



Benefits of participating in national assessments

Introduction

Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the knowledge, understanding, skills and values necessary to provide the basis for a productive and rewarding life for citizens in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to achieving this vision.

In 1999, Ministers of education established the *National Goals for Schooling*¹. They subsequently agreed to report on progress towards the achievement of the *National Goals* comparable by State and Territory, using national Key Performance Measures as the basis for reporting.

In order to measure student achievement in relation to the *National Goals*, Ministers have agreed to a program, the National Assessment Program (NAP) that collects, analyses and reports nationally comparable student achievement data in each of the following curriculum areas:

- literacy
- numeracy
- science
- information and communication technology
- civics and citizenship.

As part of NAP², Australia has established national assessments in literacy (reading and writing), numeracy, science, civics and citizenship, and information and communication technology. Current state-based literacy and numeracy programs annually assess the full cohort of students in years 3, 5 and 7, while the science, civics and citizenship, and information and communications technology assessments test a sample of students in every state and territory, in both government and non-government schools, on a rolling triennial basis³.

This national approach to assessment and reporting involves a deliberative process of consultation to reach consensus on issues and at each stage of the assessment and reporting cycle. This process supports a truly national assessment regime that provides high quality comparable data.

Annual Full Cohort Assessments

The full cohort literacy and numeracy assessments provide rich data about individual student performance and assist teachers to plan learning activities for students. They also enable schools to develop a more objective view about the performance of their students compared to those in other schools and in relation to state-wide standards. Since these state and territory based assessments are also used to provide information about the percentage of students who meet national standards (the national benchmarks), there are added benefits for schools as they are able to measure the achievement of their students not only against the

¹ *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* <http://www.mceetya.edu.au>

² Within the National Assessment Program, Australia also makes use of the rich data from the international assessments, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). A copy of the paper, *The benefits of participating in international assessments*, is available at <http://www.mceetya.edu.au>

³ See the national assessment cycle contained in the *Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures* <http://www.mceetya.edu.au>

local and state-wide standards, but also against national standards and to provide more detailed information to parents/carers than would be the case if the assessments were only state based.

With increasing parent and student mobility, there is a need for nationally consistent assessment programs and standardised reporting. Reports on individual student performance from full cohort assessments can be transferred with the student according to agreed protocols that ensure confidentiality. Such transference of reports should assist the receiving school in providing students with a smoother transition and greater continuity in their learning.

The next step in moving towards national literacy and numeracy assessments supported by all states and territories will bring improvements to the national comparability of student performance data. In May 2006, a trial was undertaken of a common national literacy and numeracy assessment of students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. This trial will subject to evaluation and will inform full implementation.

Triennial Sample Assessments

Primary and secondary schools participating in the national sample assessments in Science, Civics and Citizenship and Information and Communication Technologies benefit in a number of ways. Their students have the opportunity to engage with state-of-the-art assessment materials, in some cases delivered on-line. This is an excellent learning opportunity for students and in many cases also provides professional development for teachers. After the assessment, participating schools receive their own students' results and the school's results. These provide valuable information to classroom teachers and assist with curriculum planning.

In addition, following each of the national sample assessments, all schools are able to access a range of the items that were used in the assessment, enabling them to benchmark their own school performance against the state or territory performance and the national standard. Effective use of this nationally comparable data can support all schools in making defensible interpretations about teaching and learning, and therefore more effectively support both student and teacher learning.

The participating schools are chosen carefully to ensure that the samples are sufficiently large to provide an accurate picture of the performance of students in each state and territory. The sample of schools needs to be a representative mix of large and small schools, government and non-government, in metropolitan, provincial and more remote locations, and of students from a range of socio-economic, LBOTE and Indigenous backgrounds. It is expected that all selected schools participate and that all students in the selected classes take part in the assessments to ensure that the results are reliable and comparable.

A national perspective

All Australian schools benefit from the outcomes of all national testing, with aggregated results made available through comprehensive national reports⁴, accessible on-line. Any school can gain detailed information about how their state is performing compared to other states and territories and can identify strengths and weaknesses which may warrant further attention.

At the system level, national assessments provide Ministers for education with information about the success of their policies and resourcing in the priority curriculum areas, and the capacity to monitor the success of policies aimed at improving the reading performance of boys, and the mathematics and science performance of girls, and the achievement of student groups such as Indigenous students. In the absence of nationally comparable data about student performance, states and territories have only limited information about the achievement of their students in relation to their peers. Nationally comparable data provide an additional suite of information, thus enhancing the capacity for empirically-based decision making about policy, resourcing and systemic practices.

⁴ *National Report on Schooling in Australia* (annual reports) and *MCEETYA National Year 6 Science Assessment Report 2003*, are available <http://www.mceetya.edu.au>

The assessments also perform an accountability function. Australian tax-payers have a right to expect that education funding is being applied in ways that ensure that all students achieve worthwhile learning during their time at school. The reported outcomes of national assessments enable the Australian public to generally develop a national perspective on student achievement and more specifically see how their schools are performing.

In a world where citizens are increasingly mobile, the majority of today's students, over their lifetimes, can be expected to live and work in a range of places in Australia and even overseas. From both the personal and national perspectives, it is important that there be consistent and well understood measures of student achievement around the country, and that the outcomes of these assessments be used to inform future policy development, resource allocation, curriculum planning and where necessary intervention programs. National assessments provide useful nationally comparable evidence about student achievement. By participating in these assessments schools benefit not only their own students, but also the students in every state and territory.