167.pdf>;

⁵ NSW Government, NSW Education Standards Authority, HSC Minimum Standard, accessed at <http://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/hsc/hsc-minimum-standard>

look at leading international education systems. Ideally, these findings can be shared publicly so all stakeholders have an opportunity to consider them. If this research shows a marked improvement in literacy and numeracy attainment through testing in senior years, there may be more justification for its inclusion. If not, alternatives can be pursued.

While all students develop differently and reach learning milestones at different times, basic spelling, grammar, reading and math is generally not the focus of senior secondary curriculum and arguably should have been achieved much earlier in a student's education.

Whilst students should have multiple opportunities to learn and demonstrate these skills throughout their education, if the Victorian Government decides to proceed with the introduction of explicit assessment and measurement of literacy and numeracy in senior secondary qualifications, VCOSS would be interested in participating in further consultation on the model adopted. Some options we would be interested in discussing include:

- Consideration of whether the minimum standards can be assessed through the current General Achievement Test (GAT). This would address concerns around the introduction of a separate test, although noting that it does create a “higher stakes game” for achievement in the GAT.
- Consideration of whether the minimum standards can be assessed through the existing VCE and VCAL system, noting that English group subjects are compulsory and around 95% of students undertake at least one unit of mathematics. VCAL requires students to undertake compulsory literacy and numeracy units. This could assist in reducing pressure and stress on students.

Further consideration of whether the refining existing VCE subjects could include a focus on functional literacy and numeracy should be examined, although this should not be introduced at the expense of lowering of standards.

- The opportunity to undertake this test on multiple occasions in Years 11 and 12 (or before even undertaking senior secondary qualifications), when the student and their best feels that they are prepared to sit and pass the test.

For students where English is a second language, are from refugee or migrant backgrounds, or have experienced disrupted schooling (e.g. having been in out-of-home-care or experiencing family violence or homelessness), considerations will need to be made around additional support so these students can pass any new test. At a minimum, additional funding and resources should be provided to schools to support students not passing the test on their second attempt.

Reporting of literacy and numeracy attainment

Literacy and numeracy standards may demonstrate to employers graduates have achieved minimum skills. However, there are significant risks in this approach, including additional pressure for students to pass the test, and presenting an additional barrier to continued educational engagement for students experiencing disadvantage, thereby marginalizing them even further.

In the current education and funding system, and in the absence of any data demonstrating an improvement in minimum literacy and numeracy standards following the introduction of this test in other jurisdictions, VCOSS is concerned about the unintended consequences of the introduction of explicit reporting and the potential impact on students experiencing disadvantage through the creation of an additional hurdle to obtaining their senior secondary qualification.

Conclusion

Educational attainment is an important predictor of an individual's future social and economic wellbeing and is one of best ways to help tackle disadvantage and break the cycle of poverty.⁶ Any potential additional barriers to participation and achievement and unintended consequences of this new policy direction should therefore be carefully considered.

In this submission, VCOSS has highlighted our members' concerns, (including organisations offering flexible learning options who work with some of Victoria's most disadvantaged students).

We would welcome the opportunity to arrange a consultation with members, should this be of interest to VCAA, to obtain further insight and perspective on how Victoria can build a quality universal education system that effectively supports all learners facing disadvantage and ensures that all students graduate with minimum literacy and numeracy standards to fully participate in life and employment after school.

⁶ Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), Addressing entrenched disadvantage in Australia, CEDA, April 2015.