Chapter 5
Assessment Reform and Educational Change in Australia

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5.1 Introduction

The recent experience of assessment reform in Australia with an explicit focus on the emergent assessment policies at the levels of the nation and the state are analyzed in this chapter. The implications for teachers' classroom practice are made explicit. To begin a review of recent developments in assessment in Australia will be presented and issues relating to the use of standards for both accountability and the improvement of learning will be discussed.

These are changing times in Australia with the development of a national curriculum, national student assessment and reporting of school education outcomes. In 2007, the six states and two territories of Australia developed individual approaches to the use of standards in the implementation of curriculum, assessment and reporting. In February 2008, the interim National Curriculum Board was established to set the *core content* and *achievement standards* in Mathematics, Science, History and English from Pre-school to Year 12. Most recently, in May 2009, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) assumed responsibility for the work of the National Curriculum Board (April 2008–May 2009). ACARA now has responsibility for a national curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12 in specified learning areas, a national assessment program aligned to the national curriculum that measures students' progress and a national data collection and reporting program. The latter is intended to support analysis, evaluation, research and resource allocation and accountability and reporting on schools and broader national achievement.

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R. Berry, B. Adamson (eds.), *Assessment Reform in Education*,
Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects 14,
DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-0729-0_5,

5.2 Drivers for Educational Change in Australia

Global drivers for curriculum and assessment reform in Australia are apparent from policy makers' responses to international measures of educational attainment such as the results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), developed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Important questions of whether we are comparing like with like have not always been considered. Nevertheless, governments have used the results from international comparisons to justify the introduction of ongoing curriculum change. In Australia the use of international comparative data, for example TIMSS data, has identified significant State and Territory differences in Australia. So it was no surprise when the new Labor Government in 2008 introduced plans for a National Curriculum in Mathematics, Science, History and English in primary and secondary schools by 2011 to be extended to include languages, geography and the arts.

International comparisons have highlighted equity issues for Australia as Indigenous children have scored significantly lower than non-Indigenous children (Klenowski, 2009a, 2009b). Australian schools are not adequately addressing inequalities and when compared with other developed countries, Australia is underperforming: "high in quality but low in equity" (McGaw, 2004). The analysis of the 2003 PISA data suggested that Australia was "over-represented in the lowest categories of maths proficiency and under-represented in the highest" (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2004, p. xiii). The achievement of students overall was high; however there were wide differences between the high and low achieving students.

This trend appeared to persist in PISA 2006 that assessed science as the main domain with reading literacy and mathematics as minor domains. The analysis of these results indicated that Indigenous students were under-represented among the highest scoring students and over-represented among low scoring students. For example, "[i]n scientific literacy 40% of Indigenous students performed below the OECD 'baseline' and were judged to be at serious risk of not being able to participate adequately in the twenty-first century workforce or to contribute as productive future citizens." In mathematical literacy the percentage was 39% and in reading literacy 38% (ACER, 2007). These latest results of PISA 2006 showed a continued widening of the gap in academic achievement between Australia's Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students with minimal improvement since 2000.

Headlines such as "PISA shows Indigenous students continue to struggle" (ACER, 2007) reflect areas of real inequity in Australia's education system. Reports (Ibid; Thomson, 2008) indicate that Australia's lowest-performing students are most likely to come from Indigenous communities, geographically remote areas and poor socioeconomic backgrounds. In terms of averages, about 40% of Indigenous students, 23% of students from the lowest category of socioeconomic status, and 27% of students from remote schools, are not meeting a proficiency level in science that the OECD deems necessary for full participation in today's workforce and society.

These recent PISA results indicate that in Australia issues of inequity need to be addressed to ensure access to quality education for all students (Thomson, 2008).

5.3 National Levers for Educational Change in Australia

Apart from such global factors as international comparative analyses of achievement data there have also been national drivers for curriculum and assessment reforms in Australia. These developments are derived in part from an earlier investigation of the introduction of an Australian Certificate of Education (ACE) aimed at achieving greater consistency in senior secondary arrangements for curriculum, assessment and certification, more comparable student results across Australia, and more consistent standards of student achievement (Masters, Forster, Matters, & Tognolini, 2006). A further study (Matters & Masters, 2007) investigated what was common content, what was essential curriculum content and whether achievement standards were comparable in the final year of schooling, in English (including Literature), Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics and Australian History.

Significant consistency in what was assessed was identified; however, it was also found that different jurisdictions use different methods of assessment such as external examinations or teacher-devised assessment instruments. This finding raised the important issue of whether achievement standards can be compared across jurisdictions, or whether the existence of different assessment methods hinders comparison. The study recommended that a curriculum "core" be identified for each nominated senior school subject to specify explicitly what students would be expected to learn no matter where in Australia they live. To achieve a nationally consistent description of how well students are expected to learn the core in each subject it was recommended that a set of achievement standards be developed.

Other origins for these curriculum and assessment reforms that have been identified include the ministerial agreement on national goals at the Hobart Declaration of 1989, the Adelaide Declaration of 1999 and the National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians of 2008. There is a sense that the nation as a whole can do better than its parts and that the nation's capacity would be greater if all jurisdictions worked together to achieve more efficiency and reduce duplication (McGaw, 2009).

5.4 Background

In Australia benchmark testing began in 1999 when the first annual literacy tests (reading and writing) for Year 3 and Year 5 students were conducted. The nationally agreed literacy and numeracy benchmarks for Years 3, 5 and 7 represent minimum standards of performance. In 2008 the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was introduced, students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sit the same

national tests in reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy. In addition, National Assessment Program assessments are also taking place and involve triennial sample assessments in science at Year 6, in civics and citizenship at Years 6 and 10 and in ICT literacy at Years 6 and 10 (Harrington, 2008).

5.5 Current Context

By May 2009 the National Curriculum Board had, through a process of consultation, managed the development of four framing papers in the subject areas of English, Mathematics, Science and History. This work was handed over to the new, independent, statutory authority ACARA, which now has responsibility for the management and the implementation of the national curriculum (to be referred to as the Australian Curriculum), national student assessment and reporting of school education outcomes. There is also an intention to establish a standards-referenced framework to "invigorate a national effort to improve student learning in the selected subjects" (National Curriculum Board, 2008, p. 3). Table 5.1 outlines the curriculum development timelines.

For the other disciplines of geography and languages the curriculum framing will occur from June 2009 until May 2010, curriculum development from May 2010 until December 2010, consultation from February 2011 until May 2011 and publication from July 2011 until August 2011. The Arts will be developed a year behind this timeline.

Table 5.1 Australian curriculum development timelines

Stage	Activity	Timelines K–10	Timelines senior years (11/12)
Curriculum framing	Confirmation of directions for writing curriculum for the learning areas of English, mathematics, the sciences and history	April, 2009	April, 2009
Curriculum development	Two step process for development of curriculum documents Step one – broad outline; scope and sequence Step two – completion of "detail" of curriculum	April–Dec, 2009	June–Jan, 2010
Consultation	National consultation on curriculum documents and trialing	Jan–April, 2010	Mar–June, 2010
Publication	Publication of national curriculum documents in print and digital format	June–July, 2010	July–Sept, 2010

Source: National Curriculum Board (2009).

The Australian Curriculum is to have a futures orientation and will identify the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities that all young Australians are entitled to learn. A futures orientation includes an understanding that our society is becoming more complex and that increasingly Australians will need the knowledge and the skills to interact in a global environment. This requires knowing how to learn, adapt, create and communicate effectively, and interpret and use information more fluently and critically. A continuum of learning in literacy and numeracy skills will form the foundation for the national curriculum. It will be a web-based document. That is, web technologies will be used to embed links and enable multiple views and access. The three elements of the national curriculum framework will comprise; curriculum content, achievement standards and a reporting framework.

The curriculum content element of the Australian Curriculum will provide teachers with the expectations of what should be taught and what students are expected to learn, that is, knowledge, skills and understanding. Curriculum content will be described for a particular learning area at a particular year level for example, Mathematics, Year 5 (ACARA, 2009).

The achievement standards aim to provide "an expectation of the quality of learning that students should typically demonstrate in relation to the content by a particular point in their schooling (that is, the depth of their understanding, the extent of their knowledge and the sophistication of their skills)" (ACARA, 2009, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/The_Shape_of_the_National_Curriculum_paper.pdf#xml=http://search.curriculum.edu.au/)

The aim is to provide achievement standards for each year of schooling across K–10 using a descriptor of the quality of learning that draws together the knowledge, skills and understanding typically expected for that year. The representation of the standards for every year will include a statement of expected learning, a set of generic grade descriptors and a set of work samples that illustrate typical learning (ACARA, 2009).

Course specific standards are to be developed for Years 11–12 with a range of levels of achievement expected of students studying the particular course. The standards aim to assist in reporting to students and parents, to aid consistency of assessment and reporting across Australia and to fulfil the purpose of selection required of assessment for post-school pathways. It is intended that the Year 11–12 standards will be designed to be applicable in jurisdictions with external examinations and with school-based assessment.

Finally the reporting framework aims to provide consistency in nomenclature to describe the quality of achievement associated with each A–E grade for use across K–10. It is intended that the use of the five-point scale will indicate the extent to which a student has met the achievement standard for a particular year of school. To illustrate, students who achieve a grade of C or above will have met the standard for that year/stage. The grade C would indicate a satisfactory level of achievement while an A grade would indicate an outstanding level of achievement. Conversely a grade of D or E would suggest that follow-up is required and further investigation by teachers, students and parents might be needed (ACARA, 2009).

It is also intended that annotated student work samples will be used to demonstrate the different standards. This collection of work samples will build on the work that is currently established in the Australian states and territories. It is anticipated that this collection will provide a common and national reference point for greater consistency in teacher judgement within and between classrooms, schools, states and territories.

Such changes to curriculum and assessment make considerable demands on teachers who need to be informed, prepared and resourced to implement this level of change. It is most important that teachers are aware of the literacy demands of national curriculum and assessment for the implementation of a national curriculum requires the development of teachers' capacity to use the learning power of assessment to improve the outcomes for all students.

5.6 Emergent Issues

Teachers need to be aware of the accountability context within which they work and appreciate how the practices that they engage in are mediated by structures beyond their control, such as national policy about what they are supposed to assess and how that is to be recorded and reported. In such a context an important emergent issue is for teachers to maintain a strong sense of responsibility by developing their professionalism through building their assessment literacy and practices.

The use of achievement standards to assess student learning, as planned for in the Australian Curriculum, is a new phenomenon for teachers in Australia. Standards-driven reform in the Australian context involves the use of achievement standards as the basis for judgments of student learning (depth of understanding, extent of knowledge and the level of sophistication of skills) with the intended aims of informing the teaching and learning process and of reporting and tracking student progress.

Assessment literacy is a fundamental issue for teachers and is defined, not from a traditional view of skills, knowledges and cognitions that reside within an individual, but rather a view of literacy as a visible social practice with language, text and discourse (Gee, 2003). To raise the assessment literacy of teachers there is a need to understand, and practice, the fundamental principles of assessment design. That is "fitness for purpose" and the mode of assessment should impact positively on teaching and learning (Gipps, 1994).

The use of achievement standards for assessment and reporting will further require the development of teachers' assessment literacy and assessment practices. This will be illustrated by referring to the particular case of the Australian state of Queensland where extensive research has been conducted to study the standards-driven reform in the middle years of schooling (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2008; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2008; Klenowski & Adie, 2009; Wyatt-Smith, Klenowski, & Gunn, 2010).

5.7 The Case of Queensland

Queensland has a long history of externally moderated standards-referenced assessment that supports teachers' judgments in assessing the quality of student work. It was in 1972 that Queensland schools introduced a system of school-based assessment as a response to public dissatisfaction with the Senior Public Examination papers, set by the university. In 1966 and 1967, 68% of students failed to attain a pass in their Physics senior examination. The public lost confidence in the examination system and called for a review. The Radford Report of 1970 was the result. Externally-set senior examinations were abandoned and an alternative system developed that valued more systematic collection of student achievement data by the teacher. Teachers' professional judgment was recognised and privileged in the senior years of schooling. The support for developing teachers' assessment capability in the middle and primary years of schooling for achieving consistency of teacher judgment is only a recent development.

The Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (QCAR) Framework was developed from 2005, implementation began in 2008 and a review of the extended trial was conducted prior to full implementation in 2009. The framework comprises the Essential Learnings (ELs) that identify what students should know, understand and be able to do; standards that articulate the quality of student achievements described on a five point scale from A to E; the assessment bank that provides a collection of online assessments and resources that relate to the ELs and standards; and the Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks (QCATs) that are authentic, performance-based assessment tasks and guidelines for reporting and that outline how schools might provide information about students' learning (Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), 2009). The QCATs are designed to assess a selection of ELs in English, Mathematics and Science in Years 4, 6 and 9.

Queensland has conceptualised the framework from the view that assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning. While the QCAR framework promotes the practice of embedding assessment into classroom practice, the report on the 2008 extended trial of the QCATs found that teachers needed greater familiarity with the standards and the suggested approach to making judgments (QSA, 2009). The implication is that with the move to a national curriculum and the related use of achievement standards there will be a need for all teachers in Australia to familiarise themselves with the standards and develop their understanding of how to use them when making judgments about student work. For although at the national level the intention is to help teachers interpret the standards by providing annotated samples of work indicative of the standard, the research indicates that the judgement process involved for the teacher is more complex than this (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2008; Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski, 2008).

In Queensland the use of the QCATs is intended to allow students to demonstrate their best work and "[a]s much as possible… avoid the flavour of point-in-time tests" (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2005, p. 9). The

information collected from the QCATs is considered to be low-stakes data and it is not intended that it be used for measuring school or teacher effectiveness (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2005). Rather the intention is to build teachers' assessment capacity and assessment literacy by demonstrating the nature of quality assured assessment tasks that are designed to be authentic and performance-based. Teachers are also provided with resources, such as the assessment bank, guides to assist teachers in making judgments about the quality of the students' responses, model answers and a range of annotated samples of student responses reflective of each standard. This level of resourcing is intended to support the development of shared understanding about the interpretation and application of standards (QSA, 2009).

Teachers have indicated the value of meeting as a community of learners at moderation meetings to share their understanding and use of the standards (Klenowski & Adie, 2009). It is through the processes of discussion, critique and analysis of student responses that teachers have the opportunity to validate or adjust their interpretations of the standards in relation to the judgments they have made. Providing teachers with a common discourse in terms of the criteria (assessable elements) and the standards (task specific descriptors) facilitates teachers' understanding of how well students have completed the QCAT.

To help teachers understand the value of the assessment data and how it can be used to modify teaching and learning the QSA provides a report to schools on the implementation of the QCATs, based on the analysis of all the data collected. QSA collects a random sample from Queensland schools of teacher judgments representative of standards A to E for analysis. The resultant report provides teachers with insights into the way students typically responded. The teacher uses this information for teaching and learning purposes. The intent is that the report will contribute to a better understanding by teachers of student strengths, development of consistency of teacher judgement and comparability of reported results of student achievement and progress. Moderation processes have been found to support consistency of teacher judgments and a large number of Queensland Years 1–9 teachers have gained practical experience of this practice (QSA, 2009).

5.8 Challenges for Teachers at the National Level

Where there is a growing international trend for using standards not just for accountability but also for the purpose of improving learning, it is important to understand their different purposes (goals) and functions (roles). In Australia, standards are currently being used in different contexts to fulfil different functions.

To illustrate, in the context of the NAPLAN, the standards fulfil a particular role.

> For each year level a national minimum standard is located on the scale. For Year 3 Band 2 is the national minimum standard, for Year 5 Band 4 is the national minimum standard, for Year 7 Band 5 is the national minimum standard and for Year 9 Band 6 is the national minimum standard. The skills that students are typically required to demonstrate for the minimum standard at each year level are described on the back page of the student report.

These standards represent increasingly challenging skills and require higher scores on the national scale (NAPLAN, 2009, http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/learning/7-12assessments/naplan/nms/index.html).

In 2009, league tables emerged to represent these results for the Australian states. In Queensland, the state government is keen to raise standards as represented by the results of NAPLAN testing and in 2009 the premier advised schools to sit practice NAPLAN tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 as she was disappointed by the overall results of the 2008 tests which she indicated were designed to assess if students were meeting "national standards in numeracy, reading, writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar" (Bligh, 2009). Currently in Australia, there are no statements about the expected learning of literacy and numeracy and no standards to inform them about the expectations of quality. There are only summary statements of skills assessed to inform parents about their child's report. Here the term is used in reference to national minimum standards and the Queensland premier's response to the NAPLAN testing program highlights how the meaning of the term *standard* differs in that it is used as a level of attainment or point of reference as measured by a yardstick or as in this case band levels on a scale.

The concern for teachers is that by emphasising that the NAPLAN test is the measure or reference point, the consequent action by teachers will be to narrow their focus to that which is tested or measured. In other words the curriculum too will be narrowed and teachers will emphasize in their teaching that which has been specified in the test. What becomes evident is that in this context of accountability when the stakes are high not only will there be an impact on teaching, there will be consequences at the level of the school, the system and the nation. It is possible that high-stakes accountability testing can have benefits such as raising expectations, providing a clearer focus for teaching and learning, motivating achievement, challenging patterns of school performance and providing useful information to stakeholders for governing and allocating resources. There are also some costs such as the detrimental impact of setting targets that distort the system by encouraging teachers to teach to the test, with excessive time allocated to drill and practice, booster tests and the like. Inexorable pressures emerge to pervert the system such as the manipulation of the drop out or retention rates of students for the purposes of achieving targets, result or grade inflation and entry selection to maintain one's position on the league table (Stobart, 2008). The No Child Left Behind legislation in the USA is an example where the push to raise standards has led to enormous pressure on teachers and distortions in the teaching of a holistic curriculum with the reduction in authentic and challenging learning experiences for students (Marsh, 2009; see Chapter 3 by Flaitz).

The Queensland premier's response to the NAPLAN results demonstrates how governments are becoming increasingly anxious about education standards particularly as reflected in such national or international comparisons of student achievement. This is because of the expected critical contribution of raising standards in education to economic growth and competitiveness. There is also increasing individual (particularly parental) anxieties because of the growing importance of formal qualifications in determining success in terms of life chances.

In Queensland, standards for improvement of student learning provide a generic description of the expected quality of student work and offer a common language for teachers to use in discussing student work (QSA, 2007). The aim is to improve learning by indicating the quality of achievement that is expected and in so doing provide the basis for judgments about the quality of students' work. Research indicates that standards are useful for the purpose of informing teachers' work and in contributing to quality teaching and learning experiences (Klenowski, 2006, 2007; Sadler, 2005; Wyatt-Smith & Castleton, 2004). In the context of the QCATs, the achievement standards function by monitoring the growth in student learning and by providing information about the quality of student achievement for improvement purposes. The intended purpose of these standards is to assist teachers in identifying areas for improvement in teaching, curriculum design or development. The provision of these standards make explicit for teachers what to teach and the level of performance expected for a particular age group and in this way they contribute to the demand for public accountability at the local professional level of the teacher (Harlen, 1994; Wilson, 2004).

As suggested earlier these standards are also intended to promote teachers' professional learning, focused on good assessment practices and judgement of the quality of student achievement against system level benchmarks or referents. In addition it is expected that teachers using the standards will present more meaningful reports and engagement with assessment as a learning process.

5.9 Future Challenges

These are changing times for Australian teachers in terms of the changing curriculum and assessment demands. There are lessons that can be learnt from the research conducted in other countries, like those of the United Kingdom, where there have been years of experience of national curriculum and testing systems.

In a time of economic uncertainty, it is important for governments to be accountable and to develop policy that will maintain high standards for all. The use of national tests and examinations as the basis for school, local government, state and national accountability is on the increase in Australia, and such trends globally have given rise to standards-driven reforms. The policy rationale for such change, which includes testing, is that it will improve standards of teaching and learning regardless of the student's religion, race, gender, socio-economic or socio-cultural background. However, the cost-benefits of using testing in this way are not always economical or successful. There are alternative approaches for schools and teachers to demonstrate accountability that places less emphasis on test results. Important questions need to be considered and mistakes that other national systems have encountered need to be avoided in Australia.

While both large-scale standardised tests and authentic, teacher assessment can contribute to improved learning and accountability the question of balance remains. There are important ethical questions to consider in assessment change efforts. The

social impact of changes to education systems is not something to be taken lightly when the impact on students results in them being turned off learning or labelled as failures. Unhealthy competition between schools, teaching to the test, increased stress levels for children, parents and teachers, and huge costs are just some of the reactions to testing that is high-stakes.

There is also evidence that internationally the gap between children with and without access to high-quality education is growing. In assessment terms this raises the important equity issue which is not simply a technical consideration of the test or assessment itself. Whether testing systems take into consideration socio-cultural representations of achievement, the limitations of current assessment practices and the consequences of how the assessment evidence is used are further significant considerations in this time of assessment change in Australia.

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