Curriculum and Assessment
Closing the Gap

12th Annual Conference of the Curriculum Corporation

Brisbane, 2–3 June 2005

Conference Report
The Twelfth Annual Conference of the Curriculum Corporation was held at the Sofitel Hotel in Brisbane on Thursday and Friday, 2 and 3 June 2005.

Conference support was provided by National Curriculum Services.

This report was prepared by Vic Zbar, from Zbar Consulting Pty Ltd on behalf of the conference organisers.
Background to the conference

The Twelfth Annual Curriculum Corporation conference examined the crucial and complex relationship between curriculum and assessment, and proposed a need to close the gap that exists between the two.

Led by internationally renowned researcher and educator, Dr Barry McGaw AO (Director for Education, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, OECD), the conference considered the collection and use of assessment data by systems, schools and teachers, and the reporting of student progress with specific reference to:

- where Australia’s education performance sits in world terms;
- the drivers for curriculum and assessment reform in Australian schools and the place standards have within this reform agenda;
- how education systems, teachers and parents make meaning from the assessment data they receive on student achievement.

The importance of the link between curriculum and assessment also was examined by exploring the impact of testing programs, the design of curriculum for deeper learning, and the social competence agenda.

Two important features of the conference this year were the inclusion of:

- regular feedback sessions, where a question was posed for table discussion for 10 minutes or so followed by questions from the floor to presenters, this enabled delegates to discuss issues with their peers and interact directly with presenters;
- ‘show me’ sessions where selected schools were partnered with keynote sessions and provided short case studies to help illustrate the point a speaker made on one of the conference topic themes.

The purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide conference participants and other interested parties with a synthesis of the outcomes of the conference. It is drawn from conference addresses and other material provided by the presenters. The report takes the form of a summary of the major addresses integrated with material from the ‘show me’ sessions and participant responses from the feedback sessions.

Conference speakers

The conference program, which includes details on each presenter, is included as Appendix 1 to this report.
Major outcomes of the conference

Day one

Session 1

Conference opening

After a traditional welcome to country from Aunty Valda Coolwell from the Brisbane Council of Elders, the conference officially was opened by Ken Smith (Director General, Queensland Department of Education and the Arts).

Curriculum Corporation conferences are, Smith suggested, seen as something of a highlight on the education calendar and the fact that more than half the attendees at this conference are teachers, suggests the topic is ‘at the forefront of your work’. The conference and its theme are, he continued, ‘at the core of a major national education debate underway and the fact the conference is a sell-out only reflects this’.

The ‘education puzzle’ we are working our way through centres, in Smith’s view, on the four pillars of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting which all underpin the coming quadrennial funding and broader MCEETYA debates. Ministers are, in this context, grappling with issues that are also being debated on the international stage, and organisations such as Curriculum Corporation and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) are ‘critical players’ in that work, both nationally and internationally as there is growing recognition of education’s key role not only in social, but also economic terms.

The conference is, he explained, structured as ‘a narrative’ in which participants can engage, with a judicious mix of theoretical input and practical ‘show me’ sessions that provide the opportunity for participants’ feedback.

National perspectives on curriculum, assessment and reporting: the new agenda

The formal opening was followed by a video presentation from The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson MP (Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training) and an address from The Hon Anna Bligh (Minister, Education and the Arts, Queensland). This was followed by a high level panel session comprising Minister Bligh, Susan Mann (Chief Executive Officer, Curriculum Corporation) Ken Smith and moderated by Tony Mackay (Executive Director, Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria and Director of the Centre for Strategic Educational Thinking).
The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson

Nelson began by thanking the audience for their ‘participation in this very important conference and what, in most cases, is a lifetime of commitment to research and best practice in education’.

His responsibility as Australia’s Minister for Education, Science and Training is, he explained, ‘to constantly think about our future and think what we, as a nation, need to do to deliver the outcomes we want. Our vision is, of course, that every human being and every young person in particular should be able to both find and achieve their own potential whatever that is … in an environment of globalisation and its impacts … (including) the inexorable push to lifelong learning’.

The challenges we face, he argued, along with the fact that ‘the only benchmarks that really will count increasingly are international ones means we have a responsibility to drive, to the extent we are able, national consistency in education to ensure it is of the highest quality’.

The many things the government is trying to do, he explained, involve ‘an effort on my part to bring the views and concerns of the everyday parent, and every day person into play’. The government seeks, in this context, ‘to drive national consistency in education, particularly national high standards, transparency, education that is based in evidence, and high performance to make sure that parents are supported in being involved in the education of their children and understand exactly what is going on in relation to it’.

The Australian Government’s conditions for school funding are, he noted, many and importantly include:

- a nationally consistent starting age by 2010;
- national testing and reporting to parents in the key benchmark areas of learning of literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5 and 7 and, increasingly moving to Year 9 in the context of ACER research which showed that the single most important indicator of performance in Year 12 was Year 9 literacy;
- a requirement that the performance of the school be made public and available to the community, including such things as literacy and numeracy performance, but also teacher retention and attendance rates, student attendance rates, and median Year 10 and Year 12 results;
- a view that principals should have a say over which teachers are employed in the school which, in Victoria and South Australia is unremarkable, but is essential if principals really are to deliver a high quality of education.

Another key government initiative, he noted, is to develop the Australian Certificate of Education in the context of eight different ways of assessing the academic proficiency of our children as they approach Year 12 and the fact that, ‘at the moment, I can’t with any confidence say that we have the same standards throughout the country’, with the result many parents are turning to the International Baccalaureate instead.
ACER has been appointed to conduct work in relation to the ACE which ‘ideally could include agreement among the States and Territories for a common assessment of performance at least in some key learning areas for Year 12’. Alternatively, he argued, it might take the IB in some ways as a template which then could be offered voluntarily by schools and taken by students. Or it could, on the other hand, mean a scholastic aptitude test analogous to that in the US and which doesn’t require a particular curriculum.

Referring to critics of the ACE, Nelson observed, that ‘I myself have always argued against a common national curriculum, and I continue to do so on the basis it would be a prescription for poor outcomes’. But, he added, this does not mean ‘it is beyond the wit of all of us to drive national consistency in this area’.

Turning to reporting, Nelson argued ‘the average parent is at a loss to understand the jargonistic nonsense that is frequently reflected in school reports’. That is why the Australian Government is requiring a ranking of A to E, or something like that to have some idea of how students might be ranked – that is, an indication of which quartile they might be in, which is presented in a way that puts the information in an appropriate context.

The government also will require ‘cohort testing’ in the areas of ICT, Science and Civics and Citizenship in Years 6 and 10, – ‘not to demand that kids be taught the same things at the same time, but rather to ensure that in key areas of education there is some common testing and that we can have confidence in it’.

‘I realise that not all in the audience will agree but do know that every single one of you and of us has the best interests of children at heart,’ he said in closing.

The Hon Anna Bligh

The theme of the conference is, Bligh noted, curriculum and assessment – closing the gap, but to close any gap, ‘you must first understand why it exists’.

The gap has, in her view, emerged from a range of cultural, structural and political forces and trends which the conference is designed to discuss; and she sought to provide some sense of ‘the broad political context that exists and in which your work occurs’.

Regardless of the jurisdiction involved we all are ‘asking the same questions and motivated by the same desires’. When it comes to the essential questions Minister Nelson posed she, for example, doesn’t disagree ‘at the broad, general level despite differences we may have over the details’. The need for a ‘relevant, engaging curriculum linked inextricably to robust, comparable assessment is agreed’. In fact, she explained, ‘it was actually state and territory ministers who put curriculum consistency on the agenda’, which demonstrates the degree of consensus that does exist. It is a consensus shaped by ‘the social, political and economic forces that exist, and not a matter of accident’.

Education will always be of significant political interest, especially given the size of state level investment in it and the fact it is one of ‘our best levers to guide change and
development in our economies and societies. Education in this context is ‘always about culture and hence the stakes are both high and will continue to grow’.

Taking the theme of ‘the gap’ as her motif, Bligh suggested the proposition there should be ‘a seamless relationship between what is taught and how, and how it is assessed seems self evident. But clearly it isn’t or you wouldn’t be considering it at this conference with all the associated issues involved.’

**The political forces at work**

Bligh then proceeded to advance some ‘personal observations’ about the causes of the gap:

- Over the last decade there has, she argued, been an extraordinary national focus on the development of key learning areas and outcomes based education. The real focus has, in this context, been on curriculum content in ‘highly charged debates’, such as one relating to SOSE in Queensland which saw it the subject of policies at the level of political parties in that state. This all resulted in curriculum documents which she believes are ‘input focused’ and where assessment often is treated as ‘an after thought to the main game’.

- There is an ‘ongoing disjunction’ between publicly-stated policy in Australia and local activity to implement it. The Hobart Declaration of many years ago, for instance, committed us to nationally consistent curriculum, but state and territory activity has not really reflected that decision in practice. The national audit of curriculum subsequently conducted in fact shows curriculum in Australia ‘more divergent than when the original commitment was made’; with serious impacts such as the existence of up to two years difference between states and territories as to when particular outcomes are taught, which is ‘a real problem’ for people participating in the growing mobility that is occurring across the nation.

- After twenty years of declarations leading to very little, ‘it’s almost inevitable that national consistency is back on the agenda’ with a high degree of commitment from ministers through a process she briefly outlined. Curriculum authorities and curriculum development experts have, she noted in this context, been the source of ‘some resistance at times to national statements of learning, but the choices are clear. We either cooperate to draw together the best thinking and lead the development of national consistency, or we pile up the sandbags to protect our unique systems against the Sherman tanks that certainly are on the way driven, not by ministers like us, but by the demands of parents, teachers, industry and the community as a whole.’

- Assessment as professional judgement sometimes seems to be treated as if it is ‘sacred ground’. Professional judgement underpins every assessment task, but there is ‘little expectation’ it is subject to peer review, external scrutiny or consistent moderation in the way that other professional judgements are
expected to be. This is, Bligh explained, something Queensland is seeking to address and she expected participants to hear more about that at the conference. Outcomes-based education ‘landed in the middle of this’ but the results are, despite the best efforts of schools, ‘unintelligible to parents and the community’ in the terms the Minister Nelson expressed. This has led to a requirement in the quadrennial funding that reporting conform to the characteristics he outlined and subsequent argument, particularly about quartile reporting which Bligh sees as ‘potentially very damaging’, while acknowledging the need for meaningful reports to parents is agreed.

**Social factors as well**

Beyond the political forces she outlined, there also are some social factors which ought to be taken into account:

- We are in the process of ‘a massive transition to a knowledge economy which parents understand’ and which manifests itself in a variety of ways. These were illustrated with an outline of the ‘earning or learning’ green paper consultations in which she was involved in her own state. These, and the subsequent ‘better reporting discussion paper’ issued last year, demonstrated ‘a gap between the expectations of clients of our education system and those who work in it’. Parents, for example, have growing expectations of our system, particularly as they become more mobile, ‘and this is not going to diminish’. The nature of assessment and how it is reported will ‘be affected by this and related to social change’.

- Technology is ‘changing the relationship between parents, the home and school’ and will continue to do so, as it becomes even more accessible.

- Government expectations in the area will only increase as they become ‘even more interested in outcomes and the delivery of results achieved from the money that is invested’. The urge to improve and to test improvements will only grow and ‘this urgency must be shared by all in a position to influence curriculum and assessment in schools’.

**Closing the gap**

Curriculum authorities have ‘a unique opportunity to help close the gap’. In doing so, however, she urged participants to:

- Consider it all in the context of addressing teaching and reporting as part of the curriculum and assessment theme, ‘so we are not back here in two years time seeking to close other gaps’.
- Recognise and understand the social, political and economic forces shaping the policy debate and the jurisdictional responses.
- Accept that ‘the means to close the gap is here in this room, but you must use your power for good’. National testing at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 is, she argued,
‘inevitable’, but must be done through nationally consistent statements of learning that are embedded in every state and territory curriculum statement and in every classroom teacher’s practice. ‘So you have to be engaged.’

- ‘Talk loudly about assessment to give it the status it deserves in professional dialogue.’
- Bring parents into the dialogue and include them at all levels, ‘because they are driving the argument at the political level’.

Parents, she concluded, ‘want a good quality curriculum effective ways of assessing it, and clear ways of reporting the outcomes. It’s a question of closing the gap which perhaps never should have opened.’

Thanking Minister Bligh, Ken Smith noted that the four major challenges the conference and its participants face are:

- the growing political consensus around curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting;
- the fact the debate is around the detail, rather than the substance, and this is where professional input really is required;
- the need to ensure coherent and consistent advice to ministers to ensure the professional voice is heard in active, rather than defensive ways;
- ensuring the system operates in the interests of students, parents and the broader community, with the requirement we understand what they seek and respond appropriately.

The panel

‘Given the way in which you described the emerging consensus’, panel moderator Tony Mackay noted, ‘combined with an unprecedented level of national activity, which also is being reflected in schools, does it really amount’, he asked Minister Bligh, ‘to a new agenda? Is it really different?’

While conceding in response that it is not necessarily terribly new, in the sense that curriculum, teaching, assessment reporting have always been the core issues, what may be new, she suggested, ‘is recognising and privileging this rather than a lot of peripheral things that have occupied systems and schools’. What also arguably is new, is the ‘sense of urgency at the macro, government level, not just in the education portfolio, but at a whole-of-government level, because of the recognition that knowledge is the new global currency’.

Responding to a question about the degree of optimism he feels with this sense of urgency at play, Smith noted the difficulties involved in working on national statements, but also pointed to the fact the ‘immense debates’ about English (which is ‘the most difficult area’ and hence an area where Ministers were ‘wise to start’) are now basically resolved and ‘so we now have moved on’. One of the key issues emerging in his view in terms of the knowledge economy is having eight state and
territory curricula in such a small country in the region which is seeking to maintain its competitiveness. There is a question, he suggested, of whether we can continue to ‘afford such divergence’; and this is now being looked at in a ‘more mature, and bipartisan way’.

Asked about tensions and conflicts, Sue Mann saw potential for ‘the new agenda to transcend this because there is a stronger Ministerial desire for increased commonality than in the past’. That said, she did recall ‘being close to that with curriculum in the late 1980s’ without it coming to fruition. There is a need, in this context she noted, ‘to avoid the tendency for the curriculum mafia and authorities to protect their own patch’, as Minister Bligh alluded in her address.

State and territory ministers have, Bligh noted in response to a question from Mackay about timeline, ‘signed on’ to taking this agenda forward over the next four years; and ‘inevitably the discussion about national testing will progress the one about national consistency as well’. Looking at the politics when it first was raised, she added, ‘there was resistance from state and territory ministers to the original, negatively conceived national testing’. Now, however, ‘we find the results useful, albeit while having concerns about how comparability works if we are to be ranked in public’ and every state will have to compromise. It won’t work if the states adopt the view, ‘national consistency means you being consistent with us’. And a clear difference that exists in this regard is that ‘some of the previous forces of resistance will be overwhelmed by the common commitment that exists’.

The major lesson to learn from the Year 3, 5 and 7 testing in Smith’s view, is the need to ‘be clear about the policy purpose for any testing regime’. Clarity of objectives for why a particular regime is being put in place is ‘essential if we are to move away from knee jerk reactions to greater coherence and consistency; and that is part of the professional role’.

With all the ‘intense activity underway leading to more valuable work than we have seen in years and a better relationship between schools and systems imagine’, Mackay invited Bligh, to consider what happens if ‘we see the agenda coming to fruition over the next couple of years. How ambitious is it really as we also have new providers coming into play and the push to personalisation grows?’

It is, she responded, ‘very difficult to predict changes that will occur since the nature of teacher, students and parent relationships shift, especially as technology enables 24:7 communication and interaction and not just 9 to 5’. Her point was that ‘the ground shifts very quickly and it makes what previously was disputed, such as the use of testing and the collection and analysis of comparable data, become commonplace in schools to the point where it is being used with great enthusiasm as part of professional dialogue’.

‘We can’, Smith added, ‘either go with and influence the agenda we have been discussing or resist it’ as Bligh had said. Schools, he noted, work in a broader environment and the school responsibility extends beyond their gates. This requires us to ‘improve our evidence base to inform the decisions we take’.

Closing the gap also means, Mackay observed, ‘addressing the moral purpose of bringing together equity and excellence so’, he asked Mann, ‘have we got the gaps
right?’ In the 1980s, she responded in the final remarks of the session, ‘we focused on outcomes to the detriment of assessment. The concept of lifelong learning has shifted our focus more towards that as the goal, so it is moving beyond testing and diagnosing to also engage in treating. And this is what leads us to closing a whole range of gaps – the excellence and equity gap, the gap between teachers and parents and the gap between policy, research and practice and the way they interrelate.’
The big picture

Dr Barry McGaw (Director for Education, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) then provided the opening keynote address.

Barry McGaw

McGaw sought in his presentation to draw on the rich array of data collected through the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, to address the question of where Australia sits in terms of the quality of its education system, with particular reference to the 15 year olds involved in the study.

The information collected through the 2003 PISA assessment comprised, he explained, a volume of questions in the form of a three and a half hour mathematics assessment and an hour each for reading, science and problem solving. Each student actually completed two hours of paper and pencil tasks (a subset of all questions) and a half hour questionnaire on background, learning habits, learning environment, engagement and motivation. A questionnaire also was completed by school principals, which provided information on school demography and the quality of the learning environment.

The detailed work around PISA has been undertaken by an international consortium, led by Professor Geoff Masters of ACER (who spoke later in the conference) and, by 2006, will involve 58 countries of which only 30 are from the OECD. In terms of curriculum relevance the PISA is not, he observed, about curriculum content as such, but rather what 15 year olds ought to be able to do with what they have learned in Science, Reading and Maths. So ‘it doesn’t start with curriculum, but is fundamentally about curriculum and its purposes’.

The message on quality

The PISA assessments in mathematical literacy, on which McGaw focused this section of his address, were sufficient to enable the OECD to develop a ‘well defined proficiency scale’, where each level was illustrated by appropriate samples of work. The scale originally spanned levels 1 to 6, but since 11% of the sample fell below Level 1, that category was introduced as well.

Level 1, for instance means the student can ‘answer questions in familiar contexts, where all relevant information is present and can carry out other routine tasks’; while below Level 1 means they are ‘unable to use mathematical skills in ways required by the easiest PISA tasks’. At the other end of the spectrum, a student at Level 6 can ‘conceptualise, generalise and use information based on investigations and modelling of complex problems, and link and move between different information sources and representations’.
The distribution of students in the OECD involved in the PISA across the levels was 11% below Level 1, 15% at Level 1, 21% at Level 2, 22% at Level 3, 18% at Level 4, 10% at Level 5, and 4% at Level 6. Australia fared relatively well in these terms, with 6% at Level 6, 14% below Level 2 and 4% below Level 1; which was behind, for example, Finland and Japan, but ahead of the United States. And Australia’s mean mathematical literacy level placed it between fourth and eleventh place in the OECD (because there is no significant statistical differences between a number of the means), which McGaw illustrated in more substantial terms with the following table which broke results down into some constituent parts.

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<th>Subscales</th>
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<th>Change &amp; relationships</th>
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Australia’s performance is, he noted, consistent across the different domains compared with, say, Japan where the inconsistency, and the fact they are not number one in each case, has caused ‘consternation and concern’.

McGaw then showed a series of charts on problem solving in particular, where Australia is ranked between fourth and ninth in mean score terms.

Looked at overall, PISA’s message is that Australian education, at least to the age of 15, is ‘of high quality by international standards in mathematics, problem solving, reading and science. We are doing well by international standards, but that is a moving target, and if you sit still, you fall behind.’

**The message on equity**

So what, he asked, of equity, ‘given our view it is inequitable to leave children behind?’ That can, he observed, be a complex question – ‘if you focus solely on the spread’ – because you can take it all too far, and depress the performance of the top. Given this, he preferred to focus on the relationship between social background and achievement and what it revealed.

Fifteen year olds involved in PISA, McGaw explained, completed a questionnaire that collected information important for the interpretation and analysis of the results. Students were asked about characteristics such as gender, economic and social background and activities at home and school.

The information on economic and social background – parents’ education and occupation, cultural artefacts in the home – permitted the construction of an index of social background that ranges from socially disadvantaged to socially advantaged and which is comparable across countries.
The relationship between social background and achievement is, he noted, ‘quite strong’, which he demonstrated graphically (with both variables plotted) for the results of the 265,000 randomly sampled students involved. The correlation of around 0.45 is ‘relatively high … indicating quite a strong relationship between the two variables’; though it also can be seen there are many exceptions, with ‘socially advantaged individuals who do not perform well … and students from disadvantaged background who perform well’. That said, the ‘slope of the regression line that summarises the relationship’ in the graphic he showed, is quite steep, indicating that increased social advantage, in general, pays off with considerable increase in educational performance. Such a result has, he observed, long been established in research and can lead to ‘a counsel of despair’; since if there is such a strong relationship between social background and educational achievement, ‘education can be seen as impotent and unable to make a difference’.

An international survey like PISA, however, permits an examination of the relationship between social background and educational achievement on a country-by-country basis and this reveals that marked differences exist; which McGaw showed in a diagram with the results from five countries.

Put simply, the lines for Finland and Korea are ‘significantly less steep than the one for the OECD as a whole’. In other words, ‘increased social advantage in these countries is associated with less increase in educational achievement than in the OECD as a whole. The results in these countries are more equitable’, and although students differ in achievement, it is not in a way that is so substantially related to their social background.

By contrast, the lines for the UK, the US and Germany all are significantly steeper than the one for the OECD as a whole, which means in all of these countries, ‘social background is more substantially related to educational achievement … Their results are inequitable in the sense that differences among students in their literacy levels reflect differences in their social background to a marked extent’. Australia too is a high performing country with a slope equivalent to the UK and the US, and significantly steeper than the OECD average; ‘bearing in mind, the steeper the slope, the less equitable the results’.

Thus, socially disadvantaged students do ‘very much worse’ in some countries in the OECD than others. And the gap in educational achievement between socially disadvantaged students in Germany (where it arguably is worst) and their counterparts in Finland and Korea represents ‘around three years of schooling’. More detailed analysis of the German data then shows, McGaw explained, the pattern to be ‘strongly related to the organisation of schooling’ in that country. From age 11, German students are separated into vocational and academic schools of various types on the basis of the educational future judged to be ‘the most appropriate for them’. Students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds generally end up in low-status vocational schools and achieve poor educational results. Students from socially advantaged backgrounds are directed to high-status academic schools where they achieve high quality results.

‘The schooling system’, he observed, ‘reproduces the existing social arrangements, conferring privilege where it already exists and denying it where it does not.’
When looked at in terms of a matrix combining social equity and reading literacy, Australia, he demonstrated, is in the ‘high quality/low equity’ quadrant, along with such countries as the UK, the US and New Zealand, whereas Finland and Korea are joined in the ‘high quality/high equity’ quadrant by countries such as Canada, Ireland and Sweden; ‘blowing the myth you can’t have both’.

He then conducted a similar exercise for Maths in relation to social background, where patterns might be expected to differ from those for reading. In this case, Australia is now closer to the high quality/high equity quadrant where it would seek to be. But there are, he noted, two ways to think about equity which ought to be considered:

- in terms of the slope as outlined above;
- how well the line summarises the relationship and the degree of spread there is around the line.

Putting the two together (both slope and spread), Australia demonstrates average equity because, although the slope is steep, the spread is greater, with the result it is in the desired quadrant. So the Maths story is ‘more encouraging’ in Australia than was the case with reading.

But, McGaw suggested, ‘let’s focus on schools rather than countries and look at the variation between and within schools’. Looking at the variation in Maths performance in these terms suggests, he explained, that in some countries the variation mostly lies between schools but in others, including Australia, schools are similar and quality is high. In countries with highly stratified schools, ‘much of the intended variation between schools can be explained by socioeconomic inequalities in learning’, as opposed to systems where the variation is explained by ‘the socioeconomic level of students and schools’.

In other words, if we take the variation between schools, and consider how much we can account for in terms of differences in social background, ‘it turns out most of them … So the education system is playing a socially reproductive role’.

He then took Germany as an example and found that when he plotted both student achievement and school mean regression, the slopes of the lines between and within schools were very similar, because of the social sorting that was going on. And the same was the case in Japan. With Canada and Australia, however, the lines were actually less steep because the grouping of Australian and Canadian students in schools is less related to social background – that is, there are more advantaged and disadvantaged students within the same schools and hence less social stratification between them.

This, together with the preceding analysis suggests that PISA’s message about equity for Australia is that Australian education, at least to age 15, is of ‘moderate equity by international standards. Compared with other OECD countries, it has:

- relatively large increases in reading literacy associated with increases in advantage of social background;
- average increases in mathematics literacy associated with increases in
advantage of social background;

- a relatively low proportion of variation in mathematics literacy explained by differences in social background;
- some clustering of students in schools by social background.

Public and private?

In this context, ‘Do the differences between government and non-government schools create inequities?’ asked McGaw.

There are countries where public schools are outperforming private schools and private schools cater to the lower performing market, such as Japan, Switzerland, Finland and Italy. In countries such as the US and UK, that’s not the case. If, with this in mind, we take away the impact of social background in average terms, we find ‘almost all of the differences in achievement which favours the private school sector in those latter countries disappears’.

What’s the message for Australia? ‘We don’t know because the identifiers of school type are suppressed in the PISA data by Australia.’

Where does all this data and its implications leave us in terms of strategies we ought to adopt? That, he ended, is something he intended to address the following afternoon.

(Sources of further information:

- websites for further information are www.oecd.org/edu for OECD education work, and www.pisa.oecd.org for all national and international PISA publications and the complete micro-level data base;
- staff contacts include McGaw himself (barry.mcgaw@oecd.org), adreas.schleicher@oecd.org and pisa@oecd.org.
What’s driving curriculum and assessment reform?

Dr. Michelle Bruniges (Chief Executive, Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training) and Ken Smith (Director General, Queensland Department of Education and the Arts) outlined the reasons curriculum and assessment have been the focus of so much reform effort over recent years in all Australian education jurisdictions.

Michelle Bruniges – Curriculum

‘Today, more than ever before we are citizens of a global arena, that to some extent, influences the destiny of every individual ... The operating context for education in Australia is increasingly characterised by accelerating changes in the global economy, technologies, the needs of young people, the increased visibility of diverse social groups and a need to remain competitive both nationally and internationally ... Within this operating context education faces considerable challenges in successfully overcoming the conflicting tensions of human activity in order to ensure that all young Australians enjoy the right to a fair go/ equality of access to opportunities in education and throughout their lives.’

Education reform must, she suggested, ‘successfully navigate these tensions in order to deliver high quality curriculum that represents the appropriate mix for any designated operating context’. That said, education is not simply driven by ‘a diverse array of social, cultural, economic and political factors; education itself can be a critical strategic driver for improving these very same factors’. Not only is education a critical strategic lever for improving social mobility, for example, ‘but in order to preserve this mobility it must provide ways to develop the social and cultural understanding of a global world necessary to engender the humanism critical to democracy. Curriculum is one of the elements of education which has responsibility for enabling this understanding and for setting in place processes whereby students can become active and responsible citizens who can interpret this world.’

Reform is therefore, she argued, ‘propelled by multiple and varied drivers whose influence and purpose is context related: curriculum reform is one of the challenges facing us as educators. What drives curriculum reform today will not necessarily be the same as what drives curriculum reform in ten years time. As we step forward into the new millennium advances in technology, economic prosperity, pressures for equality, cultural diversity, globalisation and changing student needs are key considerations in the area of curriculum. The degree of influence of these drivers will change with social context, and there is no recipe or algorithm which describes how best to integrate the influences of drivers into curriculum. The challenge for curriculum reform is to take stock of the current operating context and establish a strategic vision for learning, in a way that ensures that educational access and outcomes for all students is maximised.’
Some words on ‘curriculum’

‘As professionals operating within the education field, as parents, as community members or as students we know’, Bruniges acknowledged, ‘that the concept of curriculum has many different meanings, and it is sometimes difficult to understand the exact nature of what is being referred to when the term is used.’

For the purpose of her argument, however, she took curriculum to be, ‘All learning planned, guided and implemented by the school.’ ‘Curriculum does not stand alone but has a history from which it evolves and a context in which it operates. Curriculum presents as an educational strategic plan for learning, a prioritisation of knowledge, skills, understandings and personal values, and goes well beyond issues of content, structure and design. While quality curriculum is essential to maximising student outcomes, ultimately its effectiveness will depend on the quality of teaching.’

Curriculum in Australia is, she noted, a state/territory responsibility though, ever since Whitlam established the Commonwealth Schools Commission in 1973, there has been impetus for education collaboration between the Australian and State/ Territory governments. This culminated in the July 2003 Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) meeting where Ministers directed the Australian Education Systems Officials Committee (AESOC) to manage a national project on behalf of State and Territory Education Ministers to deliver consistent curriculum outcomes in all schools across Australia, in the four domains of English, Maths, Science and Civics and Citizenship at each of the four points in schooling (Years 3, 5, 7, and 9). Work is complete for English and currently soon to be underway in each of the other domains. ‘The product of this work’, Bruniges explained, ‘will be a set of nationally agreed, curriculum outcomes in each specified domain. The national challenge presented is what happens next?’

Curriculum reform

‘The history of Australian education has’, she contended, ‘seen many debates centred on determining the best approaches to curriculum development in order to maximise student outcomes.’ While we can in this context point to areas of world’s best practice, and successful Australian results, ‘Australian education systems are still regularly criticised for an alleged failure to provide rigorous curricula. At times this criticism is formed and sometimes driven by the frenzy of the tabloid media who seek to sensationalise rather than offer a balanced and informative view. However, the current educational landscape does display some signs of distress which indicate the need for educational reform. These signs include the shift of students between different educational sectors, the widening gap between high performing and low performing students, a failure to meet expectations in the national goals of schooling, the deteriorating infrastructure of school buildings, and assertions of a chronic future failure in numbers of teachers for our schools as the baby boomers generation of teachers moves into retirement.’

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*Closing the Gap: Curriculum Corporation Conference, June 2005*
Beyond this, it is estimated that ‘from each year of students going through school 35,000 Australian students will not complete their secondary schooling and will subsequently obtain no further formal education or training qualification; with significant social and economic costs both for society and the individuals concerned.’

Curriculum, Bruniges argued, has the responsibility to ‘ensure that students are able to experience the benefits of education and become equipped with the skills and knowledge to participate and contribute to a changing world. The way in which inadequate educational outcomes are addressed becomes the topic for curriculum reform and gives rise to the consideration of important questions. What is driving curriculum reform? In which direction/s is it being pushed by the major drivers? At what destination/s should we be seeking to arrive? And, what choices and input are we making to ensure that this destination is realised?’

The challenge is, ‘to meet these multidimensional problems with varied responses and solutions that are delivered through sustainable and transformative curriculum, and that will meet the demands of a rapidly changing and developing global society. In responding to meet the changing needs of the current context, or anticipating the future operating context, curriculum needs to undergo a constant process of reformation. This process is influenced by current, as well as predicted drivers of reform, and must find shape amid a variety of social and political tensions produced as a result of fundamental differences in philosophies of education.’

It is important to recognise in this context that, as society develops and changes so too does the body of knowledge valued by it. The curriculum has the capacity to be a significant mirror of changing beliefs and opinions. Hence, as our world increases the pace at which it modifies, we often see the reflection of this modification in the reform of curriculum. It may be argued that by the time curriculum is developed and documented it is in fact outdated. The challenge for curriculum reform then is to ensure that curriculum is flexible enough so that it is credible in the present society and provides a sufficient foundation for the future education and employment needs of students. One way to address curriculum currency is to focus on building a framework that identifies the significant elements of learning and enables the teaching profession to be innovative within the framework.’

**Social and economic trends driving curriculum reform**

Bruniges then briefly charted the major social and economic trends that are driving curriculum reform within and even beyond Australia.

**Globalisation**

‘Globalisation’, she noted, ‘is a feature of the world we now live in. Australian society, like some other nation states is undergoing constant transformation. Advances in information and communication technologies, and in transport systems have brought about rapid change and diverse challenges … The changing nature of production and the workforce will influence demand for different skills. Curriculum must respond to these changes by providing students with the opportunities to develop the appropriate skills, while in their school years and beyond; … (including) a greater need for Australians to understand other people, their cultures and circumstances.’
Given the global context in which education increasingly exists, ‘it is imperative that curriculum remains relevant, responsible, adaptive and responsive to the international arena – while at the same time not losing sight of the immediate local operating context.’

The nature of knowledge and the knowledge economy

The rapid growth in knowledge – improved access to knowledge and use of existing knowledge to generate new knowledge – has resulted in ‘changes to the way people work and to our understanding of the nature and value of knowledge. These changes have significant implications for the purpose and practice of education, which must be reflected in planning the delivery of curriculum in schools.’

An abundance of knowledge, Bruniges explained, ‘gives rise to increased choice in the content of curriculum – with the resultant challenge of how to make the best choices to determine the most effective and appropriate content. The implication of which knowledge is chosen to become school curriculum can have profound social consequences. Hence decisions made about knowledge must involve critique and intelligent and appropriate response to advances in knowledge – as well as enable the same sense of questioning and examination of knowledge – to exist as a fundamental part of any curriculum. As it is impossible for students to learn everything, it is necessary that students learn a core of knowledge that will provide the common understandings and language needed to be able to work with others in a variety of contexts, and develop the research and thinking skills to find and use information when it is required.’

For our students to thrive in the knowledge society, she argued, three areas of emphasis must be made explicit in curriculum:

- provide students with the core knowledge – what is essential to ‘know’;
- enable the students to develop the intellectual tools, the learning strategies, and the critical faculties required for deep and lifelong learning;
- ensure that students understand how to apply and critique knowledge and skills.

Advances in technology

Advances in technologies in the past decade, she continued, ‘have led to significant change in curriculum; not only in what is taught, but also in how it is assessed’. There has in particular been a rapid progression from teaching students how to use computers, to using them as powerful tools in everyday teaching and learning. ‘This has implications for not only the way in which students learn, but also for the method of instruction.’
As further technological developments continue to accelerate the use of interactive technologies in learning ongoing curriculum challenges will, according to Bruniges, include how best to:

- integrate and respond to technology in the curriculum;
- ensure that students are equipped to make choices about the appropriate technology and methods to use in particular contexts;
- ensure that teachers are able to deliver effective pedagogy that incorporates technology and ensures that teachers and students remain connected;
- develop each student’s capacity to evaluate the validity and relevance of information;
- ensure that advances in technology do not leave an individual student and/or a particular cohort of students behind.

Diversity

In Australia’s increasingly visible diverse society education, Bruniges argued, ‘has an important role in bridging differences and promoting mutual respect, tolerance and understanding between people of different races, cultures, and religions, gender, sexuality and secular society. Furthermore, as part of a global society, Australia’s role and responsibility in doing this is equally true in an international context.’

Curriculum needs to provide ‘a path for students to develop values and a way of life that is consistent with sharing the rights and responsibilities of citizenship with others of different backgrounds. This path must be a balanced one that embraces and celebrates diversity, while at the same time is able to acknowledge and respond to some of the often quite legitimate concerns that surround learning in educational environments that include diverse student bodies. Furthermore, what is significantly different about education today is that the cohort of students finishing Year 12 (or equivalent) has increased. Consequently, there is a greater demand on teachers to meet an increasingly diverse range of student learning needs.’

There must, therefore, be ‘a common structure to curriculum, with the flexibility to respond to the diversity of student needs and student groups in differing local contexts within our education systems’.

Developments in teaching and learning

While we have always known that students differ in the set of experiences and knowledge they bring to the learning environment and that they learn in vastly different ways education today is, Bruniges noted, also influenced by advances in research about teaching and learning.

Pedagogy

‘High quality teachers who have the knowledge, skills, experience and professional value to be able to respond effectively to differences in the cohort make a significant and lasting contribution to young people’s lives by enhancing their knowledge and their capacities … As the student body becomes increasingly visible in its
heterogeneity – communities, clients and students demand a more personalised and tailored approach to education, … (and) the challenge for educators is to “develop pedagogy that can accommodate these differences.”

Effective Teachers

Bruniges cited John Hattie’s ‘recent rigorous and exhaustive research’ as ‘profound and powerful evidence to support what we have always known – “excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence on achievement.”’ The knowledge, skills, experience and professional value of teachers must, she argued, ‘be recognised and prioritised in curriculum development, if the learning and achievements of students are to be enhanced.’

Ensuring that teachers are ‘central to the reformation of curriculum will enable the development of pedagogy that provides the most prosperous conditions for learning, and the highest quality learning outcomes for all students. To achieve this centrality, curriculum must be the product of effective negotiation, and teachers must be empowered with a leading role in negotiation processes. Furthermore, such negotiation should provide space to contest knowledge as well as recognise and respond to the wisdom, discernment and distinguishing expertise of the teaching profession.’

‘Curriculum should not only be the result of processes of design and construction, it should also be the outcomes of multiple and diverse conversations. These conversations should be wide enough to include those with the capacity to contribute and add value – for example, the top scientists, distinguished leaders within the humanities, artists, the most innovative business people, parents and community members and industry leaders and students. The conversation should involve interactions between teachers and those with specialised knowledge and insights in order that curriculum is reflective of the most groundbreaking and current knowledge and experience.’

Effective teaching is then needed to link ‘pedagogy to the needs and prior understanding of the learner, the knowledge and skills to be learnt, the values to be acquired, and make valid and reliable assessment decisions about learning’. This means, in effect, that while ‘curriculum is necessary for learning, it is not sufficient if it exists in the absence of quality teachers. If, as part of curriculum reform, we are to prioritise effective teaching, which I argue, we must do if curriculum reform is to succeed, it is imperative that teachers are respected for their knowledge, skills, experience and professional value … Whereas once it was thought necessary to “teacher-proof” curriculum, it is (now) imperative that curriculum is a process that prioritises teacher input.’

Equity in curriculum

There is, Bruniges noted, ‘growing evidence that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer … In a democratic society that prides itself on egalitarianism and a fair go for all, there is surely a compelling need for equity of access and

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opportunity to education.’ While Australian students attain high results by international standards, of great concern is that international testing as evidenced in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) indicates that disparities among students are wider in Australia than in most other nations. Faced with such disparity, there has been an increased focus on the “new equity” in education – which has come to mean the proportional representation by designated “equity groups” in predetermined curriculum outcomes.’

This does not mean expecting and accepting differential outcomes for students, which leads to the perpetuation and exacerbation of inequalities, but rather ensuring ‘that the conditions necessary for student success exist in all schools and for all students’.

The use of data to inform teaching and learning

Vicki Phillips argued at last year’s Curriculum Corporation conference that effective education reform requires alignment of the three key message systems that exist in education – curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Unless these systems are fully aligned, reform efforts will be hard to sell to practitioners on the one hand, and dysfunctional on the other. Luke’s argument for alignment is, for Bruniges, ‘a powerful one … If Australia is to achieve equitable, far-reaching high quality educational standards for all students, just as curriculum is reformed, so too must be the forms of assessment with which it is coupled.’

Conclusion

‘Education must’, Bruniges concluded, ‘take account of the transformation that society undergoes. Curriculum should be an enabling mechanism that nurtures adjustment to change, and simultaneously provides a roadmap of expectation. As the pace and diversity of local and global change increases, education will continue to face an abundance of challenges. The responses to these challenges will undoubtedly influence the type of societies in which we live.’

There are, she argued, many tensions and drivers that influence curriculum reform. In anticipation of, and response to these there are some aspects of curriculum that are fundamental to its quality, effectiveness and success, including that:

- while there must be a common core of essential knowledge, this core should not stifle the regeneration of curriculum, but rather respond intelligently, flexibly, creatively and bravely to social change;
- curriculum must enable students to develop the higher-level process skills necessary to participate in a changing and dynamic environment and contribute to a civil society;
- curriculum must be a negotiated process that encompasses broad and inclusive conversation;
- curriculum must provide access to knowledge for all;
- curriculum must provide students with the capacity to question, examine and critique knowledge and its application;
- curriculum must take account of, and address appropriately the needs, interests
and knowledge relevant to the current, as well as future, operating context;
• teachers must be able to exercise autonomy, creativity and professional
  judgement in delivering curriculum while remaining accountable and
  consistent;
• the role of the teacher must be recognised as integral to the design, development
  and delivery of curriculum.

‘No two societies’, she ended, ‘are identical. Hence, while we exist as part of the larger
global world and need to have a quality of curriculum that will hold its own
internationally, we are distinguished by living in an Australian society. Education
must capture our uniqueness by recognising local contexts and values and striving for
better outcomes for all Australian citizens. It must share responsibility for valuing and
building our workforce capacity. It must recognise the richness of diversity, in
particular our Indigenous people. It must be socially just. It must critique and
question the ever-changing world. It must be available and accessible to all. It must
develop students to be active, contributing and thriving individuals in their local and
global worlds, and instil in them the capacity for life-long learning. It must meet the
challenges of the here and now, while also preparing for the future. It must highlight
Australia on the global scene as a place where education is valued. And, it must be
such that all Australians are able to take pride in, and benefit from our quality
education systems.’

Ken Smith – Assessment

Modern school education is, according to Smith, ‘a complex business … (and) to the
general public, it sometimes appears to be a maze, compared to the straightforward
system they “went through”.’

Professor Richard Smith of Central Queensland University has suggested we should
think of school education as being like ‘the London Underground, with multiple
entries, exits, recursive paths, alternative ways of getting to the same place, multiple
entry tickets, and so on.’ This, Ken Smith felt, is ‘a neat metaphor’, to which he added
another element in the form of the Underground’s warnings on every platform to
‘Mind the Gap’. This conference, he noted, ‘is about another gap: the gap that can
open between curriculum and assessment. In the education Tube, we must be very
mindful of that gap.’

In Queensland at the moment there is, he explained, a major debate around the
interconnected relationship of curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting; and
local research ‘confirms what I think is the international consensus: that these four
practices have to be in alignment for the best educational outcomes. Nevertheless,
there are priorities and logics, and we have to be wary of allowing say assessment or
reporting to drive curriculum and teaching. At least without reflecting seriously on
what it is we are trying to achieve. The axis of curriculum, teaching, assessment and
reporting can be viewed from a number of positions: from the point of view of the
teacher, or the parent or student, or the school principal, or the local education system
administrator – or from my position, as a manager and policymaker for the system as
a whole.’
When it comes to assessment, ‘at the fundamental level of the teacher–student relationship it’s mainly about monitoring the student’s progress, modifying teaching strategies to adjust to what you’ve found, and clearly reporting results’. From Smith’s point of view as a system manager and a policy adviser, ‘those fundamental uses of assessment do not fade away, but they are joined by other needs’. Further he added, ‘I must be concerned with all students, not just specific individuals, with the viability of the system as a whole, and its accountability to parents, the government and the broader community. In that context, assessment becomes a potentially valuable tool for monitoring and reporting on the performance of the system overall.’

School curriculum in this context, is ‘a part of a government’s remit. Government must concern itself with the quality and effectiveness of school curriculum, and to that extent it must monitor the effectiveness of the education system constantly, and directly intervene at times. So curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting form an important site for government action. However, this shouldn’t be seen as compromising the need for independent non-partisan education. It shouldn’t be seen as a threat to giving accountable discretion to professional educators to see that students are taught in the best way compatible with current knowledge.’

In the space between what became known as the Monkey Trial of 1925 in Tennessee (immortalised in the film *Inherit the Wind*), which he cited as one end of the curriculum regulation spectrum, and a totally laissez-faire approach governments have, there is ‘both room and responsibility to take action about curriculum’. Such action could, he noted, extend beyond the legislative overkill of the approach in Tennessee in the past, to the equally effective requirement that students sit tests in which particular knowledge is included and other knowledge omitted, with schools being funded according to the test outcomes and the like.

**Testing and policymaking**

Teachers, Smith observed, ‘are well aware that assessment can be used for a range of purposes. In teachers college, they are informed that there are two main types of assessment: Formative and Summative. I am advised by folk with classroom experience that out at the chalkface, there are other handy uses for assessment, for example, Punitive and Sedative.’

But tests also have other uses for system administrators and policymakers: system monitoring and reform prominent among them. One American expert he quoted (Robert Linn, 1994) summarised the appeal of tests for advancing reform in the following way:

- tests and assessments are relatively inexpensive;
- testing and assessment can be externally mandated;
- testing and assessment changes can be rapidly implemented;
- results are visible. ‘Test results can be reported to the press … Based on past experience, policymakers can reasonably expect increases in scores in the first few years of a program … with or without real improvement in the broader achievement constructs that tests as assessments are intended to measure.’
Those advantages are, he conceded, ‘pragmatic. They presuppose that testing is a relevant and effective way of achieving the specific necessary reform.’ Testing is, of course, ‘a necessary part of formal education. Done well, it is an ideal way of assessing some aspects of what students can do. Good classroom assessment is vital, as research here in Queensland has shown. But high-stakes testing as a means of assessing systems and schools, students and teachers, of imposing accountability or of motivating reform, needs to be considered very carefully.’ It is a question of getting the balance right, where:

- less assessment or less centralised assessment, on the one hand, may be seen to foster or serve responsiveness to local needs and diversity, pedagogical innovation, professional discretion and educational leadership, ideological neutrality, and primacy of curriculum;
- more assessment or more centralised assessment, on the other, may be seen to foster or serve portability and buying power of credentials, communication of expectations and achievement, motivation to excellence, intellectual rigour and stretch, and alignment of curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting.

‘Most of these, on both sides of the balance are’, Smith suggested, ‘desiderata of a publicly supported education system in a diverse modern democratic state. The resolution cannot be as simple as more or less assessment, or centralised or dispersed control of assessment.’

**Why we need consistency and standards**

At the moment, Smith argued, ‘there are compelling reasons to examine the side of the balance in favour of common standards and assessment that supports those standards’. Queensland has advocated strongly for greater national consistency in curriculum, assessment and reporting standards in part, he explained, because of demographic reality and the population migration that occurs.

But the issue of consistency and standards for Smith is ‘not just about pragmatic recognition of demographic reality, or the journey across state borders. It is about a bigger journey still. If you are a student, it is about you knowing yourself, knowing the measure of yourself, and making your way in the world’; which he illustrated with reference to the young Aboriginal leader in Cape York, Tania Major.

Standards for Major and others are ‘the benchmarks of aspiration. They are the currency of achievement, the legal tender recognised in another state or another country. Like it or not, they are the coin of the educational realm’ – not low-level basic skills, but standards of high-level intellectual engagement.

This in turn means assessment and reporting must reflect and enact high level intellectual engagement, and is an absolutely essential way that curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting must be aligned. This especially is the case when we recognise not only that ‘higher achievers have higher aspirations’, but there also is ‘good reason to believe that it works the other way … (and) higher aspirations generate success.’
Some disturbing trends

While there is a need for consistency and standards this should not, Smith argued, ‘be turned into a caricature of itself. Education has become a complex undertaking, and it is easy to appeal to people by saluting the simplicities of bygone days …’ The Australian Government, he noted, has recently called for a ‘Plain English Report Card’. Their example report card gives a hypothetical (male) student receiving it a criterion-referenced grade: A, B, C, D, E. It also gives him a norm-referenced rating, by identifying his place in a quartile of the class: Top, 2nd, 3rd, Bottom. Published comments by the Minister, Dr Nelson, indicate that these quartiles will literally be of a single class, with on average 25 to 30 students.’

Coincidentally Queensland is about to do something in terms of plain English and criterion-based reporting, ‘so there is potential for some common ground with the Commonwealth. But I’m hoping the example report they have published is a draft, and that they will accept some amendments to it. Because I am very reluctant to accept Top and Bottom, and I am very reluctant to accept placement in quartiles of students in a class of twenty-eight – or fifteen? or seven? And what sort of class – who knows? The issue of how we should educate – especially children – should’, he added, ‘certainly be an arena for robust discussion. But it should not be the place for settling some very important issues by simplistic solutions, or point scoring, or returning to some solutions from the past’.

Smith also was quick to point out that, when he emphasises the need for consistency and standards, he does not mean ‘an excessive use of high-stakes accountability testing on the American model’. As he already had noted, ‘school assessment plays an essential role as an educational tool. And chunked up to a higher logical level, these tests – for example, the national literacy tests for Years 3, 5 and 7 – provide useful system monitors’. But, experience in the US shows, when high stakes such as school closure or loss of funding are attached to such assessment systems, ‘the overall consequences … have been inflated scores (especially if the exact same test is repeated), teaching to the test, narrowing of the curriculum, neglect of higher order skills, and the quaintly named “Lake Wobegon Effect”, whereby everybody miraculously scores above the norm.’

Test-based accountability, he explained, has also had ‘more subtle, less obvious effects as well. For example, it has encouraged teachers to focus on “bubble kids” –those who happen to be near a significant cut-off that determines school performance and perhaps funding. They realise that getting those kids over the line is an easier way to improve the school’s standing than making an effort to genuinely raise the performance of all students or the most at risk.’

But perhaps ‘the most pervasive effect is the narrowing and lowering of expected curriculum outcomes’. If the stakes are high enough, the curriculum becomes ‘a disaggregation of learning that is educationally regressive’.

Every student teacher knows, in this context, ‘that validity is one of the big two criteria of good assessment, along with reliability. Every student teacher also knows that to be valid, an assessment has to adequately and accurately reflect the relevant learning objectives.’ However it is unlikely, Smith suggested, ‘that every student teacher is aware that the validity of an assessment relates not just to the learning
objectives, but to the purposes for which the assessment and its reports will be used. These include the purposes of the system and the public and, in particular, raise the issue of league tables."

There are, according to Smith, ‘plenty of things to object to with league tables’. Fundamentally, he explained, they ‘misrepresent the data we have collected, and invalidate the assessments we have made. And this is invalidity in the fully technical sense, not just a metaphorical or moral sense … We want to be transparent, but we don’t want transparent misinformation. Here in Queensland we will be entering into a dialogue with the news media, and I hope and believe we will see responsible public reporting of school results.’

‘Dumbing down’

For some years Queensland, Smith explained, has engaged in significant research around curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting. One major piece of research involved a thousand observations of selected classrooms, the good news of which was that classrooms were found to be strongly socially supportive, but the bad news was ‘a disturbing frequency of low levels of intellectual engagement and intellectual demand’.

It is difficult, he acknowledged, to say what is behind this type of lowered intellectual expectation, and ‘one temptation is to pull this kind of laxity into line using the tool of assessment for one more purpose’. There is, of course, some value in using assessment to bolster standards. ‘We certainly would hope that benchmark tests of the literacies send a message about what we think is fundamental. We would hope that they are valid and precise enough to warn teachers and schools about inadequate practices. In Queensland we will be instituting some common assessment and testing across the state in the early and middle years of schooling, and in part we would hope that those assessments will drive greater consistency and higher standards in curriculum and teaching.’

But using assessment to drive curriculum and teaching has its risks. Beyond what he already had mentioned, there is a risk that using assessment to drive curriculum and teaching will send the message that this is ‘the right way around’. But curriculum, he argued, ‘should come first, or curriculum and assessment should both fit into a framework. Otherwise, the assessment tail may wag the curriculum dog.’

There is a need, he reiterated, to ensure that curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting are all aligned. ‘And they need to align vertically as well as horizontally: they need to align in terms of intellectual challenge, as well as content covered. We should’, in this context, ‘recognise that dumbing down in schools can occur in the name of either amorphous personal growth or reductionist test-fixations. We need to resist the challenges to intellectual rigour that come from either … There is a workable, consistent position between the extremes, and it is not an obscure or abstract or intellectually difficult position.’
Aligning curriculum and assessment

This goes back, Smith noted, to ‘getting the balance right. On the one hand, then, we have the importance of aligning curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting. On the other hand we have the risks that follow from aligning curriculum and assessment too tightly, or from aligning curriculum to assessment, rather than vice versa. On the one hand we have the usefulness of assessment for reinforcing standards, communicating expectations, motivating improvement, monitoring the system. And on the other hand we have the risks of perverse consequences, like narrower curriculum, and of misinterpretation, like league tables. On the one hand we have the educationally essential role of formal and informal classroom assessment that is continual and integral with learning. And on the other hand we have the challenge of supporting teachers to do it well.’

Returning to the metaphor he used at the start ‘we need’, he stated, ‘to mind the gap between curriculum and assessment. And sometimes we must close it, and sometimes we must preserve it.’

Referring to Queensland experience in particular, he then explained how the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study looked at curriculum and assessment, and demonstrated ‘a marked inconsistency between the quality and nature of pedagogy and those of teachers’ assessment practices’. There was a generally low level of demand for intellectual quality in assessment tasks, especially in the more informal setting of the early and middle school.’ Since then, however, ‘we have found that adopting a rigorous assessment system is workable. It challenges teachers, but the important thing is to provide them with appropriate support and a feedback mechanism. Under those conditions, they demonstrate the skills and commitment to meet the demands of good assessment, statewide comparability and school accountability.’

That rigorous assessment system brings ‘a cluster of benefits. It establishes standards for student work. It supports effective implementation of the curriculum. It enables comparative reporting on the quality of student work’ – and Queensland is now working to bring curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting into systematic alignment in primary and junior schooling through the recently announced Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (QCAR) Framework which will:

- define what is essential curriculum for all students in Years P–10;
- assist schools to continue to provide other curriculum appropriate to local needs;
- set standards of student achievement in the essential curriculum;
- create a bank of assessment tools for teachers that link to the essential curriculum and standards;
- establish, at three key points in the P–10 years, rigorous comparable assessment against the defined standards, which will result in consistent teacher judgements of student achievement;
- specify a common framework for reporting student achievement against standards;
- provide for ongoing review and refinement of Queensland’s P–10 syllabuses.
based on a rigorous evidence-based approach.

‘Once we’ve established statewide standards,’ he explained, ‘we will be in a better position to monitor the achievement and progress of individual students. We will be able to report to parents at key points in their children’s schooling in a way that allows a broader view of their child’s progress. And teachers, students, parents and the community will have a clear, common base for talking to each other.’

The framework is designed to ensure that standards and assessment have a positive effect on student learning, and that curriculum has both ‘local applicability and general portability’.

Bringing his address to a close, Smith suggested that his themes have been ‘the role of assessment, and its relationship to curriculum, and the role of government with respect to both’.

The role of government in these things is, he concluded ‘to refrain from making this an arena for ideology and partisan manoeuvring, to maintain accountability, but not through mechanisms that corrupt educational process or defy normal reason (and) to encourage a clear view of the interrelationship and priority amongst curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting’.

The role of assessment at its most fundamental level is, then, ‘about seeing our students: seeing what they are, and seeing what they might be, and communicating those things to them and their families in a way that informs but does not inhibit, inspires but does not inflate. It seems almost impossible to get the right balance. But it is everyone’s task – be they educators, political leaders, parents or bureaucrats – to work to get the balance right. For out of the right balance will come improved educational outcomes for everyone – not just the privileged – in our community.’

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Feedback session 1

The presentations by McGaw, Bruniges and Smith were followed by the first of the conference feedback sessions where table groups had the opportunity to briefly discuss and respond to the input provided on what is driving curriculum and assessment reform in Australia before posing questions to the presenters.

Responding to one participant’s observation they were as interested in assessment for learning and using data to help students progress as in its use for monitoring purposes, Bruniges indicated that thinking through what you do with diagnostic information is ‘incredibly important’. One of education’s ‘capacity building needs is to select the most appropriate teaching strategy to address learning needs, which depends on gathering and evaluating good diagnostic assessment data’.

Smith agreed, noting a need at the outset to ‘be clear about our objectives in progressing assessment, because the objectives determine the nature of the assessment including the tests’.
The formative/summative distinction is very important to McGaw and needs always to be borne in mind. International comparisons, he noted, must be summative, but the structure of the conference, with Geoff Masters’s coming session, ‘will address the formative bit’.

Teachers are the point, a participant commented from the floor, where curriculum and assessment come together and there is ‘a massive need for professional development so teachers can understand and apply what the research is showing’. In that sense there is a need, which all presenters agreed, for systems to ‘put their money where their mouths are.’

In a final observation from the floor, another participant sought to ‘wave a flag for modes of assessment and the need’, again undisputed from the stage, ‘for multiple modes of assessment at a time when a lot of the focus is on testing for comparability purposes’.
Session 4

Raising standards

Professor Geoff Masters (CEO, Australian Council for Educational Research) spoke on using assessment to improve learning, prior to a case study presentation led by Jan McClure (Deputy Principal) and supported by Dr Hilary Hollingsworth (Consultant) and David Shepherd (Principal) on Ballarat & Clarendon College, and the second of the conference feedback sessions.

Geoff Masters

Research into human learning, according to Masters, has identified general principles of learning and teaching that have the capacity to improve levels of student achievement in our schools.

He then proceeded to discuss the three principles identified by the psychologists Bransford, Brown and Cocking, in their book *How People Learn*, with particular reference to their implications for teaching, learning and assessment in schools.

Principle 1

Learning is enhanced when learning opportunities are tailored to individual’s current levels of attainment.

Research in human learning is providing, Masters explained, a view of learning as ‘a continuous, ongoing process that occurs throughout the lifespan’. At any given age, individuals are likely to be at different stages in their learning and development, and to be progressing at different rates, but research suggests that all learners are capable of making further progress given appropriate learning conditions, which he characterised as a mix of ‘challenge and support’.

The point is that new learning opportunities are likely to be most effective in promoting further learning if they take account of the learner’s present knowledge, skills and understandings; tap into the learner’s interests and motivations; are consistent with what is known about the learner’s preferred style/s of learning; and if learning opportunities are provided in a supportive social context.

This is not entirely a new idea. As Ausubel, who Masters quoted, indicated back in 1968, ‘the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows’; a point reiterated over thirty years later by Bransford, Brown and Cocking when they state that:

There is a good deal of evidence that learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to the knowledge and beliefs that learners bring to the learning task, use this knowledge as a starting point for new instruction, and monitor students’ changing conceptions as instruction proceeds.
The clear implication of this, according to Masters, is that although there are ‘lots of different ways of talking about assessment (formative, summative, norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, assessment for learning, and so on) … the essential purpose of all assessment should be to establish where individuals are in their learning’. What then is done with that knowledge is another question to address, but this is the ‘key purpose’ of assessment in schools.

The process for achieving this, he explained, requires ‘a map’ of the areas of learning and the terrain to be traversed, characterised by a clear direction from where we are to where we ought to head. He then illustrated this with reference to Writing and a student’s progression from fairly unsophisticated writing, to the development of one or two ideas, through to the development of sustained narratives and coherent arguments.

An explicit map of learning – variously called a ‘progress map’, a ‘described proficiency scale’, or a ‘developmental continuum’ – provides ‘a picture of what it means to make progress: a picture that is more general than, and applies across, classrooms, teachers, schools and even school systems’. It describes the nature of progress within an area of learning or development, and provides a frame of reference for monitoring individual progress over an extended period of time; with less of what is being assessed at the bottom of the map and more at the top, which it is useful to illustrate with samples of student performance/work.

Teachers who use progress maps of this sort understand that not all students progress through an area of learning in exactly the same way or at the same rates. That said, teachers also understand that, in most areas of school learning, there are common paths of development, making it possible to talk about one student being at a ‘more advanced’ stage in their learning than another. A map of progress (such as a Mathematics illustration that Masters showed for students progressing from Grade 2 to Grade 7 in the United States) is ‘a pre-requisite for measuring individual growth across the years of school’, in the context of what is substantial overlap of performance between different grade levels and, coincidentally, a growing spread of performance as students progress through the years of school.

This is, he explained, very different from a view of assessment ‘conceptualised primarily as the evaluation of how well students have learnt what teachers have taught’.

Under ‘the factory assembly line model of schooling’ developed during the early years of the 20th century, the assumption was, according to Darling-Hammond who Masters cited, ‘that a sequenced set of procedures would be implemented as a child moved along the conveyor belt from first to twelfth grade’. The idea that underlies this conveyor belt model is that students of the same age/grade are reasonably similar in their level of achievement. Despite the fact ‘some very able Grade 5 students may be performing at a higher level than some lower achieving Grade 6 students, and some low achieving Grade 5 students may be achieving at lower levels than some very able Grade 4 students, the conveyor belt model assumes that students of the same age/grade are more or less equally ready for the curriculum package associated with that station on the conveyor belt’.

Closing the Gap: Curriculum Corporation Conference, June 2005
A feature of this traditional approach is, he explained, ‘that each new school year marks a fresh start in a child’s learning’. He quoted Marshak:

In elementary schools children move from one teacher to the next every year. Every year we trash a year’s worth of relationships built between children and their teacher, and we throw away all the knowledge the teacher has gained about what each child needs and can do. Each year, we tell every child and teacher to start over again.

The effect of this is that assessment comes to be ‘conceptualised primarily as a check on whether expectations for the grade/age have been met’; and our literacy and numeracy benchmarks are, Masters feels, a good example of this, with the problem they ‘encourage a focus not on where students are on a continuum and what progress they have made over time, but on a single point on this continuum (a cut point). The important question then becomes, are they above or below this cut point? And, as we know from the history of minimum competency testing in the US, this focus can reduce the attention given to students who have already met the benchmark.’

As McCall, Kingsbury and Olson have noted, ‘when the goal is to get the greatest number of students to meet the standard in a year, schools quite sensibly direct efforts at those performing just below the cut point. The model does not evaluate the progress of students who have already met the standard’. Recall, Masters advised in this context, that ‘most children in Australia achieve the Year 5 reading benchmark when they are in Year 3, and many achieve it when they are in Year 2 (or earlier). By the time most children reach Year 5, the Year 5 benchmark is irrelevant’. As Benjamin Bloom whose lectures he attended while studying said, ‘what we learnt in the 1970s was that school systems that set out to achieve minimum standards, usually succeed’.

Masters then explained how he was, recently, ‘fortunate enough’ to read several hundred primary school children’s descriptions of the changes they would like to see made in schools, and he shared ‘precisely’ what two of them wrote before moving on to the second finding from research:

- I would like all children to learn at the level that is right for them. (Year 3, Berala, NSW);
- I would like classes of children who have the same abilities even if you had an eight year old with an eleven year old. (Year 4, St. Ives, NSW)

‘It’s interesting to think’, he observed, ‘about what in their school experience has led these two children to make these comments.’

**Principle 2**
Learning is more effective when it leads to deep understanding of subject matter.

‘One of the hallmarks of the new science of learning’, to quote Bransford et al again, ‘is its emphasis on learning with deep understanding.’

Learning of this type, Masters explained, requires continuity as new learning builds on to and extends prior learning. Deep understanding of key concepts, underlying principles and big ideas in a subject must be developed across the years of school.
This in turn requires ‘assessments that investigate and reveal individual’s understandings of important concepts’ or, what he referred to as, ‘assessment as exploration’. Once again, assessments designed not to measure performance, but to reveal where individuals are in their learning. ‘For some students this may require assessments that drill down to expose misunderstandings: what are the mental models and conceptions that they have developed and that may be getting in the way of further practice … (Or, it) may require open-ended tasks, opportunities for students to discuss and explain their thinking’.

He then illustrated this with reference to first, a young child’s ‘knowledge’ the Earth is flat compared with being ‘told’ it is round; and second, an older student’s understanding of the scientific concepts of velocity of movement and the path of a falling object, with all the potential misconceptions this can induce among different students which teachers would then need to address.

There are, according to Masters, a number of ‘pressures that make it difficult to teach or assess in depth’, such as:

- the crowded curriculum – the fragmentation of school curricula into ‘units’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘competencies’ can encourage disconnected and superficial learning, and the ‘partitioning of curricula into elements that can be separately taught, assessed and marked off on a checklist … usually does not encourage the building of connections necessary for deep learning’.

- mixed ability classes – noting that ‘students within the same grade differ widely in their levels of development and school achievement, and learning is enhanced when teachers pay attention to where individuals are in their learning’, raises the question for Masters of how schools best can provide ‘classroom activities appropriate to individual’s current level of attainment’. Many schools are, he observed in this context, now experimenting with ‘more flexible arrangements than traditional streamed and mixed-ability classes. For example, some whole class teaching, but combined with individual learning plans for students, within class grouping for particular subjects, multi-age classes and cross age tutoring, with an overall focus on providing learning opportunities that are ‘personalised’ to the needs of the individual students. There is some research in this regard to show that teachers are ‘very good at teaching’ and when a student gives an incorrect explanation, will stop the student short and provide the correct answer rather than seeking to find out the nature of the misunderstanding involved.

- the emphasis that is placed on ‘basic skills and the achievement of minimum standards’, with the consequent focus on ‘task performance (that is, isolated skills/ competencies) rather than understanding’. By contrast, if the goal is learning with understanding then assessments must, as Bransford et al have argued, ‘tap understanding rather than merely the ability to repeat facts or isolated skills’.
Principle 3

Learning is more effective when learners are supported to monitor and take responsibility for their own learning.

If we are genuinely to shift from what Dweck has called ‘performance oriented’ to ‘learning oriented’ cultures, then teachers will need, according to Masters, to ‘encourage risk taking, tolerate mistakes and provide feedback that allows learners to monitor progress’.

Assessments must, in this context, look not at ‘how have you performed on what I’ve just taught you, but where are you at in your learning. They also must ‘enable learners to monitor their own progress over time (across the years of school)’. And he provided a comprehensive example (developed by Margaret Forster of ACER) of how one Grade 3 student’s assessments and subsequent report provided to her parents online could convey:

- basic information about her teacher, class, special activities undertaken and homework completed;
- how she looked when she started school compared with how she looks now;
- how she is doing in her most recent report in relation to core knowledge, ideas and skills for Reading, Writing, Mathematics, Science, Art, Physical Education, Music, Cross-curriculum essential skills, and Personal and social skills;
- a sample of her writing with information on whether it is getting better, how it compares with expectations at Grade 3 and what writing progress looks like (see below);
- a teacher’s comment as well as a comment from the student herself.

There is, Masters suggested, ‘no reason why schools cannot construct a record of a child’s learning across the years of school’ along the lines shown. It then potentially could be available to the child, their parent/s and their teachers on a password protected site.

Another way of tracking progress over time he then noted, is to draw graphs, such as one he showed tracking girls’ weight over time and divided into percentiles. The interesting question is, whether we could develop pictures of this kind for, say, Reading. ‘If we could, we would be able to read off a child’s current level of achievement, how it relates to the reading ability of students of equivalent age and how it relates to that student’s past reading performance.’ But it depends, he pointed out, on having ‘a well constructed scale, which in turn enables us to provide parents and students with a picture of individual progress over time’.

Clearly the biggest obstacle that exists to this sort of comprehensive assessment and reporting approach, which focuses on the learning and development that has occurred, is what Masters referred to as ‘the emphasis on performance (for example, passing/ failing) that exists in schools, and the consequent ‘emphasis on year level reporting (for example, letter grades A to E)’.
Effective assessment
Keeping this significant assessment and reporting example in mind, and drawing the three principles for good pedagogy and assessment together into a whole, Masters concluded that effective assessment:

- establishes *where* individuals are in their learning;
- emphasises and encourages the development of understanding;
- supports students to monitor their own progress over time.

And assessment of this kind would not be seen as something separate to teaching and learning, but as ‘an integral part of good pedagogy’, which has the potential to improve student achievement.
Teacher’s comment
Lauren has described the task clearly. She is using full stops and capital letters correctly and her spelling of simple words and some difficult words is accurate.

Lauren’s comment
This is not my very best writing. I’m better at writing stories because I like them more and then I don’t make so many mistakes. I am trying to concentrate harder.

Is Lauren’s writing getting better?
Is Lauren’s writing what we would expect at Grade 3?
Test results
What does writing progress look like?
Ballarat & Clarendon College case study

Ballarat & Clarendon College, it was explained, is a co-educational school of 1200 spanning the primary and secondary years which, around five years ago, sought to re-examine its curriculum with particular reference to the middle years of schooling from Year 5 to Year 9.

The key questions the school sought to address, according to McLure, centred on whether the individual learner is making progress and, if so, is this ‘enough progress’ and ‘optimum progress’?

To answer these questions, the college developed progress maps, along the lines that Masters had discussed, which ‘allow for progress to be measured and tracked over the time that students are in Years 5 to 9’. Eventually, it was explained, they hope to develop progress maps in each area of learning from the Early Learning Centre to Year 12.

Essential Learning Outcomes

Before the school could develop its progress maps, it first had to identify ‘Essential Learning Outcomes’ (ELOs) – that is, what it is the school considers ‘essential that students learn in Years 5 to 9. ELOs were developed in the six areas of literacy, numeracy, thinking, creativity, personal futures, and global learning. Within each of these areas there are three or four strands of learning to be tracked and each has its own developmental continuum describing ‘the likely path … of learning’ and providing ‘a scale against which we can measure progress’.

The result is that each student has around 20 to 22 progress maps of their likely learning path as they move through Years 5 to 9, and they also have recorded on these paths indications of their progress over time. And McLure then showed a sample continuum for the hypothesis and contention component of the thinking continuum they had developed.

Any assessment against the continuum is, she pointed out, ‘an on balance assessment’. No student sits exactly on any one level at any one time. The development and use of the continua has, in this context, ‘triggered a series of professional discussions among staff about elaborations, assessment tools, accuracy of information, correspondence of assessments with curriculum, annotated samples of student work, moderation of assessments, professional judgement, effective pedagogy, and so on.’ And this process is, she felt, ‘probably at least as significant as the actual progress maps’.

The gains

Uses of developmental continua have, McLure argued:

- supported meta-cognition – ‘because the learning path is described on the continuum, the learner has a clear target and can set performance and mastery goals … (and this) enhances the possibility of the learner being able to plan and self-regulate’;
- scaffolded learning – ‘scaffolding learning is an important role of the teacher. The developmental continua support this activity by helping to maintain pursuit of the goal, and provide a background against which discussions can occur about
discrepancies between what a child has produced and the ideal solution. Progress maps also make the steps in learning seem more manageable;
• provided a common language;
• built expertise in assessment;
• provided a scale for tracking progress over time.

Put simply, she explained, ‘learning continua serve as road maps of graphic organisers to help learners plan, set goals, monitor progress and develop strategic competence in learning’.

Challenges and outcomes

‘You cannot’, McLure noted, ‘move to assessment against developmental continua unless you have a whole school commitment – a commitment to both the concept and to the allocation of resources.’ And this, she noted, is where the role of the principal really comes in.

Beyond this, the process really does take a long time and constant refinements are required ‘to make the puzzle fit together’.

That said, the college under the principal’s leadership did invest in the ways required with the result it now can:
• track the progress of the learner from year to year;
• tailor the teaching for the learner;
• use progress maps to help students develop ‘strategic competence’ in learning;
• assess the effectiveness of the teaching against intended learning;
• engage in decision making around the allocation of resources for professional development because, as Richard Elmore who McLure quoted states:

Improvements in instruction have immediate effects on student learning … demonstrated through skilful assessment. Professional development is the process by which we organise the development and use of new knowledge in the service of improvement.

Returning to her three original questions to end her contribution to this show me session (that is, Is the student making progress? Is it enough progress? Is it optimum progress?), McLure indicated her and the school’s belief that ‘you cannot answer any of these unless you are able to accurately measure the level of achievement against a scale such as a learning continuum over a period of several years … Effective teaching can only be measured in terms of the progress of the learner.’

Hollingsworth’s role, in this context, was to support the school in improving pedagogy with a focus on the Japanese ‘lesson study’ professional development technique. To teach and assess effectively, she explained, ‘we needed to develop a shared vision of learning with understanding, levels of learning with learning maps, and the role of students and other key players’.

To develop that shared vision the school needed to establish and support ‘a culture of teacher professional learning where learning opportunities are focused, substantive and
pervasive’. Drawing on Elmore’s view that the knowledge gap is not so much about knowing what good professional development looks like as knowing how to get it ‘rooted in the institutional structure of the school’ it is, she noted ‘complex and there are not many schools equipped for the task’.

What is needed, she suggested, is ‘enlightened professional development practices which become part of the mainstream of ordinary school life’; and that is really where her work with the college comes in. It is, in effect, part of a ‘very deliberate attempt to create a professional learning culture in the school as part of a coordinated effort to improve in ways that can be sustained over time.’

Focusing more specifically on lesson study (which has been explicated in detail by Stigler and Hiebert in their book, The Teaching Gap) it is, Hollingworth explained, an approach to professional development that:

- involves in-depth study of a single lesson over an extended period of time;
- is focused on student learning and understanding;
- involves observation, analysis and research;
- develops shared understanding among teachers;
- pervades teaching.

It is a phased process which, as practised in Japan, involves the following eight steps:

Step 1: Define the Problem
The identification of a problem to work on derived from the experience of the group itself.

Step 2: Plan the Lesson
The group identifies a learning goal to be pursued and then meets to plan a lesson to be taught by one of its members on its behalf.

Step 3: Teaching the Lesson
One teacher teaches the lesson prepared by the group on a designated date, observed by all members involved. Sometimes the lesson is even videoed to facilitate later analysis and discussion.

Step 4: Evaluating and Reflecting on the Lesson and its Effect
The lesson, as opposed to the teacher who taught it, is analysed by the group, usually later on the same day, and critically evaluated.

Step 5: Revising the Lesson
The lesson is revised according to the outcomes of Step 4, so it can work more effectively in the future.
Step 6: Teaching the Revised Lesson
Once ready, the revised lesson is taught again, usually to a different class, and this time in the presence not only of the planning group, but of the faculty as a whole.

Step 7: Evaluating and Reflecting Again
Further analysis and evaluation, with input from the entire faculty, and perhaps even supplemented by an appropriate invited expert, in order to identify what has been learned from the lesson and its implementation.

Step 8: Sharing the Results
Most commonly the group writes a report to ensure that what it has learned spreads within and beyond the school, and thereby contributes to better practice across the board.

And it is, Hollingworth concluded, an approach which accords with Geoff Masters’ advice ‘to know exactly where students are at, so assessment becomes integral to teaching each class’.

Feedback session 2

Table groups considered the implications of what they had heard for their own practice and then engaged with the presenters about what they had said.

Kicking off the discussion, session chair Ken Davies (Acting Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, Northern Territory) asked Geoff Masters his view on the implications for policy of what he had presented. There is a need as a profession, Masters responded, ‘to continue our efforts to make explicit what we know from research and practice about the nature of learning and what works’. This means talking up ‘the importance of work we have done as a profession and, if we are to have A to E reporting to parents, how we can put it in that broader context. Let’s not focus too much’, he urged participants, ‘on benchmarks, but rather, put them in the larger context. Be clever, for example, in defining the A to E in ways that are anchored to standards work we have been doing.’ This involves taking seriously as a profession the task of describing, through assessment, where students are at.

Responding to a question about students at Ballarat & Clarendon College forming their own learning agendas, McLure explained how student surveys are used to gain the students’ views on how they themselves see their learning going. They try to ask questions ‘we think the students are in a position to answer’, including such questions as ‘does the class start on time, because this sets the agenda about how things are done around here’. They also ask if continua are used and explained in the classroom to develop an understanding of them and their purpose.

Pushed to comment on the role of parents in the process, she went on to explain that ‘we work with parents via copies of the continua that are in student portfolios’. Students conduct the parent/teacher interviews and use the continua to structure these. The college is also moving towards an online reporting approach whereby there won’t be an end of term report but rather, progressive assessment against the continua which parents can access at any time.
The students have, David Shepherd added, developed ‘a strong understanding of how the continua are working and contribute to their own learning’; which he illustrated with reference to the experience of his own, Year 7, son.

Asked to comment on how assessment fits in a ‘modern, non-factory’ education approach, Master suggested that ‘when you look at the conveyor-belt model, it is not surprising that students are falling behind. There is, however, a logic to the research to suggest that, if you tailor learning opportunities to where students are at, the outcomes will be better’.

Responding then to a follow up question which ended the session related to the fact that progress maps are very hard to develop and hence ‘many of us need help’, he suggested it ‘makes sense to begin with what already exists (such as First Steps to which the questioner had referred), since something like that draws on a lot of research and subsequent testing in classrooms’.
Session 5

Assessing social competence

Susan Pascoe (Executive Director, Catholic Education Office, Victoria) discussed whether or not we can and should be assessing the social domain, with reference to work being undertaken in Catholic schools in Victoria, prior to a case study from Mark Merry (Principal) of Marcellin College and the final feedback session for the day.

Susan Pascoe

Assessing social competence is not, according to Pascoe, ‘a topic for the faint-hearted. Educators have long lauded and prized the notion of assessment in the social domain, however measurement methodologies until recently did not keep pace with their aspirations. Much of the assessment of a student’s social competence was based on unsystematic observation, with reporting confined to parent-teacher interviews and end-of-school references.’

Her basic view is that we should be assessing in the social domain and this requires us to provide students, parents and the community with ‘valid and reliable judgements … We are selling students short if we are not explicit about the expectations that society puts on schools to turn out individuals who are able to thrive in global, cultural, economic and environmental orders. It is through the values we teach, the personal and social attributes that schools nurture, and the generic and work-related competencies inculcated in the curriculum that students can develop as well-rounded citizens and lifelong learners.’

‘The absence of an explicit values statement is’, Pascoe argued, ‘a value position in itself and is untenable from the perspective of a socially aware community. The absence of shared teacher understandings about expected standards of classroom and school-yard behaviour is an abrogation of a professional responsibility. And the absence of generic and work-related competencies across the curricula of primary and secondary schools is a failure to fully prepare students for life beyond the schoolyard. Concomitantly, the absence of assessment and reporting in these areas is a failure to fully understand our professional responsibilities as educators.’

There is, she explained, support for these strong positions in:

- the UN Declaration of Human Rights;
- the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (Delors, 1996) with its four pillars
  - Learning to know
  - Learning to do
  - Learning to be
- Learning to live together; Australia’s Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century (MCEETYA 1999), the preamble of which talks about Australia’s future depending on each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society.
And Pascoe unpacked some more of this statement of goals to illustrate how it fits in the
social domain and demonstrates the commitment Australia’s Education Ministers have to a
broad based education.

Complementing the 1999 National Goals is, she added, the recently launched Values
Education Program of the Australian Government (Australian Government 2005), which
Federal Education Minister, Hon. Brendan Nelson introduced in terms of the Australian and
State and Territory Governments’ shared belief that “education is as much about building
character as it is about transferring skills, knowledge and the thirst for learning”. The ‘Values
for Australian Schooling’ (see Appendix 2) are based on Australia’s National Goals and on a
national values education study undertaken in 2003 and used as a basis of consultation in
2004. These values are, in Pascoe’s view, noteworthy for their alignment with democratic and
broader religious values, such as those agreed at a UNESCO Conference on educating for
interfaith and inter-religious understanding in Adelaide in 2004 as a basis for building
understanding and trust.

Just as ‘the recognition of the importance of human and social capital to the wellbeing of
nations and their citizens is arguably a corrective to the earlier undue emphasis on economic
indicators’, so too for Pascoe ‘the recent focus on the personal, social and values dimensions
of schooling is a corrective to the singular importance placed on the measurement of
academic outcomes’. And advances in educational measurement should now ‘establish
assessment in the social domain at the forefront of progressive assessment methodologies’.

She then turned her attention to some Australian initiatives at the system and school level to
develop rigorous, comparable assessments in the social domain, explaining in this context
that for her purposes, assessment of social competence is assumed to be within formal
education settings and aligned to values dispositions, personal and social competencies and
generic or work-related capabilities identified in Australia’s National Goals, state curricula,
school mission statements or major educational reports.

**System level assessment in the social domain**

While there are few system level assessment initiatives fully developed and implemented
there are, she suggested, some ‘promising projects underway’. Within the domain of
traditional assessment approaches, the MCEETYA PMRT\(^3\) Civics and Citizenship
Assessment combines assessment of cognitive outcomes and those in the social domain. This
assessment of dispositions and skills for citizenship participation, Pascoe explained, collects
data nationally from Year 6 and Year 10 students on understandings related to the attitudes,
values, dispositions, beliefs and actions that underpin active democratic citizenship.

The assessments use student samples to gauge the effectiveness of programs of teacher
professional development and materials development to improve knowledge, skills, values
and dispositions in Civics and Citizenship Education. ‘They are pencil- and paper-based,
centrally developed and scored, and therefore are somewhat circumscribed in their capacity
to provide a comprehensive evaluation in the social domain, compared to the cognitive
domain’.

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\(^3\) Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs Performance
Measurement and Reporting Taskforce (MCEETYA PMRT).
Another ‘very promising initiative into systemic assessment in the social domain’ is the pilot project conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the West Australian Department of Education to assess the social outcomes of schooling. The assessments are part of the broader ongoing Monitoring Standards in Education (MSE) in that state, and assess students in Years, 3, 7 and 10 on interpersonal, moral and ethical aspects of schooling under the headings of social knowledge, principled behaviour, recognition of different points of view, empathy and perspective.

The MSE assessments of social competence include teacher observation, self-reporting and student responses to scenarios. Each dimension has developmental scales (for example, respecting and valuing others) to identify where a student sits on a continuum from seeing no dilemma in a scenario to showing compassion or taking principled action. A marking guide assists teachers in identifying the location of a student’s responsiveness on the scale. The teacher completes a performance profile map calibrating the skills and understandings used by students in order of difficulty.

The importance of the MSE initiative is, in Pascoe’s view, ‘that it is piloting an evidence-based approach focusing on aspects of student development which are within the jurisdiction of schools and which are susceptible to school intervention. The descriptors are sufficiently fine grained to enable teachers to make clear judgements. The data can be used to assist individuals or groups and for classroom lessons or whole-school programs. The aim of this very promising pilot is to develop scales that are stable, valid and reliable.’

In Victoria, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), together with the ACER, has been trialling methods of assessment and reporting of student achievement of generic competencies. The work is supported by software to record teacher assessment and by professional development of staff in reaching global judgements on students’ generic competencies in Years 9, 10 or 11. The aim, she explained, ‘has been to assist teachers make global judgements on generic learning and working skills in a period of approximately three minutes. The approach is one of whole-school assessment where teachers are asked to judge a student’s cross-curricula competencies rather than discipline-based knowledge and skills. An overall assessor reviews teachers’ assessments and uses software to establish levels of performance. The overall assessor may occasionally need to consult with teachers over discrepant assessments.’

The assessment trials have found ‘high levels of agreement between teachers and that the assessments can be introduced with minimal professional development. While there are some modifications required to refine the facet descriptors, level schema and software, this has been a very successful student assessment and illustrates the capacity for rigorous assessment in the social domain’.

Staying in this state, the recently launched Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VCAA 2005) are relevant in that they take an integrated approach to learning with three components integrated:

- the processes of physical, personal and social development and growth;
- the branches of learning reflected in the traditional disciplines;
- the interdisciplinary capacities needed for effective functioning within and beyond school.
This is indicated in the following diagram from the VCAA.

‘While the VCAA is yet to publish assessment and reporting approaches, the Standards Overview calls for integrated approaches and the domains within the “Physical, Personal and Social Learning” Strand of the Standards will inevitably require assessment in the social domain.’

**School level assessment in the social domain**

‘While systemic initiatives may capture our attention through publication or pronouncement, the countless examples of innovative approaches to assessment in the social domain in individual Australian schools provide us with a very clear indication of the importance which schools and their communities place on the ability to measure a student’s
personal and social development’ – as illustrated by the Marcellin College case study which followed Pascoe’s address.

Similarly, John XXIII College in Western Australia ‘explicitly embarked upon a project to assess if it was living its Mission’. The challenge was, Pascoe explained, ‘how to measure the stated mission of seeking to “develop people of competence, conscience and compassion who are committed to God and the service of others”.’ The College Council engaged ACER to undertake the innovative work of measuring and monitoring students’ moral and ethical growth. ACER worked with councillors and teachers to define the domains to be assessed and monitored, to construct a developmental scale and to build a reporting scale. Like the MSE project she had spoken of earlier, ‘great care was taken to describe and differentiate levels of behaviour on continua such as a conscience scale so that levels of behaviours could be identified and reported’. The instrument has been administered to all students in Years 8 and 12 and mailed to former students five and ten years after graduation and the school uses the data as a starting point for conversation and reflection on the attainment of its mission.

The John XXIII initiative is, in Pascoe’s view, ‘interesting in its resolve to measure its core purpose, and not just to determine effectiveness with current students but with graduates of the College. The groundbreaking measurement in the social domain has been further refined by ACER and is now widely available as the ACER Attitudes and Values Questionnaire.’

**Issues for teacher assessment in the social domain**

Returning to her comments at the start, Pascoe noted that ‘teachers have always made assessments in the social domain. Parent-teacher interviews have generally been interactive, open and frank, while more measured accounts are given in written reports of students’ social and emotional growth and development, and of learning and work-related dispositions and competencies. And in faith-based schools, religious and ethical development is reported to parents. Much of this assessment has been impressionistic and ad hoc. What is new is the resolve to measure all that we purport to be, and to do so in a robust and defensible fashion.’

The main dilemmas teachers faced in the past have been:

- determining the data on which reliable judgements can be made;
- identifying generic behaviours in school curricula structured around traditional disciplines;
- understanding the full range of behaviours along the continuum in a single social domain such as tolerance;
- finding time in pressured school timetables for observation of students, shared teacher judgements and recording;
- allaying concerns about the potential for litigation if students and parents disagreed with the teacher assessment.

‘It is’, she concluded, ‘pleasing that advances in educational measurement can put many of these dilemmas to rest. Research bodies, systems and schools are collaborating to push the assessment boundaries and create an environment where teachers can securely and professionally provide feedback to students and parents on their development in the social domain. At the same time, schools are better placed to evaluate if they are achieving their
mission. These developments are embryonic but worthy of broad-based support from educators, the community and employers.’

The role of broad based reporting in school improvement
A case study of Marcellin College

Marcellin College in Bulleen is, Mark Merry (Principal) explained, a well-resourced Year 7 to 12 Catholic Secondary School of more than 1200 Boys located in the Eastern suburbs of Melbourne conducted by the Marist Brothers and focused on meeting ‘the needs of all students, ranging from those who are academically able to those who need additional support’.

The Marcellin College Strategic Plan titled Beyond 2000, Building a Learning Community was introduced in 2001, when Merry was newly appointed principal of the school, ‘in response to the school community’s need to address perceived deficiencies in the educational process at the school’, including ‘a clear imperative for improvement in areas ranging from academic performance through to work ethic and general engagement by students in the life of the school’.

Central to achieving the objectives of the plan was, he explained, ‘the realisation that institutions are cultural entities … (and hence), change may only be effected through an understanding of the organisational culture of the institution’.

So what about the ‘Marcellin Culture’ was in need of change? An analysis of a range of relevant data by the school revealed the four interrelated performance issues of:

- academic outcomes that were below what might have been expected given the school’s intake;
- non engagement by a significant number of students in the wider life of the school;
- under-performance in regard to work ethic particularly in the ‘middle years’ of schooling, that is, Years 8, 9 and 10;
- a degree of “anti-intellectualism” prevalent among students and indeed among some of the faculty itself’.

While ‘the avowed aims of the school are to encourage the development of “the whole person”’, Merry explained, ‘our measurement of that growth appeared to be failing in a number of areas’; and there was a desire to introduce a more holistic approach.

Broad interventions to effect cultural change

Based on the findings of relevant literature and needs identified in the strategic plan, the school’s Leadership Team embarked on a course of ‘systems review and systems change’. Specific initiatives introduced ranged from ‘the general structure of the college, the ways in which we relate to the students, the ways that their work was being valued and the ways in which the students were held accountable to that work. This phase of “building a boy friendly school” preceded the initiatives to help foster the further development of boy friendly classrooms.
The specific interventions were as wide ranging as:

- lowering the class sizes in the core subjects at Years 7–10 from 31 to 26 students so that teachers are given better opportunities to work individually with students;
- the Work Submission Policy which establishes clear expectations of all students regarding submission dates and quality of work and keeps parents informed of problems in study performance;
- the Student Progress Committee which intervenes with those individuals who are not progressing due to under-engagement in their studies;
- the new process for subject selection which better monitors subject choices for the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) so that students are choosing subjects more wisely based upon interests and abilities;
- the institution of Academic Colours which celebrate the efforts and achievements of the students in their studies;
- the institution of extension classes in Year 12 in addition to the study skills classes to help students learn how to learn;
- an increased emphasis on professional development of staff and the institution of staff appraisals so that we are reflecting upon our own work practices and affirming good practice;
- the commencement of a major building program in the areas of Visual Arts and Technology to celebrate and foster the students’ evident interests and skills in these two areas;
- imparting a vision to the students that they have the capacity to aspire to personal excellence in their studies;
- building a “case management approach” to the management of students’.

‘The Marist philosophy of the school’, Merry explained, ‘had always placed great emphasis upon pastoral care and knowing the students.’ That is why, after a review in 2001, the college instituted ‘a full vertical system based upon the House model. House Coordinators were appointed to lead the teams of pastoral leaders and join them in forming the longer-term relationship with the students over their six years at the school. The key relationships are therefore longer term and the interactions with the students on a more regular and meaningful level.’

In response to concerns about inconsistent enforcement of discipline in the school, a new discipline code was introduced in 2001 ‘outlining the various instances of misconduct, the level at which it would be dealt with and the member of staff responsible for its enforcement. This discipline code is renegotiated with the students at the end of each year and appears in college publications on the college website, in each of the classrooms and importantly is accessed by teachers on the Reporting Database … Discipline is now perceived to be a matter of policy rather than whim … (and) the process of consultation at the end of each year serves to re-educate the students to the contents of the code and allows issues of conduct to be discussed between pastoral teachers and their students in their pastoral groups.’

The problem of poor work ethic is, Merry conceded, ‘a complex one. Issues surrounding fear of failure, lack of motivation and lack of engagement require a variety of interventions to change student mindset. However, greater accountability towards the submission and quality of student work across the school has been achieved through a raft of policies designed to create a greater sense of accountability for students. These policies are made
practical by the use of the online Reporting Database developed at the school in 2003 to track student progress.’

A complementary Student Progress Policy was introduced in 2003 to ensure quality of work by identifying ‘those students not achieving in their studies without suitable cause’ and ensuring an appropriate case management approach to support. This has all been underpinned by a more focused Subject Selection Policy which ‘requires all students to have their subject choices endorsed by their current subject teacher and they must discuss their overall program with their pastoral leader prior to submission of their choices. The process requires a good deal more consideration and allows for more suitable choices to be made.’

‘When taken in context’, Merry argued, ‘each policy – Work Submission, Student Progress, Subject Selection and Graduation – injects a greater sense of accountability and monitoring of the students’ passage through the school. The automatic nature of progression and the sense that one does not have to work until the realities of Year 12 have all but disappeared.’

Accountability, according to Merry, ‘addresses one part of the issue of student engagement in their studies and in the wider life of the school. Perhaps more important are the opportunities that need to be created to celebrate that engagement … the sporting prowess of the college had enjoyed appropriate recognition for a number of years. Not surprisingly the college has done very well in terms of sport. In 2002 a new series of awards was introduced across the school to recognise both academic life and contributions to the community.’ These have been ‘much sought after by the students … (and since) there is no discrimination between Achievement and Endeavour in the awarding of colours … all students regardless of ability have access to them. This largely accounts for both their relevance and popularity.’

A new approach to student assessment

The many initiatives introduced, Merry suggested, created a need ‘to better manage information relating to the various aspects of the students’ lives while at school – particularly to ensure ‘we recognise what the boys have done and are capable of doing’. Previously, our assessment was confined to Student Reports and parent teacher interviews, an inadequate methodology when taking into account the complex nature of the school and the various dimensions of the students’ lives’. The school now, however, has determined that ‘to improve our reporting processes we would need to better manage the various types of information and centralise our data. Over a period of four years this was done by the development of the Reporting Database which is truly “holistic” in its approach to case managing students.’

The database developed by the school provides a vehicle whereby student files are centralised online and where every aspect of the students’ work at the school is recognised. It provides a ‘single operating system which brings all information relating to students into one place’. Entries enable teachers to automatically:

- mark the roll each period;
- access information on students in each class related to testing, basic literacy and numeracy skills, ‘career-wise’ testing outcomes, and so on, which provides teachers with ‘a wealth of information on each student in the class’;
- link to the school’s own special education department to get even more detail about individual student’s interests, personality traits, and so on, and also the student’s
conduct in the school in relation to its discipline code.

Teachers are able, he explained, to ‘drill down further’ and look at, in the case of a conduct issue for example, what happened when the discipline code was infringed, the student’s performance in relation to the submission of work, and so on. A domain exists in this context for a teacher to be able to express concern as a ‘signal to parents and other teachers that there is a problem existing which may need to be addressed’. On the other, more positive side of the ledger, the instrument also links to the student’s achievement results and awards, including their involvement in the wider life of the school and/or their community.

This online instrument, Merry noted, helps ‘overcome the fight with paperwork and enables us to bring all the information together in a useable form. At the end of the day, it gets us to a comprehensive student report which moves beyond just the academic to encompass the co-curricular as well.’

The database then produces Graduation certificates, Pastoral and academic reports, House Service Awards, Community Service certificates, Subject Awards certificates, References and Summaries of all entries.

The database, according to Merry, ‘facilitates a whole school approach to the management of students. It allows for consistency in the key areas of assessment and reporting and allows an expansion of what is assessed and reported. Access to this level of information is helpful to subject teachers, pastoral carers, administrators and ultimately to the parents and the students.’ What is more, by comparing ‘outcomes across a range of indicators to the baseline findings in 2000, we can determine if after four years of school wide intervention, there has been a significant or measurable shift in the learning climate of the school. While cultural change can take many years to come into effect, early indicators will provide some insight into the possibilities of school improvement and addressing the needs of boys through a school wide approach.’

**Conclusion**

‘Four years on from the school review in 2000,’ Merry concluded, ‘Marcellin College is in many ways a very different place. Opinions might vary on whether that difference is for the good or not.’ The strategic plan review conducted this year has produced a range of data which provide some clear indications as to how the progress has been received by the school community:

- there have been clear indicators of improvement in the general cultural health of the community;
- ‘accountability to studies as indicated previously has improved with greater diligence in terms of the submission of work’;
- ‘all teachers are now proficient with the use of the college online database, the use of which has led to uniformity in discipline, reporting, assessment and parental contact’.

Beyond this, ‘our assessment now better performs the twin purposes of greater accountability and greater encouragement for the student. In return our teachers have appropriate access to excellent information pertaining to their students’, with the result ‘the
questions: “What has this student achieved and what can he do?” are better answered. We know our boys better, we report on them better, and we better affirm them overall.’

Feedback session 3

Table groups ended the day with a brief discussion of whether or not we should be assessing the social domain and then had a short opportunity to pursue this with the presenters.

Session chair, Andrew Cappie-Wood (Director General, Department of Education and Training, NSW) opened the questioning by asking Susan Pascoe to comment on the implications for teacher professional learning of the advances in assessment in the social domain she had outlined. She indicated in response that ‘any answer relates as much to pre-in-service education’, especially if we think in terms of the need to understand students’ social and emotional needs and the new emphasis on values and work-related skills.

Looking at professional development in particular, though, she suggested it takes us to ‘the dilemmas I showed particularly in relation to consistency of judgements between teachers and over time, and ways of doing the necessary observations in a busy timetable’. That said, the use of some of the instruments she discussed does provide additional support which she felt could be ‘looped into PD’.

Asked to comment on the indicators used to assess and report on such social capacities as compassion and leadership, beyond just recording involvement, Merry spoke of the school’s house system and the way in which the pastoral leader ‘uses the data available to flesh out discussions with parents about the various involvements and activities in the school’. Parents also can, he explained, access the database to be informed prior to any such discussions taking place.

Responding to a follow up question from the chair about any evidence of academic lift, Merry noted that ‘when we introduced real time attendance, the rate of attendance markedly increased so they are there’. The school also had poor work submission rates, which have been reduced to minimal levels. Beyond that, the academic performance of the school has improved markedly, ‘not just because of the increased information and monitoring, but also because of the care and concern we show for each child’.

In response to a concern from the floor that passing such information as the conduct data from year to year could mark a child for their whole time at school, he explained that the conduct data is the one set removed at the end of each year for exactly that reason. In addition, he pointed out that he had shared the highest level of data with participants, which is only available to the principal and house leaders in the school to avoid ‘typecasting kids’.

In a final question from the floor, one participant raised about ‘scope’, suggesting to Pascoe that, ‘if you assume all learning occurs in the classroom you can measure social competencies there, but if you take the alternate view, you are looking at leverage systems only in the school domain. So how do you sort out what the school is contributing or not and relate the broader sphere of learning in?’

It is possible, she responded, to make that argument to other learning areas as well. ‘While it’s fair to say, though, that students will learn social and emotional skills well beyond the classroom door, it also is possible to develop assessment proxies such as the use of scenarios,
teachers developing combined judgements for students in the social domain and so on. It’s not easy, but it’s also not impossible. And it’s worth pursuing to ensure we don’t get confined to what’s easier to measure.'
Day two

Session 6

Beyond the core — richer assessment

Day two of the conference began with a presentation from Dr Gabrielle Matters (Director, Assessment and New Basics Branch, Education Queensland) on what works in designing assessment tasks for deep thinking, and one from Joan Holt (Deputy General Manager, Curriculum Solutions, Curriculum Corporation) outlining a national initiative on assessment for learning.

These presentations book-ended a case study from Bruce Houghton (Head of the Middle School) from Western Cape College and the first feedback session for the day.

Gabrielle Matters

Matters used her talk to present ‘some ideas about how a valid and reliable process for assessing deep thinking is not a function of the assessment regime (such as external or internal, standardised or teacher-devised), but is actually a product of the successful application of certain design criteria’, predicated on ‘one simple belief that I hold – the capacity to design good assessment tasks is a vital part of an extensive professional repertoire and, as such, it demands space and time and respect’.

Assessment tasks for deep thinking as a topic is, she suggested, ‘like an inkblot in the Rorschach test. Different people will read different things into it.’ It is easier, in this context, ‘for us to agree on the meaning of the terms design and deep thinking than it is for us to have similar images of an assessment task. So I will put forward my working definitions of design and deep thinking first; then put the case that what many of us are referring to as an assessment task is really a teacher-devised student task; and then return to some “live” tasks that assess deep thinking.’

Deep Thinking

‘We cannot’, Matters argued, ‘know whether deep thinking is taking place’, but merely can infer it from ‘the evidence of student work’.

Deep knowledge and deep understanding

Deep knowledge for Matters involves ‘the acquisition of facts, concepts, theories, perspectives, and modus operandi that are critical to a significant topic or discipline and that extend beyond the superficial, the routine or the trivial. I take deep understanding to be the application of knowledge to constructing explanations, drawing conclusions, discovering relationships, making complex connections around a central theme, solving problems, asking new questions, formulating and testing out hypotheses.’
Intellectual depth in student work

In a recent research activity (2004), the Queensland Department of Education and the Arts tried to find out if richness (a proxy for rigour) could be validly and reliably identified in student work and identified the following three dimensions of richness:

1. Intellectual engagement
   - deep thinking and understanding
   - considering aesthetics
   - going beyond the data presented

2. Engagement in specific disciplines and transdisciplinary learning
   - demonstrating deep and coherent knowledge of a field
   - drawing on and exploiting knowledge from a range of fields
   - drawing on and exploiting practices and skills across fields

3. Engagement in significant problem solving, decision making and action
   - identifying, analysing and resolving significant problems and issues
   - tackling problems individually and collaboratively
   - engaging in pragmatic social action, including purposefully communicating in different media.

‘This elaboration of richness’, Matters suggested, ‘gives us some clues about how to promote intellectual depth in student work and how we can advance deep thinking through our assessment tasks.’

Deep approach to learning

There is, she then added, ‘another “depth” to keep in mind. This depth is a psychological attribute of the student, not a characteristic of the assessment per se’. Her own research shows that ‘a deep approach to learning correlates with achieving motive and academic self-concept, which in turn correlate with academic success’.

Students with a deep approach to learning, she explained, ‘refer to the excitement and satisfaction of schoolwork and study whereas students with a surface approach to learning often refer to a don’t-do-anything-extra strategy for studying. We owe it to our students to create an environment where it is considered “cool” to be excited by learning.’

Examination, test and assessment

It is important, Matters argued, that ‘we spend some time getting a common understanding of one of our key terms – “assessment task”. Where does it fit into the conventional array of assessment instruments? In fact, what is assessment vis-à- vis examination and test?’

4 Or domain, or KLA syllabus strand, or discipline, or subject in the common parlance.
Quoting Vernon\(^5\), she explained that:

- ‘An examination is devised to assess the attainment and skill of pupils or students in a particular subject, whether by objective-type or by conventional written, oral or practical questions. All the questions refer to a syllabus which has been defined by a teacher or examiner’;
- ‘By a test we mean a published instrument, which has been constructed by persons technically trained in mental testing and statistical methods. Its items have been thoroughly tried out beforehand, and the test is accompanied by norms or standards of performance which enable the tester to interpret how far a pupil’s score or mark is superior or inferior to those of other similar pupils’.

Drawing on Calfee\(^6\) assessment is, by contrast, ‘the collection of information for a purpose – as in assessing the nature of student learning for the dual purposes of monitoring performance and improving learning; as represented in the following diagram and samples falling under the umbrella:

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**Assessment task**

Turning more specifically to the meaning of an assessment task Matters suggested it is, ultimately, ‘a tool or device or constructed situation that creates the opportunity for learners to demonstrate/display the nature and quality of their learning. The primary aim of an assessment task is to call forth evidence of student achievement that can be judged by teacher-assessors. The collection of the substantive products of student learning in and/or across curriculum areas, completed in response to an assessment task is student work. The notion of assessment tasks making work for students (student work) is not in conflict with the person-in-the-street understanding of *tasks* and *work*.’ Tasks can, in this context, be many and varied, as can the products of student work.

‘The defining aspect of the so-called assessment task is’, she explained, ‘that it is not time-restricted (it might be but it does not have to be). Some would also list connectedness to the real world as a second defining aspect. As well, it has curriculum planning bits attached to it, which is why I call it a student task rather than an assessment task.’

**Examples of assessment tasks for deep thinking**

Matters then provided a description of three different exemplifications of student task, all purporting to assess deep thinking:

- a Rich Task (a transdisciplinary task as in New Basics) (Education Queensland, 2002);
- a Mathematics task derived from the corresponding KLA syllabus P–10 (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004);
- a Teacher-generated Task that assesses a processing skill – transforming ideas and information – across two KLAs, Study of Society and the Environment and The Arts (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2005).

**Design criteria**

The design decisions confronted when setting assessment tasks such as these apply to ‘the whole gamut of assessment instruments, from good old point-in-time subject-specific multiple-choice tests to complex open-ended tasks completed over an extended period of time, from external examinations to teacher-devised assessments, from assessing knowledge and understanding in the disciplines to assessing generic skills or dispositions’.

How, Matters asked, do you design a good assessment task? The answer to this question lies, she suggested, in responding to the series of subsidiary questions in the diagram below. (See Appendix 3 for a magnified version.)
‘In a nutshell the design criteria are’, she noted, ‘intellectual rigour, authenticity, accessibility, and credibility.’

The features of good assessment tasks are many and varied but there are four themes threading the design decisions in the diagram above:

1. The task must be based in the curriculum.
2. Students must know what is expected.
3. Students must recognise the task as worthwhile and relevant.
4. The task must be capable of eliciting an optimal performance from students.

What is more, these design decisions ‘respect the decision-making aspect of a teacher’s role as assessor’.

Three essential elements

In a good assessment task there is, according to Matters, ‘an effective interplay of three simple elements distilled from the four themes above – what is taught/learnt (the intentions of the curriculum), what is assessed (evidence of knowledge/skills/dispositions in the domain being sampled), and what is rewarded (high-quality performance on the criteria set down in the marking scheme and incorporated in an associated exemplar)’.

A look at an extract in the NSW HSC Physics exam (2004) she provided, including the question asked along with the outcomes assessed and the criteria for scoring, shows the interplay of these elements in practice – the sample reflects ‘the syllabus outcome statements (and we assume that what is taught in classrooms is an enactment of the intended curriculum). Also, the criteria in the marking guidelines reflect the commands in the
examination question (for example, assess/critique, calculate, argue a position) so that what is rewarded (gets the most marks in this case) is student work that matches the verbal descriptors. By applying the test for “depth” according to our earlier working definitions, it can be seen that this task (examination question) requires students to demonstrate deep knowledge and understanding in Physics.’

Similarly, what is assessed in the Rich Task she had presented earlier and which Houghton discussed in more depth below, reflects what is taught (the New Basics referents as expressed in the task description). Also, the desirable features for high-quality performance (what is rewarded by high grades) match the description of student products in the Rich Task demonstrations.’

If nothing else it, together with the preceding discussion clearly demonstrates, Matters concluded, that teacher assessors ought not to ‘let anybody tell you that you can hurry through the process of designing a good assessment task on a rainy Sunday afternoon’.

**Western Cape College case study**

Building on Matters’ earlier address, Houghton outlined how the implementation of New Basics curriculum and, especially the use of Rich Tasks, can address the two challenges of:

- ‘embedding the demonstration of depth of knowledge and understanding in the primary curriculum and;
- developing a transdisciplinary approach to curriculum development and delivery in the upper middle school and retaining the desired depth of knowledge and understanding.’

**Context**

The Western Cape College was created in 2001 from an amalgamation of Weipa North, Mapoon, Aurukun and Jessica Point State Schools. Spread over 300 kilometres, the college was formed to ‘fundamentally address the educational outcomes for all students of the Western Cape’. Education outcomes for the cohort of Indigenous students, Houghton noted, ‘reflected the national picture of endemic failure including a continuing decline in overall outcomes … (and) training and employment opportunities outcomes were equally poor’.

The focus of the college since inception has been, he explained, on ‘achieving organisational effectiveness and individual teacher accountability as the fundamental driver of improving education, training and employment outcomes’. The New Basics curriculum was adopted by the newly amalgamated college to ensure consistency across the different sites in ways that cater for ‘the diversity of needs, learning styles and the range of abilities of students’, while also responding to parent concerns about the grading of student work, the reliability of this information and statewide comparability.

**The Rich Tasks**

Echoing Matters, Houghton explained that the Rich Tasks are ‘highly complex assessment tasks requiring students to demonstrate deep knowledge and understanding from a range of
disciplines. A Rich Task is a culminating performance or demonstration that is purposeful and models a real life role.’

He then outlined two models for applying Rich Tasks in the college with particular reference to how teachers were supported in implementing the approach.

Model 1 (Rich Tasks Suite One Years 1–3 and Suite Two Years 4–6)

**Teachers as Transdisciplinary Agents.** Based on the typical primary school structure this model requires ‘teachers to work in vertical and horizontal teams to complete tasks’. The complexity of the tasks, which require students to demonstrate deep knowledge and deep understanding, means that many primary teachers ‘are “out of their depth” when it comes to some aspects of the tasks’, and hence require specialist support from across the community and secondary school, as illustrated in the diagram Rich Task 6#6: Design, Make and Display a Product. (See the PowerPoint™ presentation for diagram.)

To support such a model, new team meeting structures were designed involving **Horizontal** and **Vertical** teacher teams:

- **Horizontal** teacher team meetings focused primarily on teachers in the same year level meeting together to plan towards the completion of the Rich Task; whereas
- **Vertical** teacher teams, which are ‘vital to the success of New Basics’, see all teachers in the Years 1–3 pod or 4–6 pod involved in the curriculum development.

Since primary teachers ‘often lacked the required specialist knowledge and application to complete tasks … specialist secondary teachers are involved in team meetings to assist in the planning process and in some cases teach components of the tasks. The local community is also used as a specialist resource.’

While the logistics of such team meetings are ‘enormous’ due to the vast distances between campuses, the college is committed to these meetings and provides teachers with the necessary travel support.

Model 2 (Rich Tasks Suite Three Years 7–9)

**Teachers as Lead Agents:** This approach involves a ‘Lead Agent’ teacher being assigned a Rich Task. The Lead Agent then ‘subcontracts’ out various components of the Rich Tasks to other subject specialists who work towards the completion of the task. The Lead Agent is accountable for the completion of the task and has to monitor the progress of the specialist teachers and keep the task on track. The transdisciplinary approach, use of specialist staff and community business and expertise is the key to developing and implementing the New Basics Curriculum, which Houghton illustrated with another diagram similar to the one provided above.

In the Year 7 to 9 pod, he explained, ‘the **Horizontal** teacher teams consist of teachers from a variety of specialist areas that teach across a year level. The Rich Task is the common element that combines the teachers, and team meetings function solely around the completion of tasks’. The **Vertical** teacher teams in this pod differ ‘greatly’ from the primary model, with teachers organised into subject areas based on the four New Basics Curriculum organisers (Life Pathways, Active Citizenship, Environment and Technology and Multiliteracies) and a
subject area coordinator as the team leader accountable for the development and implementation of work programs covering Years 7 to 9.

These models illustrate, according to Houghton, ‘the development of the Professional Learning Community in the Western Cape College’ that ultimately led to ‘the successful implementation’ of the curriculum he had described.

**Teacher and administration actions in support**

Success at the college did, Houghton observed, depend on a range of actions that both teachers and the administration had to take.

Teachers, for example, had to:

- recognise that this was ‘a new approach to teaching and learning not just something old in a new package’;
- cooperate on curriculum development and delivery;
- commit to ‘a full and balanced curriculum and the expectation that there is no dumbing down of tasks and all tasks are to be completed’;
- commit to developing ‘a curriculum that caters for all students’;
- commit to the curriculum ‘through clear understanding of accountabilities and achievable goals’;
- own the curriculum reform;
- be prepared to admit when they are out of their depth and seek the necessary support and advice;
- have high expectations of students ‘with regards to behaviour, attitudes to learning and completion of tasks’;
- present the reforms positively in public.

The administration, by contrast, had to:

- commit totally to the New Basics Curriculum;
- design systems and structures ‘through timetabling and teacher teams for completion of tasks’;
- ensure ‘responsive and appropriate resource allocation and management for the implementation of the curriculum’, including ‘appropriate staff recruitment’;
- devolve responsibilities through ‘clear role statements and accountabilities’;
- ensure regular teacher and administration meetings focusing on curriculum development;
- provide direction for curriculum development;
- respond to the needs of staff ‘during a time of massive structural and curriculum change’;
- positively promote the New Basics in public;
- commit to a ‘Supportive School Environment with high expectations of student behaviour, attitudes and attendance’;
- develop a curriculum website as a professional development tool for teachers across the college.
'What has been described in this paper in no way does justice', Houghton concluded, ‘to the organisational change that has occurred over the last three years’. The changes have been enormous but, at the same time, ‘the New Basics curriculum framework and the vigorous assessment agenda through the Rich Tasks provides a connectedness of purpose and in a sense is creating a Professional Learning Community across Cape York’.

**Joan Holt**

Building on the three principles of learning and teaching outlined by Professor Geoff Masters on the previous day, Holt introduced participants to the Assessment for Learning web site ([http://www.curriculum.edu.au/assessment](http://www.curriculum.edu.au/assessment)) which is designed to build professional knowledge and skill in formative assessment practices and provides tools for teachers to use in their schools.

The site was, she explained, commissioned by the Curriculum Corporation Board as a means of building and supporting ‘a strong assessment culture in all Australian schools’.

Assessment for Learning practices, and hence the website, emphasise completion of the learning cycle illustrated below:

![Learning Cycle Diagram]

‘Well designed assessment promoting deep learning gives teachers the material or opportunity to make judgements about achievement and learning needs, leading in turn to feedback and teaching programs designed to meet the needs identified through the assessment process.’

The site aims, in this context, ‘to close the gap between assessment and learning’ – an order she used deliberately to convey the fact that information from assessment is used to improve
learning, and to support the use of a number of other strategies that research demonstrates
as effective. As such the site also aims ‘to close the gap between research-based evidence and
classroom practice; to use what has been learnt from research into formative assessment to
provide professional support and tools for teachers who in turn can use this to inform and
perhaps even transform practice’.

**Formative assessment**

Formative assessment, according to Holt, refers to ‘the frequent interactive assessments of
student progress and understanding’. The Assessment Reform Group in the UK defined
Assessment for learning as ‘… the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by
learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they
need to go and how best to get there.’ (2002)

This definition implies:

- a deliberate, planned and focused process;
- the involvement of both learners and teachers;
- a professional knowledge of assessment on the part of teachers (picking up on
  Gabrielle Matters’ view that assessment is more than the stuff of a rainy Sunday
  afternoon);
- most importantly, an expectation that the information gained from this kind of
  assessment will directly inform the teaching and learning program.

Research undertaken by Black and Wiliam in 1998, entitled *Inside the Black Box*, found typical
effect sizes of formative assessment interventions of between 0.4 and 0.7. These effect sizes
are larger than most of those found for educational interventions; and an effect size of 0.4
would mean that the average pupil involved in an innovation would record the same
achievement as a pupil in the top 35% of those not so involved.

A significant piece of research published since the site she was outlining went live confirms
this earlier research. A UNESCO study of nineteen case studies in nine OECD countries,
which incorporated an examination of policy frameworks, visits to exemplary schools,
interviews, classroom observations and literature reviews found that ‘… formative
assessment is one of the most effective strategies for promoting high student performance.’
It also confirmed Black and Wiliam’s finding that it is important for ‘improving the equity of
student outcomes, for closing the gap between low achievers and the rest of their cohort – for
diminishing the assessment gap tail … (and) for developing students’ “learning to learn”
skills’.

Despite this evidence, though, both Black and Wiliam’s studies and the more recent OECD
one show, Holt explained, that formative assessment is used only ‘haphazardly – at all levels
of the teaching and learning interaction’.
Some assessment for learning strategies

The seven ‘fundamental strategies’ which Holt suggested arise from the research about how to make formative assessment more systematic and powerful in schools are:

1. embedding assessment in student learning
2. providing effective feedback – on the qualities of the work with advice about how to improve
3. the use of strategic questioning
4. student self-assessment – which helps students to understand and internalise the task and develops ‘learning how to learn’ skills
5. sharing learning intentions and assessment criteria – students should know and recognise the standards
6. making formative use of summative assessments both the kind that is done in classrooms and at a system level
7. planning and adjusting teaching programs on the basis of what is learnt from assessments

Each of these strategies has a body of knowledge arising from classroom research about what makes for effective practice, and also is built into the structure and all elements of the assessment for learning site. In this context there has been, she explained, ‘great interest’ at both the grass roots and policy levels in being involved in the project and learning how to make use of the site; and she briefly outlined the overall development process involved.

Features of the site

The assessment for learning website essentially is a professional development resource incorporating:

- assessment tasks with rubrics and suggested follow-up teaching and learning activities;
- work samples;
- five Professional Development modules.

The assessment tasks, Holt explained, are ‘a framework to illustrate the strategies which have been identified in the research as effective, and the emphasis is on modelling rather than on provision of definitive “carved-in-stone” assessment tasks.

Holt then took participants on a tour of the assessment for learning site on screen with particular reference to the assessment tasks and professional development it contains.

The site is not, she concluded, ‘the end of the story’. The Curriculum Corporation Board has also identified a need to provide further tools and professional support, and a new project is underway which will develop three case study DVD/videos of exemplary classroom practice in relation to three key Assessment for Learning strategies (that is, strategic questioning, effective feedback and student self-assessment), including interviews with teachers about their use of the strategies, and their difficulties and how they were overcome. The first module is under way with two others to follow depending on the evaluation of the first.
‘Formative assessment clearly does make a difference. It has the power to improve student learning and, supported by resources such as this site, can help close the achievement gap.’

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Responding to a question from session chair, Wendy Bodey (Manager, Assessment Services, Curriculum Corporation), about the implications for policy, practice and professional learning of the three presentations, Matters responded with the following:

- Models of professional development – ‘the power of built in, rather than bolted on PD as Bruce Houghton had advised. The effects are positive and huge’.
- Positions on equity – ‘the very simple truth that high expectations lead to improved outcomes, as evidenced by the improved outcomes for Indigenous students in the Cape that Bruce described’.
- Leadership – ‘you cannot overstate the power and importance of the leader in schools’.
- Research – ‘the New Basics research reveals that change can occur and be accepted by the profession, but we ought drill down and look at what works and why, rather than just say “it works”’.

From a policy perspective, Houghton added, ‘we need continuity and growth of the New Basics trial with the comparability it gives between what happens in Aurukun and what happens in Brisbane. That is what our parents really want, as evidenced by the fact we’ve stemmed the flow of kids to boarding schools in our community.’

The site she outlined is, for Holt, a ‘good example of policy and ground level interest coalescing that can be mirrored elsewhere’. The UNESCO research to which she referred indicated, she explained, a range of other policy levers that systems ought to look at, with professional development ‘clearly to the fore’. In terms of school-level practice, she felt there are some of the seven strategies she outlined which ‘we do well’, such as embedding assessment in curriculum and teaching and learning, but others, such as strategic questioning, we are ‘not so good at’. There are, in this context, some simple research-based techniques we can use to improve such as better use of wait time in class.
Better assessment tools for teachers

Mary Chamberlain (Senior Manager, Curriculum Teaching and Learning Group, NZ Ministry of Education) briefed participants on successful approaches in New Zealand for improving and validating teacher judgements which are, arguably, among the best in the world.

This was followed by brief presentations on Australian and broader OECD experiences on reporting to systems and schools by Jocelyn Cook (Manager, Educational Measurement, Western Australian Department of Education and Training) and Dr Barry McGaw, and a further feedback session for participants.

Mary Chamberlain

Chamberlain used her presentation to share some thoughts about some of the issues the New Zealand Ministry of Education has grappled with ‘as we have developed new assessment tools over the last few years’.

One of the aims of the NZ assessment strategy, she explained, is to develop school based assessment tools that ‘help teachers and students see more clearly what quality looks like, identify bases to build on and areas in which to grow, and, in Royce Sadler’s words7 to “use information on the gap to change the gap”’.

Another aim was to build a learning environment broader than just the classroom, by considering ‘who needed assessment information, what they needed it for and how assessment tools might be used to promote a two way flow of information that supports learning rather than takes energy away from it’.

Traditionally, she explained, educational stakeholders such as parents, other teachers, school managers and governors ‘have wanted (and sometimes received) information about student learning but have not been able to use this information in ways that are experienced back in the classroom as supportive of learning. In other words, information going out from the learner was more often focused on the reporting and accountability functions of assessment, with little explicit flow-back to the learner.’

The ministry strategy, by contrast, is clearly focused on ‘using assessment to improve teaching and learning at all levels of the system’. This is not, she noted, ‘incompatible with the reporting and accountability purposes for assessment. If teachers are teaching and students are learning then there will be evidence that can be used to improve teaching practices, and provide feedback for learning and this evidence should also be able to be used for reporting and accountability purposes.

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The participatory processes used to develop the tools and the professional development programs the ministry funds to support their use to improve learning are, therefore, ‘as important as the quality of the tools themselves. They have enabled teachers to engage in conversations and develop shared agreement about things that matter, to look for indicators of quality in examples of their students’ work, and to reflect on their teaching practice.’

These participatory processes have been followed up with professional learning programs that help teachers to use assessment tools to:

- set clear and challenging goals with students;
- provide learning oriented feedback;
- adjust their teaching and develop learning environments that are more relevant and motivating for their students;
- develop better learning focused partnerships with parents and community.

Shared ideas about what matters and what quality looks like are, in Chamberlain’s view, ‘critical because what teachers believe matters (about their students, about what’s to be learnt and about how it should be taught), guides what they notice, what they recognise, and how they respond to students. When the decision is made to value something by developing tools to assess it, what people see changes. Interactions change, teaching changes, learning changes.’

What matters, of course, changes over time and this influences both pedagogy and assessment, which she illustrated with a video clip of reading in the 1960s. When Chamberlain herself was at primary school her teachers believed ‘that oral fluency was important in the teaching of reading. This meant that reading was taught by having us read aloud around a circle. Unknown words were supplied by the teacher or another student and we were assessed with a mark out of 10, or a stamp on the hand.’

A few decades later ‘we have a fundamentally different conception about how students best learn to read. This influences how they are taught to read, and how reading is assessed’; which again was illustrated with a short video clip, but this time of a reading lesson today. ‘We now believe that teaching students from early on how to make meaning from the text is more important than oral fluency. Teachers use texts that support this. Texts that are rich in meaning for their particular students, engage students’ interests and draw on their cultural and social identities. Teachers look closely at student’s actual reading behaviour and use a range of approaches including guided, shared and independent reading. They teach students specific strategies to help them decode unknown words and make sense of rich texts. They use assessment tools that help them see these things more clearly and clarify students’ possible next steps.’

Good assessment is, she noted in this context, ‘more than assessing important content outcomes – we have always had reading comprehension tests. It is also about assessing in ways that are compatible with what we believe is important about the learning process.’
She then proceeded to discuss two new school-based assessment tools developed in New Zealand which:

- provide clear, valid, reliable and accessible information for students, teachers, parents and Boards about things that matter;
- provide deliberate links to curriculum, pedagogy, and possible ‘what next’ pathways;
- are accompanied by professional learning for teachers.

Both tools have been developed in English and in Maori through separate but parallel processes.

**asTTle**

asTTle (*Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning*) is an interactive CD ROM based tool that provides assessments in both English and Maori medium, for students in Years 4–12, in reading, writing and mathematics. Its main purpose is to provide analysed assessment information that can be used to improve teaching and learning.

The tool, she explained, ‘generates interactive graphic reports that allow teachers (and students) to analyse student achievement data to share with anyone who has a need for that information – usually students and parents. Along with other assessment tools, asTTle provides externally referenced assessment information that assists teachers to make valid and reliable judgements about the progress of their students.’

At the classroom level, asTTle enables teachers and students to ‘diagnose student performance, give and receive focused feedback, set learning goals, develop and modify classroom programs, and engage in learning oriented discourse with parents using reliable information’.

At the school level, information may be aggregated and used to evaluate teaching programs and inform strategic planning.

Users can, Chamberlain explained, ‘create tests to specified difficulty levels and content, manage student and test information and create in-depth reports on student and class achievement’.

All test items link to the New Zealand Curriculum, and also are linked to a common scale using student trials, moderation, educators’ reviews and item response theory. This ensures that all items are marked to scale and the results of different items can be compared.

The program, she explained, generates a range of reports showing curriculum levels, individual learning pathways, group learning pathways, comparisons with national data and what next profiles. These asTTle individual learning pathways reports identify areas of strength to build on as well as areas of need for individual students. Possible next steps in learning are also shown, enabling teachers and students to develop learning intentions together as indicated in the following sample she provided. (See also the PowerPoint™ presentation.)
Patterns of achievement and learning needs, she noted, also are identified for whole classes and specific comparisons can be made on students’ year of study, gender, ethnicity, language spoken, location, and to ‘schools like mine’.

Given all this information it is important, Chamberlain advised, to ensure that data is not too hard for teachers to disaggregate and use to improve their teaching. ‘This can happen when numbers or summary comments become disconnected from the event or task. The further those interpreting the numbers are from the event, the more difficult it is to re-gain a rich picture of what happened.’

Since such information is, ultimately, ‘a meaning problem, it has to be addressed as a continuous learning proposition’, and New Zealand has developed Assess to Learn (aToL) professional learning programs to support teachers to use the insights gained from assessment tools to design richer opportunities to learn; which she then illustrated with reference to the child of a family friend and a particular primary school. The teachers in this case were supported to share their pathway reports with their students, which first required them to ‘scaffold the students’ understanding of the report’ before discussing ‘what they thought the results meant about their current patterns of reading knowledge and what they thought they needed to learn next’.

The teachers, she reported, ‘were delighted with what happened. The students came up with a detailed analysis of the reports and came back highly motivated about what they wanted to learn next and how they wanted to learn it. The teachers then built on this base by conferencing with each student about their own individual report and supporting each
student to focus the group goals down to their own individual learning needs. This further increased motivation – especially when the students then spontaneously took the individual reports home to discuss their learning with their parents.

These are examples of pedagogical approaches to using assessment tools that ‘intensify peer support and create environments where “getting it wrong” is simply useful. These approaches provide an opportunity for higher mental processes to form through scaffolding of students developing understanding through social interactions with skilled partners. They are examples of students contributing to their own assessments, and learning more effectively; examples of interactions that help teachers to learn about their students working theories about learning – knowledge that helps them to teach more effectively.’

This kind of professional development is, of course, ‘challenging and demanding in time and personal commitment to implement change and in ideas and approaches’. A major source of support is, in this context, teachers’ awareness that they are not alone. ‘Team or whole school approaches that support teachers to look at data together across the school or department and consider what it’s telling them help teachers to focus on the issue and motivates them to consider new approaches.’

Curriculum Exemplars

Curriculum Exemplars, Chamberlain explained, ‘are examples of student work in all curriculum areas that are annotated to illustrate learning, achievement, and quality in relation to levels 1 to 5 (approximately 5 to 14 years old) described in national curriculum statements. They help to answer the question, “What’s quality work?” and highlight features that teachers need to watch for, collect information about, and act on to promote learning.’

All exemplars follow the same general format and include indicators about what the work shows, curriculum links, the learning context (what the teacher did to get students to produce this work), a learning conversation between teachers and students or students and their peers, and ideas about where to next.

While teachers’ judgements about progress and achievement are guided by their understanding of the long-term educational outcomes signalled in achievement objectives in New Zealand’s official curriculum, Chamberlain and her colleagues found that ‘achievement objectives alone were insufficient to provide the clarity of focus needed to signal learning progressions that assist teachers to provide focused formative feedback to students. They were also insufficient to help teachers make consistent and comparable judgements about students’ quality of performance for reporting purposes. As Sadler8 points out, it is difficult to express progress and quality in words alone. Words are needed to describe criteria and examples are needed to demonstrate quality; which she illustrated with reference to achievement objectives for visual arts.

Shared agreement and understanding between teachers, students and parents about what is to be learnt and why, she argued, ‘is critical because often underachievers don’t know what they’re supposed to be focusing on. This can mean they expend effort on the wrong things, get disheartened because their efforts don’t lead to success and retire hurt, attributing their successes to luck and their failures to lack of ability. Conversely, helping students attribute

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their successes and failures to effort and strategy rather than luck or ability is one of the most
important things teachers can do for their students because it impacts on their achievement
and the way they approach their ongoing learning.

Shared agreement and understanding between teachers and students about what is to be
learnt and why also helps students see ‘why something is important’ and this is ‘more likely
to trigger their personal desire to learn’ which can carry them ‘through repeated
disappointments and difficulties’.

Students’ individual learning journeys, according to Chamberlain, ‘may be smooth or
involve stops, starts, sudden leaps and wrong turnings – a bit like snakes and ladders. To
support students’ learning and help them to make their next move, teachers need to make
strategic, on-the-spot interventions’. The teacher–student conversations in the exemplars
suggest how to provide effective feedback that scaffolds learning and these have been
accompanied by professional development focused on learning conversations and feedback
that improves learning. And she shared an example involving a conversation between a five
year old during a first draft of a story about his grandfather (found at
http://www.tki.org.nz/r/assessment/exemplars/eng/character/wpp1o_e.php), which
demonstrates that ‘positive feedback that celebrates their successes can help to keep students
motivated and increase their confidence. Constructive feedback can highlight the things that
are important to focus on and provide scaffolding towards the next learning steps.’

Good feedback, which inspires the student to do something, or try something differently,
and which therefore leads to increased task engagement and increased agency, ‘is tailored to
both the nature of the assessment task and the learner’s response to the task, and leads to
progressive appreciation by the learner of what constitutes quality work and the strategies
needed to attain high standards’.

This means that teachers’ understanding of the qualities of effective feedback is critical.
Curriculum exemplars in this context are being used in number of ways. A common practice
to help teachers develop shared understanding of progress and quality’, for example, ‘is for
staff to plan a school or department wide unit or assessment task for their students. Each
teacher brings to a whole-staff meeting six samples (at low, mid, and high range) of their
students’ work on the unit or task. In turn, each teacher lays their samples out across the
staffroom floor to show a continuum or progression from the lowest to highest curriculum
levels. The teachers then group the samples of work. They annotate these grouped samples
and record features of the work that they think are important. The teachers then compare
their school samples and annotations to the relevant national exemplars and indicators.’

Activities such as these, Chamberlain explained, are ‘helping teachers make more consistent
judgements that are likely over time to decrease discrepancies between different teachers'
judgements; inconsistencies in a teacher's judgement over time; a teacher's personal view of
the student; the carry-over of positive or negative judgements from one assessment to the
next; a teacher's general tendency towards leniency or severity; and teachers being
influenced by extraneous factors in the student's work, for example, neat or untidy
handwriting.’

Teachers have also been using exemplars with their students to help them better understand
and judge the quality of their work and provide feedback. This enables students to see and
discuss ‘desirable qualities in real examples of work’ and to realise there are many ways to
achieve their goals.
Exemplars and asTTle are ‘assessment tools that signal important things for teachers to notice, recognise and respond to in their teaching practice’. They are supported by Assess to Learn (aToL) professional learning opportunities for teachers so they can use them to make a difference to student learning.

Investment in assessment tools will not on its own, she concluded, make any difference to student outcomes. ‘The difference happens when motivated and skilled teachers use the tools to change what students become.’

**Jocelyn Cook**

‘Assessment systems in Australia are’, Cook explained, ‘grounded in the belief that being explicit about learning goals and measuring students’ progress towards these same goals will help to improve student learning.’ Assessment programs are, therefore, ‘developed to measure in terms of learning goals. Information from the programs then provides an indication of how students, schools and systems are travelling and how successful programs and initiatives have been and … the information needed to shape programs at the macro-level of public policy and the micro-level of teaching programs within the classroom.’

More formally put, this process can be described as ‘a series of steps:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step1</td>
<td>What students should know and be able to do, is agreed and explicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step2</td>
<td>The extent to which this is being achieved is measured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step3</td>
<td>The broader educational enterprise that includes bureaucrats, administrators and teachers throw their efforts behind ensuring students reach those goals.</td>
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Using a framework for judging the quality of system-wide monitoring programs developed by Margaret Forster, Cook then interrogated ‘the efficacy of testing programs, particularly the reporting processes’, in three respects – planning the program, collecting the data, and using the data.

**Planning the program (clarity of purpose, resourcing and sustainability)**

Testing programs in which Australian States and Territories participate ‘measure-up well’, according to Cook, ‘in terms of their clarity of purpose and their alignment with the designated curriculum and reporting frameworks’.

Websites of all testing programs in which Australian States participate make it clear that all such programs share a vision of ensuring they serve as levers for change ‘by informing action that improves student outcomes’. And a number of samples she then cited made it readily apparent that ‘testing programs in which Australian students participate intend to stimulate appropriate educational reform by providing information and insight to stakeholders so that the required interventions can be made. Being clear about the purpose of assessment programs does not, however, in itself make them successful.’
Collecting the data (validity and reliability)

The testing programs in which Australian students participate also, in Cook’s view, ‘measure-up well in terms of the quality of the data collected. Jurisdictions ensure that the processes of measuring performance are robust.’

Since 1998 in particular, when jurisdictions around Australia began to collaborate to ensure reporting of national comparable data, ‘the psychometric and curriculum integrity of jurisdictions’ own testing programs has been subject to close scrutiny, by each other and by the Commonwealth. While psychometric rigour is necessary for a successful system-level assessment program it too, according to Cook, ‘is not in itself sufficient’.

Using the data (informing policy and reform)

This, she argued, is the area of ‘greatest weakness in all assessment programs undertaken by Australian students. The talent and creativity that is invested in the development of the assessment and the analyses isn’t matched when it comes to disseminating and using the information at the local level. The degree to which programs are integrated into the larger educational context has been relatively limited, as is use of information to shape programs at the macro-level of public policy and the micro-level of classroom programs.’

This clearly is ‘a significant weakness; because if the accountability mechanisms do not positively affect the quality of public policy, school practice and classroom teaching, then regardless of their other strengths, the accountability mechanisms themselves are failing’.

This led her to discuss the dissemination of significant information from the monitoring program in WA in a way that is accessible to a range of stakeholders.

Dissemination of significant information in accessible ways

While there undoubtedly is ‘a wealth of information from the various assessment programs, it often does not get communicated in a particularly timely or accessible way’; which Cook illustrated with reference to experience in her own state (WA) which generally has been confirmed by colleagues from other jurisdictions.

The sample testing programs such as Western Australia’s MSE program, the national Primary Science Assessment Program (PSAP), the international programs PISA and TIMSS currently have, in Cook’s view, ‘negligible symbolic or technical function at the classroom level because the reports, while comprehensive, do not “speak” directly to classroom practitioners or even school administrators. Sample programs cannot provide valid individual student level information and often can provide only limited school level information. The complexity of the analyses and depth of the reporting result in quite a time-lag between testing and reporting, so the limited information that is given back to schools may refer to a cohort of students that has moved into a different phase of schooling.’

This, she explained, does not in itself make the information irrelevant, ‘but in the school environment where the operational challenges always have the face of a student, parent or teacher attached to them, this information has a level of abstraction about it that allows it to be put in the “Interesting … I’ll attend to that when I get time…” pile’.
That said, she also has observed that, ‘when time is made for teachers and administrators to learn about a testing program such as PISA and the implications of its findings, they are highly responsive to the information and make the connections of its relevance to their own context very quickly’; as in fact happened in WA in 2003.

‘Recognising the importance of taking time to explicate aspects of programs for key stakeholders’, Cook explained, ‘grew out of our experience with the Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy program. This program had been introduced in 1998 under a storm of opposition and anger from educators. In early 1999 an evaluation was conducted to formally gauge parent and teacher reactions to the program. The results indicated relatively high levels of mistrust and dissatisfaction among teachers with WALNA.’

From 1999 to 2003 two significant programs were introduced to support better use of the data by key stakeholders of WALNA:

- The Data Club which targeted principals, ‘supports school leaders in making performance judgements based on their school’s Western Australian Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA) data’;
- A program targeting teachers which began life as the ‘Teachers’ Data Club’ and has since been re-badged as ‘Assessment for Improvement’. This professional development program seeks ‘to increase teachers’ confidence in judgements they make from a range of assessments. Teachers’ Analysis workshops have been specifically designed to build teachers’ ability to blend their classroom monitoring with WALNA results to judge student achievement and plan for future teaching and learning’.

While both programs were about understanding data, ‘they were built to meet the needs identified by principals and teachers. Beyond the initial data provided, the displays and graphs included in WALNA reporting have been ones requested by principals and teachers, rather than all the ones that a powerful statistical software package can generate.’

A subsequent evaluation of WALNA carried out at the end of 2002, and using the original questionnaire with a representative sample of teachers and parents, revealed increased parent support for the role that external assessment can play in supporting schools to provide better literacy teaching; and a significant decline in teacher disagreement that system level test information would assist schools in providing better literacy teaching. There was also, Cook explained, ‘a significant shift in how useful teachers perceived the WALNA results to be’; which she illustrated with some short video clips of teachers from Exmouth who were involved.

It is also worth noting in this context that principals who had not had access to the Data Club (which, as noted earlier is the older of the two programs) differed significantly in their responses to other principals. ‘These principals were less likely to:

- provide the data to the current or next year’s teachers or the school;
- think their staff was confident in using the data;
- involve the school council in interpretation of the data or share the data with the P&C;
- take the data into account when reviewing curriculum plans;
- belong to the Data Club;
• find the data on individual students useful for diagnostic purposes or for determining rates of learning;
• use it to track student performance.’

In addition, ‘these principals were more likely to disagree that the results confirmed strengths and weaknesses of the school curriculum or that the results gave a good overview of teaching in the WALNA years’.

**Lessons learned**

The main lesson learned from this experience is, according to Cook, ‘that if you want to engage teachers in discussion about the meaning of system assessment, talk to them about the students they teach and are crucially interested in helping. Use the data to help them articulate what their students can do and what they are struggling with. Let the data shape teachers’ “stories” about their students … (because you then) are talking to them about “their kids” and their teaching program and it’s irresistible!’

All jurisdictions are, she concluded, ‘committed to the deep reform that positively alters learning outcomes for students. They demonstrate this by their considerable investment in international, national and local testing programs, yet a key aspect of the cycle has been missed. Accountability systems will fail if teachers, who have been trained for decades to mistrust test data, are expected to work it out all by themselves.

This isn’t about producing more, complicated graphs … Good reporting is about guiding teachers to intelligent interpretation of data that is useful to their work: teaching students effectively. An assessment system that fails to support school personnel in this enterprise is a highly imperfect mechanism.’

**Barry McGaw**

McGaw’s task was to talk about the international context which, he conceded, could not be ‘as rich as what you have heard’.

He did, in this context, describe a meeting of all OECD Ministers in 2004 where ‘efforts to raise standards’ were discussed and there was:

• some support for global testing systems and public use of data on the one hand;
• concern about potential misinterpretations of such data without the amelioration of context and hence the degree of value added, on the other.

As a result, some countries like Ireland, which hosted the meeting, had introduced national testing programs but mandated the data cannot be publicly used. Debate, he noted, ‘raged’ and hence he suggested, as often happens in these circumstances, that a further, more informal and smaller meeting be held to explore the issues in more depth – a meeting where Australia was represented by Anna Bligh.

He then drew on these two meetings, rather than any detailed study of events in individual countries, since these were not directly investigated.
To a large extent, of course, these meetings were driven by the PISA results to which he had referred on the previous day, and which have arguably ‘changed much of the international discussion so it focuses more on the quality of performance’.

Some particular reactions

Germany, for instance, had looked at the regression slope he described on the previous day (see above) for Reading literacy in terms of social equity and which saw Germany in the low quality/low equity, or least desirable quadrant. In response, McGaw explained, they decided to look at the experience of comparable countries in the desired, high quality/high equity quadrant (Finland, Sweden and Canada) as well as other countries such as France and the UK which are in the same quadrant as Australia (that is, high quality/low equity) but which also are important partners of Germany in Europe. The commissioned detailed study that resulted is, he explained, on the OECD website for all to view.

Denmark, by contrast, was concerned about efficiency. They looked at the results of a graph relating achievement to expenditure and became concerned that, although countries like Australia performed better than would be expected given their expenditure level, Denmark was performing less well than expected. In other words, ‘they run a very inefficient system’. It, therefore, sought to investigate how it could get more value for what it spends, and once again the report is on the OECD site. The key finding was, McGaw noted, that the Danish system does not have a ‘culture of evaluation’ and the fact that, whenever evaluation was available, they did not perform as well as they thought; and this is something the country now is seeking to rectify.

The point of these examples is to demonstrate that the availability of international evidence can provide a context where it becomes easier to introduce national/provincial programs of assessment because of the recognition that ‘more could be known domestically’.

Inevitably, he conceded, this raises the question ‘why bother?’ since, as commonly is heard, ‘weighing a pig won’t make it fatter’. McGaw’s response is that ‘without weighing the pig, how can you know how well the feeding regime is working? The purpose of weighing is not to know the weight so much as to assess the change, to see if what you are doing is working.’

The two purposes of assessment are, in this context, summative for reasons of accountability, and diagnostic/formative, for reasons of improvement. These reflect, he emphasised, ‘not ways in which the technical aspects of assessment alter, but ways in which the purposes do’. And these purposes are equally relevant at the system and school level as they are for the individual student.

The scope of such assessments (that is, sample or census) depends, he noted, on whether the focus is the system, schools or students, but one of the reasons he tends to prefer sample assessment is that ‘you can do more intelligent and interesting things with a sample than when everyone is to be tested’. That said, there is a reason for full population testing too. ‘Sample assessment tells you what happens at the system level. Population based testing provides information on every student and helps meet the obligation to report to parents on achievement in comparable terms. Even if the concern is purely with the system, and you want to improve it, one thing it is helpful to know is where best practice is occurring, and that requires that you can disaggregate to find it.’
Disaggregating the data: an example

With this in mind, McGaw outlined an example of how having disaggregated data can help drive system reform, taken from health rather than education, and based on information provided to the meeting of Ministers of Education by Michael Barber who heads the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit in the UK.

The question under investigation was, how long people should have to wait for treatment in an accident and emergency unit; and the UK had set a target of no more than four hours.

A more specific target that at least 90% of patients should wait no more than four hours in Accident and Emergency Units was included in the UK National Health Service Plan in June 2000, and became a formal part of the Public Service Agreement struck in June the following year. But despite this, the actual performance over 2001 and 2002 was less than 80% and no improvement or change occurred.

The government in response created a Department of Health Task Force in January 2003 and made the Accident and Emergency measure one of the factors determining the star ratings of hospitals in April that year. A noticeable improvement occurred and the 90% outcome was exceeded by the end of 2003. Because of the plateau that occurred after these measures were introduced, the government added an incentive scheme in March 2004 which saw the figures again begin to improve to above 95% by the end of that year.

The example illustrates, according to McGaw, how a major system-level target was approached ‘more systematically’ only after disaggregated data was analysed and best practice identified in the process, which subsequently was generalised across the system as a whole. The result was, he observed, performance management at the institutional level, and tailored support for specific problems that were identified as needing to be addressed.

And other examples were provided by Barber at the meeting as well, such as reducing the number of minor crimes that had to be dealt with by police, which led McGaw to ponder ‘its applicability to schools and teachers’. This in turn raises the question of how far we ought disaggregate – to the school level, albeit with debate about public availability of the data? to teachers, given the research about the impact of teachers and teaching on student achievement?

Perhaps in this context, he posited, ‘the focus ought not so much be on making schools better, as on making teachers better’, given it is ‘a myth that all teachers are equal’.

Data form and use

All of this raises questions about how much and what data we should collect.

When it comes to the breadth of data we gather, McGaw advised, we would do well to remember that ‘what we measure signals what we value’. This in turn requires us to ask, where ‘what we don’t measure signals what we don’t value?’ and to also consider the ‘unintended consequences of not measuring something’.
While it undoubtedly is student performance that we seek to measure there are, he suggested, real questions then about what we publish:

- the measurement of current performance?
- estimates of the value added by the school?’ and/or
- comparisons with other, ‘like’ schools?

There is, he noted, lots of work going on in this context on value added measures, but there are significant statistical difficulties to be overcome. Value added, he explained, is estimated by taking some prior measure (such as social background) and using a current estimate to say how much could have been predicted from where they were then; and then attributing to the school only shifts that have occurred beyond that. When that is said, however, ‘you end up with some schools adding more than was predicted and others with a negative score. Does this mean they have subtracted value?’ The point is, according to McGaw, that value added estimations are fundamentally normative, which is counter to the direction we are headed, and hence a methodological problem to resolve.

Turning to the broader question of uses of data, and whether it ought to be public or not, McGaw noted it is contentious to say the least. Some such as the Irish, as indicated near the start of his address, choose to collect the data but not publish it. Others, such as the Norwegians believe that having data requires you to make it public, but then they bury people in data providing absolutely everything as evident on the websites they maintain. Aside from that, there is a need to recognise there already are significant private sources of data on the web, such as a Standard & Poors site that mobile professionals use to help choose their children’s schools when they relocate around the globe.

So do assessment programs make a difference? At the level of research there is not much, apart from Hanuschek’s work, though what there is tends to be positive. At a system level, England at least reports improvement among the poorest performing schools though less improvement for the next 15 per cent.

This means, he concluded, that if you are going to introduce monitoring programs, there is a need to ‘monitor the monitoring’ by evaluating the trends both overall, and for subgroups such as the way in which the No Child Left Behind Act in the US requires. ‘We have a long list in education of doing what we think we ought do, instead of systematically monitoring whether it’s working or not’. If nothing else, it is an obvious and important question when countries are saying that the way to raise standards is to monitor them.

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Feedback session 4

Session chair, Pamela Macklin (Deputy CEO, Curriculum Corporation at the time of the conference, and now Deputy CEO, ACER) invited feedback from table groups in the context of a real focus on the support and tools teachers need to improve their assessment practices.

Asked about any consideration of extraneous or compounding variables impacting on the efficiency factors in various countries, such as teacher salaries as a proportion of GDP, McGaw explained that the data was analysed in terms of ‘equivalent purchasing power parity’. This means they looked at salaries in terms of how much you can buy with reference
to a basket of goods developed by economists in the OECD. ‘So the amounts spent per student were genuinely equivalent.’ That said, he noted, there were some expenditures that were not captured. South Korea, for example, spends 7.2% of its GDP on education, only 5% of which is provided by government. ‘But we don’t capture the huge expenditure on out-of-school tutoring which reflects the commitment to education in that country.’

While he had the floor, McGaw also sought to explain what it is about Finland that makes it so successful. Finland has no assessment program which ‘confounds the argument’, but they do have ‘a culture of assessment’. Teacher education is harder to get into than medicine. Teaching is not especially well-paid, but has very high status. ‘It’s a well-educated profession that knows what it is meant to do and highly capable of delivering it. So, if you can’t replicate that, then you had better think of something else – like monitoring.’

Responding to a question about good and poor teachers and the pre-service training they received, McGaw pointed out that the absence of any evidence of an empirical relationship is purely because the data hasn’t been gathered. Measuring the nature of the teacher education is ‘very problematic’. Even the data on teachers and their impact is, he noted, ‘tricky, because you tend to look at the characteristics of the current teaching against the outcomes and impact of many years of teaching on a student’. That leads to concluding teaching is less significant than it really is because that data isn’t actually speaking to the question.
Session 8

Reporting to parents and the community

Brief perspectives on current initiatives in reporting were provided by Dr Graham Maxwell (Deputy Director, Research and Policy, Queensland Studies Authority) and Jennifer Branch (Senior Vice President, Australian Council of State School Organisations) prior to a case study from Lyn Hollow (Principal) on Maningrida College and another feedback session.

Graham Maxwell

There are, according to Maxwell, three ‘prominent influences’ on the ‘considerable public debate and action around Australia concerning reporting to parents and the community’.

1. Parent difficulty in understanding the meaning of (some) school reports

Parents, he explained, ‘cannot support their child’s learning if they cannot fathom what and how well their child is learning. Most schools make earnest attempts to communicate with parents and there are many examples of excellent school–home connections. But the plethora of ways in which schools report on student progress causes confusion among parents.’

Part of the problem, he suggested, is the lack of ‘a common language to describe student progress’, which he illustrated using a table he presented from an article by Thomas Guskey in the December 2004 edition of *Phi Delta Kappan* which listed such indicators of student success as (for the lower end of understanding/quality) ‘modest, beginning, novice and unsatisfactory’ and for the higher end ‘superior, exemplary, distinguished, and outstanding’, with similar illustrations for levels in between and other categories of performance.

Regardless of issues about the standards which sit behind such labels the real point is, according to Maxwell, the need for ‘deliberate strategies … to be developed to help parents understand what lies behind the labels and to participate in meaningful discussions about their child’s progress’.

2. Teacher uncertainty about how to enact recent curriculum reforms effectively

Curriculum reforms of the past decade had as their starting point the development of frameworks of learning outcomes. ‘The intention, not yet fully realised’, according to Maxwell, ‘was to shift the focus from the act of teaching (what the teacher does) to the act of learning (what the student does). This was achieved by mapping detailed developmental sequences of learning outcomes. In time, these frameworks have come to be seen as offering both too much and too little.’

The ‘too much’, he explained, ‘concerns the difficulty in handling so many learning outcomes … (which) prompted the current moves to define the “essentials” and to “un-clutter” the curriculum. The “too little” concerns insufficient guidance to schools on how to use the frameworks to assess and report student progress.’ It is all very well, he argued, ‘to
have a comprehensive framework, but teachers need some way of condensing it into manageable components. Charting progress on every learning outcome becomes laborious – and, for parents, unintelligible. Some simpler ways of recording and reporting progress are needed. This does not necessarily mean abandoning existing frameworks – just restructuring so that the detail is situated within more general concepts and structures. This helps locate discussion about student learning at an appropriate level of generality or detail.

3. Government interest in monitoring and improving the effectiveness of schools and in public information and accountability

Education, Maxwell explained, is now a large expenditure of government budgets. ‘Governments are naturally interested in the effectiveness of that expenditure’, and the national process of defining performance benchmarks for literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5 and 7 was ‘an attempt to provide some common language for learning outcomes. Attention to the benchmarks themselves, as rich descriptions of learning targets was, (however), subverted by translating them into minimum cut-scores on tests. The new national process of defining National Learning Statements may realise this ambition for a common focus more effectively.’

His real point though, was that ‘monitoring the effectiveness of schools requires a common language about what is to be assessed and how the standard of performance is to be represented’. While State and Federal jurisdictions in Australia are grappling with this issue, it is tests that are seen as the means of providing this kind of information. ‘But tests assess only some aspects of student learning – often only those aspects that have “right/wrong” answers, involve small and disaggregated tasks, and require immediate response. While this can provide some useful information … it represents only a part of the learning outcomes that schools seek to foster.’

Teachers themselves, he explained, assess a much broader range of student performance than can be assessed by external means. The question is, then, ‘how to assure the quality of the teachers’ assessments’ and this again requires ‘a common language for assessment and reporting. By clarifying what is to be assessed and how it is to be reported, it becomes more possible to have conversations across schools about the quality of their assessments and the comparability of their judgements of student achievement. This can serve government ambition to monitor effectiveness but also help to focus attention on improving the overall quality of student learning.’

Reporting on progress

Turning to a consideration of reporting to parents on their child’s progress, Maxwell explained how, in 2004, the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) conducted focus groups with parents to discover their views of assessment and reporting in relation to the Key Learning Areas (KLAs). The focus group parents revealed ‘a strong interest in finding out about their child’s progress in school and how they can help in improving that learning. But they felt they should be informed of any problems as soon as they arise, not wait for a formal semester report.’
In relation to assessment, the parent focus groups:

- ‘saw a relationship between assessment and reporting but were not sure of how this occurs, that is, did not understand what assessments were used and how what was reported related to what was assessed;
- wanted more information about assessment in schools;
- believed assessment should occur in each of the KLAs.’

When it came to reporting, they:

- ‘wanted to know how their child was going in general, with specific details of strengths and weaknesses;
- liked to have other information besides academic, particularly behaviour and effort;
- wanted to be informed of student development or progress from one report to another;
- wanted reports that were clear of educational jargon – reports written in plain English;
- wanted a balance between too much detail and not enough;
- understood assessing and reporting information easiest when organised into KLAs/subjects;
- valued seeing student work;
- valued parent–teacher communication;
- accepted that there may be differences in student performance/behaviour from one context to another (one KLA to another, learning/assessment opportunity) and would like this information reported accordingly;
- wanted an indication of standard, but typically meant this to mean comparison to a cohort of peers on a statewide (not classroom) basis;
- had difficulty with anything too complex or beyond their own experiences;
- liked specific personalised comments;
- believed there would be an advantage of an overall system for assessing and reporting that would lead to comparability across schools;
- recognised that there may be different emphases in reports depending on the phase of schooling;
- were able to understand the concept of a continuum of levels, but had difficulty with the outcome statements used to describe this.’

In simple, and not particularly surprising terms, they wanted to know:

- ‘How is my child going (against standards and showing progress)?
- How does this compare with others (preferably against the cohort)?
- What next? (how can I assist further learning and development)?’

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these findings from Maxwell’s point of view, is that parents are ‘puzzled about assessment. They seem to be saying that reporting might be informative but “we do not understand how you arrive at the reported information”. That is, we do not understand how you collect and interpret the evidence on which the report is based. This means that the evidence base needs to be more transparent.’
Portfolios and deliberate sharing of frameworks teachers use to plan, monitor and report on student learning can help in this regard, but it still does not resolve the issues of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to report, especially if this is to be done in a coherent way across schools.

**Some recent developments on reporting to parents**

Maxwell then noted such recent developments to move towards clarifying the what and the how of reporting to parents as Tasmania’s *Essential Learnings*, Victoria’s *Essential Learning Standards* (VELS) and Western Australia’s *Progress Maps*, and outlined in detail his own state’s *Queensland Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Framework* (QCAR).

The QCAR, as Ken Smith earlier had explained in his address:

- defines what is *essential curriculum* for all students in Years P–10;
- assists schools to continue to provide other curriculum appropriate to local needs;
- sets standards of student achievement in the essential curriculum;
- creates a bank of assessment tools for teachers;
- establishes, at three key points in the P–10 years, rigorous comparable assessment against the defined standards, which will result in consistent teacher judgements of student achievement;
- specifies a common framework for reporting student achievement against standards.

The intention is, in this context, to develop a reporting framework that ‘is clear, meaningful, easy to read, has consistent ways of describing student performance, specifies common categories of information, and is used by all schools for reporting at particular junctures of schooling’.

**Reporting to the community on school outcomes**

At the same time, he explained, the Queensland Government’s *Changes to Schools Reporting* initiative proposed:

- a requirement that all schools publish information about the school and its outcomes ‘to support continuous improvement and enhanced accountability’ (subsequently overridden by the reporting requirements of the Australian Government);
- annual publication in the media of a profile of data for each school with students in Year 12, plus an annual statewide survey of the study, employment and other destinations of Year 12 students in the year after leaving school.

A Queensland Year 12 School Performance Report, Maxwell explained, is being trialled in 2005 and in 2006, and the Year 12 data for 2005 will be published in the newspapers in an alphabetic listing of schools, showing ‘the variety of options provided by the school to its students, the ways these are taken up by students and the outcomes of their studies by the end of Year 12’. The report (which he illustrated with a sample for a fictional school) will recognise context and celebrate diversity, but it also will provide ‘a basis for reflection by the school on whether it provides the most appropriate programs, support and opportunities for its students. Used in this way, it can be an agent for school improvement.’
This profile of student performance data provides, he suggested, 'a useful starting point for parent discussions with the school about how the school is making appropriate provision for your child.' The complementary Queensland Year 12 Destination Survey (Next Step), being conducted for the first time in 2005, will then provide schools with comprehensive data on the immediate destinations of their students and some comparative information on other schools to help ‘gauge the relevance of their school programs in terms of the post-school pathways taken by their students.’

**Conclusion**

Reporting to parents, Maxwell concluded, ‘is multi-faceted’. The focus of government policy at the moment is on developing common frameworks for school reports that will create greater consistency in the ways these things are reported across schools. But, ‘reporting’ is more than ‘reports.’

‘Formal reports allow the possibility of greater transparency and comparability. But reports need to be interpreted within their context. A lot more needs to be known about the individual student and the individual school to make sense of the formal reports and draw appropriate conclusions. For formal reports to serve a useful role, parents need to be engaged in an ongoing conversation with the school. Both the parents and the school can contribute to this conversation. The school holds a lot more information than can be condensed into a written report; parents can contribute background information about the child and their expectations of the school. In that sense “reporting” should be seen as a process of engagement with parents and the community rather than just a formal statement of individual and collective learning outcomes – a process that aims at openness, communication and connection rather than simply fulfillment of a legislated requirement.’

**Jennifer Branch**

Over the past four years Branch has, she explained, ‘been presented with the challenge of finding out and understanding what parents really want to know in their child’s report and indeed how their child is going throughout their years at school. The clear consensus with all parents was they wished no surprises in their child’s report and that they understand the primary purpose of assessment and reporting is to improve student learning.’ This, she argued, can only be achieved ‘by mutually respectful and open partnerships between home and school and consistent communication between the teacher and parents regarding a student’s progress, so that students’ learning opportunities can be optimised throughout the school year’.

There is a need, her consultations in Tasmania revealed, for a ‘consistent reporting format’ that will effectively:

- provide a view on how a child is doing in comparison with others in the same year group around the state;
- enable teachers to apply the same assessment process regardless of which school they worked at, because of their involvement in rigorous moderation processes;
- ensure parents (in particular transient families) benefit from the knowledge that the assessment result received in school A was the same as school B;
- provide continuity of reporting from Kinder to Year 10.
This was tackled in 2004 when, she explained, a new report format was developed and trialled in Tasmania designed to take account of both:

- the clear message from the consultations with parents that what they want is ‘an honest, informative report about their child … (and) the best and most informative information about their child’s progress, through the written comments of school reports’;
- the recommendations of relevant national reports.

While teachers ‘tried very hard to produce meaningful comments in the student’s reports, and should be praised for their efforts’, parents felt they had used ‘too much of the jargon of the "Essential Learnings" which for many parents they saw as “gobbledegook”. The lesson here’, Branch contended, ‘was that without a deeper understanding of the new curriculum and the reporting document, parents had great difficulty trying to grasp what the new format was actually telling them!’

More specifically, parental feedback from the trial effectively urged teachers to ‘“Keep it simple”, a clear message heard time and time again. They also wanted “…clear information when reading the report”. They also said “…we value the timing of reports…” They didn't want to receive their child’s report on the last day of the school year, they wanted time to talk to the teacher about any issues raised in the report … Parents wanted to be alerted as soon as possible to any problems that a child is experiencing.’

Parents also were aware that ‘some assessments could be potentially damaging to their children, especially those children who have special needs and learning difficulties where it is important that assessment shows improvements in a child’s progress, however small the steps!’ Comments gathered showed that parents do recognise that ‘teacher assessment judgements will always be subjective to some degree … (and) a single (test) result does not mean much on its own and look for trends in their child’s progress over time.’

We should therefore, Branch argued, seek to ensure ‘students are not disadvantaged or hindered by a learning progress or early attempts …(and remember) a single test answer or a piece of work is unlikely to enable a student to demonstrate the understanding of their learning … (and) we must give our children every opportunity to succeed’. What is more, given the expectation that curriculum ‘should be relevant to the 21st century … the way that a child’s learning about the curriculum is assessed should also reflect 21st century thinking.’ She conceded, ‘This is a complicated issue that cannot be resolved with a report card assessing achievement on the A, B, C, D, E, F scale. Similarly, providing parents with a report on how their child is doing against national benchmarks will not mean anything unless parents understand the meaning of the benchmarks and how they relate to the curriculum their child is studying in the classroom.’

Branch then provided a sample of what she sees as a clear, simple and meaningful approach to assessment and reporting from the consultations in which she was involved. At Cambridge Primary School teachers are ‘engaged with improving communication between school and home. Brochures were developed that clearly outlined the unit of work, what

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9 Cuttance, P. *Reporting on students and school achievement*, and *Report of the National Parent Consensus, Assessing and Reporting Student Achievement* by the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the APC National Parent Council.
students would be doing and the expectations the teacher had for them, any excursions involved and how parents could support their child at home. During assemblies these units of work were presented for the whole school to share and newsletters were used to keep everyone up to date with how the school was progressing with assessment, reporting and the overarching goals of the school.’

“‘Keep it simple’”, Branch concluded, ‘are words I believe we must all keep in our minds when communicating student achievement, while guarding against being so simple that the report is meaningless … More importantly we must constantly remind ourselves that the end of year report means nothing if we haven’t clearly communicated between home and school the student’s progress all year long and used assessment to improve student learning and celebrate their achievements along the way.’

Perhaps in this context, and bearing in mind the theme of this conference (Closing the gap) ‘it would be more appropriate to report formally at Years three, six, ten and twelve … (and use) a less formal approach for the other years and in line with what parents are saying using parent teacher interviews, phone calls, emails, incidental meetings, assemblies and other unthought of ways in the 21st century to communicate student learning. Let us always remember the importance of conversation. I believe nothing can replace an opportunity to share information verbally between teachers and parents about a student. This is where a deep and meaningful exchange can take place about a child’s progress. If assessment and reporting helps improve a child’s learning by accurately communicating progress this process will be a positive thing. If it confuses the parents or adversely affects the child it will be negative!’

Following the presentations, session chair Judy Bundy (President, Australian Council of State School Organisations) asked both Maxwell and Branch how we make reporting to parents meaningful and understandable without losing the educational rigour? In the short time available, Branch suggested that ‘most teachers are doing a good job’, but urged them to take note of the message about keeping it simple, honest and part of a continuing conversation.

**Maningrida Community Education Centre case study**

Maningrida Community Education Centre, Hollow explained, is a large remote-area school for indigenous students situated in Arnhemland in the Northern Territory. In 2003 a community consultation aimed at finding out how to strengthen the dialogue between school and community revealed a need to try ‘new ways of engaging with the community about school business’. Electronic Reporting was introduced in response and ‘has proven to be a meaningful and enjoyable way of interacting with community, students and other teachers about school’. Together with other multi-media Electronic Reporting it also ‘has greatly improved community understanding of what goes on at school’.

Electronic reporting as applied at Maningrida is ‘the compilation of a Power Point presentation of a student’s work that can include writing samples, recorded speech, pictures, charts, videos and any other scanned samples of work. The Power Point presentation, which she illustrated in detail with reference to one child (Charlene) in the school, takes the place of a paper report and is best presented on a computer or as a Light Pro presentation. Parents
can be given a CD containing the report if they have a computer or a paper copy … (and since) most homes have a DVD player at Maningrida all parents will be given a DVD copy of their child’s report for the first time, at the end of this year.’

**The Maningrida context**

Approximately 1,800 people live in Maningrida speaking 17 indigenous languages. The community is situated about 500 kilometres east of Darwin on the Liverpool River and there are 15 Homeland Centres in and around Maningrida. The school, Hollow explained, provides educational services to 13 of these Centres. ‘Teachers fly or drive to Homeland Centres and generally spend three nights camping and working with an Indigenous assistant teacher to deliver educational programs for students from preschool to Year 12. The Hub school provides programs in three languages, Ndébbana, Burarra and English for students from preschool to Year 12. Ndébbana was chosen because it is the language of the Kunividji people, the landowners of Maningrida, and Burarra because the speakers of this language are the largest group numerically. English programs are provided for students from English speaking backgrounds.’

The community at Maningrida is, she added, ‘traditionally oriented with ceremony remaining strong throughout the year and especially in the dry season. The school is often invited to run a program at a ceremony site during the day. We consider ceremony to be a major part of our Two-way program.’

**The school and the community**

Most teachers, Hollow noted, ‘recognise that they need the support of parents and the community in general for students to be successful at school … (and) a variety of ways of forming partnerships with the community and of informing them about what happens at school’ have been tried – that is, ‘visiting students and families in their homes; including parents in excursions both local and beyond; inviting parents to Cultural Days, Open Nights and special events; inviting the entire community to large events, barbecues, and days out; welcoming parents in classrooms throughout the school; and broadcasting video and slideshows about school into people’s homes via the school’s own TV station.’

Despite these and other efforts, including the employment of Indigenous people in various capacities by the school, ‘a community meeting indicated that we had not achieved the necessary levels of understanding, and commitment to our school by the community’. This is why the school conducted the community consultation referred to earlier which resulted, perhaps somewhat coincidentally, in the Electronic Reporting approach.

**Electronic Reporting in the school**

Teachers at Maningrida have, according to Hollow, ‘often expressed their discomfort in presenting written reports to parents whose own literacy may mean they cannot access the information they contain’. They tried other means in response ‘but still felt that the message about what goes on at school, what impacts success at school and student achievement was not getting across in any meaningful way’.
Their main concerns were that parents ‘did not understand the nature or extent of activities the kids were actually involved in at school. They actually thought our curriculum was not as comprehensive as Darwin Schools. Teachers always reported that kids were doing really well and this is true within the context of Maningrida but not so in the broader context of mainstream education. During the consultation parents asked how their kids were doing in comparison to town kids. Parents did not seem to feel comfortable talking to teachers about school, they didn’t seem to know what sort of questions to ask and so the teacher did all the talking. Reporting was not a positive or meaningful experience for parents, kids or teachers. Teachers were never sure about the language of the reports – did you provide information to address the needs of parents or for other teachers?’

Electronic Reporting (ER) responds to these concerns in that it allows parents ‘to actually hear and see what sort of activities their kids are involved in at school … ER allows us to pictorially represent kids’ personal progress at school and how they are doing at school in relation to mainstream kids. ER allows kids to be involved in the construction of their own reports … ER provides teachers and parents with something to talk about and takes the focus off parents being talked at. ER tended to be a very positive experience for all with lots of laughter and surprise.’

Looked at overall, Hollow argued, ER allows ‘us to provide information about school more efficiently and appropriately to both parents and teachers’; though it does require teachers to substantially develop their IT skills.

The process of becoming smarter

The school trialled Electronic Reporting in the Primary area in 2003 in one class, with substantial positive parent response, and this in turn led it to trial the approach across the primary school at the end of that same year. By 2004 teachers ‘felt a little more confident about their computer skills’ and developed more efficient and effective ways of viewing the reports. In addition, a buddy system was trialled whereby ‘a teacher with strong IT skills was buddied to a teacher with lesser skills.’

Then, in the final term of 2004, an electronic portfolios approach to reporting to parents was attempted across the whole school. This was, Hollow acknowledged, not without its glitches. In mid-2004 there was, for instance, ‘some frustration expressed by teachers in the delivery of reports to community’; commonly involving such logistical issues as, to use the report of one teacher, ‘the impossibility of 20 adults viewing one laptop, families not being home, dogs walking over computers, and the problems of delivering large numbers of reports to homes with many kids attending school’.

While a survey of teachers conducted at the start of 2005 revealed they generally ‘preferred making ERs to laboriously writing reports, (and) the process was enjoyable because it was creative and the kids loved being involved in choosing what to show their parents … (while) parents were really getting a good picture of what their kids were doing at school; … there was again the occasional comment about some of the problems of going out to the community to deliver reports’.

‘This was’, Hollow observed, ‘somewhat shocking as going out into the community was meant to be one of the greatest benefits in the whole process. Teachers explained that it was fine when just the primary section had gone out to present reports to community in 2003.'
But, one teacher asked, “Imagine yourself as a family with 8 or even 10 kids living in Maningrida and its report time!” She noted that she had actually seen parents hide as the 10th grinning teacher, full of enthusiasm, came over the hill armed with laptop and a great desire to show and talk through a very comprehensive report. It was taking up to 45 mins for each report to be shown and if a picture was worth a thousand words why did teachers still feel they needed to talk so much!”

After discussing this at the school, an alternative now has been put in place. ‘Open Nights will be advertised over our TV station, in our community magazine and with posters around town. Each classroom has at least seven computers available. Parents with their kids can come into classrooms and view reports and teachers will offer support when and where it is appropriate. Some teachers would still like to go out into the community and we feel that is good advertising and some parents may request a visit and we would also be very happy to accommodate such requests.’

‘In summary we feel’, Hollow concluded, ‘that ERs are giving parents a better and more accessible picture of what goes on at school, and of their own child’s progress. This has allowed parents to engage with teachers about school, to ask questions and make suggestions. ERs allow kids to be part of the process of reporting to parents so making reporting a more positive and meaningful experience for most of them. ERs are also providing teachers with a more efficient way of compiling and providing relevant information to both teachers and parents … Overall Electronic Reporting has proven to be the most effective means so far of keeping everyone informed about school at Maningrida and closing the gap between home and school in the context of all the bridges we constantly are striving to build.’

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**Feedback session 5**

Discussion in this feedback session centred on whether we are sufficiently closing the information gap between the profession and parents.

Maxwell basically agreed with one questioner’s observation that there is a danger in not having reporting to parents against some framework or benchmark, that the results of such things as Maths competitions might take their place as de facto reports in parents’ eyes. That is why, he suggested, ‘it is imperative to find ways of reporting comprehensively and in ways that are embedded in the curriculum, but still allowing for some sort of comparison to be made. And the current conundrum is how best to do that.’

Maningrida is, Hollow explained, in response to a question about whether parents are seeking additional information to the electronic report, only on its fourth round, ‘so it’s still fairly new’. The engagement of parents has, in this context, been strong, but there remains a need to ‘nurture discussions that truly respect our desire to maintain community languages and that gets information out into a community that doesn’t really know much about modern “Western” schools’. One means available to the school is its television station and another is the range of community open nights that it conducts.

Picking up Maxwell’s comments about factors relevant to assessment and reporting, one participant commented on the need for support and professional development focused on
both ‘manageability in teachers’ busy working lives’ and the need to build strong expert
teams. Maxwell endorsed the view, ending the session by suggesting that the development
of teacher expertise is critical because it’s the ‘only way things really can happen’; which he
illustrated with reference to a couple of initiatives in his own state.
Session 9

Conference reflection and the way forward

The conference concluded with a summing up from Barry McGaw and closing remarks from Sue Mann.

Barry McGaw

The purpose of the conference was, according to McGaw, to see how we, as a nation, can close the gap between curriculum and assessment, which has meant also considering the nature of the gap. It was not, he noted, about ‘bridging the gap, but rather closing it’. That is important because the focus was on closing it from ‘both sides’:

- On the curriculum side, through clarity about the learning to be achieved, the outcomes, ‘as the first and important step to measuring if you have achieved them’. This involves separating the important considerations of curriculum and pedagogy from the outcomes which are to flow from them.

- On the assessment side, a number of characteristics for closing the gap were discussed, but two were paramount – ‘authenticity’ in terms of some connection to the life with which the curriculum itself is concerned, and ‘validity’ in the sense that if we clarify the intended outcomes, then that is what needs to be assessed.

The scope of assessment in this context was, in McGaw’s mind, ‘interesting’. There was discussion about both international assessments, but also national, state, school and teacher assessment and the need for a broader framework in which those assessments sit. A framework which can be expressed in consistent ways so that ‘an A is an A and is not so context specific it can’t be carried nor comparison be facilitated’. Australia, McGaw pointed out, is not alone in looking at events elsewhere with all the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and the need to focus on intellectual capital for economic growth’.

Korea, he suggested, is interesting in this regard. In the mid 1960s, Korea had a GDP at the level of Afghanistan. Now it is a member of the OECD, ranked 32 with New Zealand and it has the highest proportion of students finishing secondary school while doing very well in the PISA results. It is ‘a high performing country with a massive national commitment to education, because it sees the value of it’. And that’s the environment in which Australia finds itself.

The Europeans are pursuing the Lisbon agenda (named for the location of the meeting which determined it) which requires that Europe will, by 2010, be the number one knowledge economy in the world. In an economic sense, of course, the US is the competition but not, he noted, in educational terms where the US doesn’t perform particularly well. Ahead of the European countries are Japan, Korea, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and more.
So how, he asked, can we account for this paradox of the performance of the US if its education system is so poor? It is, he responded, probably a product of:

- ‘first mover advantage’ arising from the time when the US did build a strong higher education system after the Second World War;
- a strong entrepreneurial tradition and a labour market that rewards skills rather than qualifications;
- the fact it recruits the best from every other quality education system around the world.

These are, however, sources of advantage that perhaps the US will not be able to sustain and hence will result in it eventually being lost.

**Assessment in particular**

There was, McGaw stated, ‘a fair bit of discussion about the locus of assessment and, in particular, whether it ought to be managed by systems and fed down, or managed by schools and fed up. This ought not be, he advised, a choice, and rather is a case of doing both.

In terms of the formative versus summative purposes of assessment, his own view is that formative is key, since ‘we want to make things better’; though there then ought to be strategic summative assessments undertaken to report to the public and accredit students as required.

So what, he asked, are the threats to closing the gap? And, in response, he nominated three.

- There is a need to avoid ‘professionalising assessment’ in ways that put it beyond the reach of practitioners – that is ‘too technical and difficult’. It is important that assessment is ‘accessible to the whole profession’. Strategies to avoid this include professional development strongly set in ‘the context of professional practices including, but not limited to moderation’. Also make use of important resources exhibited at the conference itself, such as the assessment for learning website and the New Zealand materials, which can be further shared.

- The biggest risk is the pursuit of developments which could ‘widen the gap, such as the Federal Minister’s opening remarks’. This may, McGaw conceded, be an ‘unfair interpretation, but he did say he wants national assessment but not a national curriculum. Won’t that lead to assessment unrelated to curriculum?’ The US, he explained, did that in the 1930s because they had no system-wide assessment and only school assessments, which saw universities privileging advantaged schools, so they developed the psychometrically based SAT test. But now the US is seeking to alter the SAT because of its cultural bias and its downward pressure on the school curriculum even into elementary schools.

The US could, he felt in this context, consider having assessment based on what children are supposed to learn. In Australia there is a need to be ‘cautious’ in any attempts to get national assessment to not disconnect it from the intended curriculum.
States and schools can have different curricula, ‘if we have a clearly understood common outcomes framework, and national assessment still can be achieved’.

- When he had his own oldest child in Year one, McGaw explained, he had a meeting where the teacher indicated they would report how his child was measuring up to that teacher’s expectations rather than against the performance of other children. But the obvious question was, he indicated, ‘what were her expectations and how were they formed?’ That, he argued, is ‘what we are trying to get away from in our efforts to close the gap’.

The challenge for the education profession in Australia is, McGaw concluded, ‘to find ways of speaking about assessment and reporting it that establish the profession’s competence’. To report how well the child, the school and the system are doing to ‘the groups with whom you are seeking to speak and establish confidence in the judgements you have made; because we are past the point where we can just say “trust me”. We must earn the trust by reporting in ways that make clear we know what we are doing and we know it’s working.’

**Sue Mann**

At a recent Curriculum Corporation Board meeting, Mann noted in ending the conference, someone asked her how they could get ‘a helicopter view of all the issues around the country on assessment’. At the time, she said ‘come to the conference, and that has proven to be good advice’.

Minister Anna Bligh outlined at the start the commitment of all ministers to a new agenda and the fact that, despite the differences that inevitably exist, their desire to come to consensus about a national assessment approach. The conference, she observed, has ‘helped in this regard’.

It requires, she concluded, that all the key players, in systems and in schools, ‘put aside local concerns and collaborate on a truly national assessment regime and curriculum outcomes that underpin it; so we can bridge and close the gap’.
## Appendix 1 – conference program

### Day 1 – Thursday 2 June 2005

#### Session 1
**0845–1000**
- **Indigenous welcome**
  - [local indigenous elder]
- **Conference opening and foregrounding**
  - Ken Smith, Deputy Chair, Curriculum Corporation Board
- **National perspectives on curriculum, assessment and reporting: the new agenda**
  - The Hon Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training (by video)
  - The Hon Anna Bligh, Qld Minister for Education and the Arts
  - Susan Mann, CEO, Curriculum Corporation
  - Moderator: Tony Mackay, Director of the Centre for Strategic Educational Thinking

#### Session 6
**0845–1015**
- **Beyond the core – richer assessment**
  - Designing assessment tasks for deep thinking
  - Dr Gabrielle Matters, Director – Assessment and New Basics Branch, Education Queensland
  - Assessment for Learning – a national initiative
  - Ms Joan Holt, Deputy General Manager – Curriculum Solutions, Curriculum Corporation
  - Show me
    - Bruce Houghton, Principal, Western Cape College, Qld

#### Session 2
**1030–1110**
- **Conference keynote – The big picture**
  - Achievement & equity. Where is Australia at?
  - Dr Barry McGaw, Director for Education, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

#### Session 3
**1110–1230**
- **What’s driving curriculum and assessment reform?**
  - Dr Michele Bruniges, Chief Executive, ACT Dept Education and Training
  - Ken Smith, Director-General, Qld Dept Education and the Arts

#### Session 7
**1045–1245**
- **Better assessment tools for teachers**
  - Improving and validating teacher judgements
  - Mary Chamberlain, Deputy Director (Research and Policy), Queensland Studies Authority
  - What parents want to know
  - Jennifer Branch, Senior Vice-President, Australian Council of State School Organisations
  - Jocelyn Cook, Manager Educational Measurement, WA Dept Education and Training
  - OECD country practices on reporting and implications for Australia
  - Dr Barry McGaw, OECD

#### Session 4
**1330–1500**
- **Raising standards**
  - Using assessment to improve learning
  - Prof Geoff Masters, CEO, Australian Council of Education Research
  - Show me
    - David Shepherd & Jan McClure, Ballarat & Clarendon College, VIC, Dr Hilary Hollingsworth

#### Session 8
**1345–1525**
- **Reporting to parents and the community**
  - Current initiatives in reporting
  - Dr Graham Maxwell, Deputy Director (Research and Policy), Queensland Studies Authority
  - Jennifer Branch, Senior Vice-President, Australian Council of State School Organisations
  - What parents want to know
  - Lyn Hollow, Principal, Maningrida Community Education Centre, NT

#### Session 5
**1530–1700**
- **Assessing social competence**
  - Can and should we be assessing the social domain?
  - Susan Pascoe, Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission of Victoria
  - Show me
    - Mark Merry, Principal, Marcellin College, VIC

#### Session 9
**1525–1600**
- **Conference reflection and the way forward**
  - Dr Barry McGaw, OECD

**Conference Close**
- Susan Mann, CC CEO
- Close: 1600

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**30 min Morning Tea**

**60 min Lunch & school performance by Mansfield State High School**

**60 min Lunch & school performance by Ferny Grove State High School**

**Feedback session**
Appendix 2

Values for Australian schooling

Care and Compassion
Care for self and others.

Doing Your Best
Seek to accomplish something worthy and admirable, try hard, pursue excellence.

Fair Go
Pursue and protect the common good where all people are treated fairly for a just society.

Freedom
Enjoy all the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control, and stand up for the rights of others.

Honesty and Trustworthiness
Be honest, sincere and seek the truth.

Integrity
Act in accordance with principles of moral and ethical conduct, ensure consistency between words and deeds.

Respect
Treat others with consideration and regard, respect another person’s point of view.

Responsibility
Be accountable for one’s own actions, resolve differences in constructive, non-violent and peaceful ways, contribute to society and to civic life, take care of the environment.

Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion
Be aware of others and their cultures, accept diversity within a democratic society, being included and including others.
Appendix 3

Design Decisions for Quality Assessment Tasks

- **Cognitive & Affective Expectations**
  - Is the task intellectually challenging?
    - Does the task draw in sufficient depth and breadth upon the targeted knowledges, concepts, and skills of the domains?
    - Does the task require students to engage in a range of thinking skills and to demonstrate critical analysis?
    - Does the task allow students to demonstrate their thinking and understanding?
    - Does the task offer opportunities for students to demonstrate valued attributes and attitudes?
  - The intended cognitive expectations of the task must be clear to students.
  - How trustworthy is the task for generating sound evidence about student performances?
    - Does the task require performances that are relevant and adequate for the targeted intentions?
    - Does the task have clear and explicit criteria for the types of evidence students will be required to provide?
    - Have sufficient and clear standards been developed to provide advice to students (and other assessors) on the basis for making judgments?
    - Does the task provide sufficient opportunity for students of all races, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background to demonstrate their achievement?
    - Does the task contribute to students experiencing a balanced and varied collection of tasks as part of the school assessment plan?
  - The connections to the educational intentions must be clear to all audiences.
  - The consequences of assessment for students and institutions must be considered.

- **Is the task authentic?**
  - Is the context of the task appropriate for the cognitive domain? Is the context appropriate for the students?
  - Does the content and mode of the task entice and engage students and target realistic audiences?
  - Does the task have a genuine and valued purpose?
  - Do students have opportunities to negotiate the assessment?
  - Students must recognise and be motivated by the purpose and relevance of the task.

- **Is the task supported all students in the production of a performance of best quality?**
  - Does the task have a complete set of guidelines (including models) that allow students to reflect on, rehearse and review their responses?
  - Do your choices relating to the layout, cues, visual design, format and choice of words (including ‘technical’ language or jargon) facilitate engagement with the task (and reinforcing student understanding of what is valued in their responses)?
  - Does the task have examples and resources that are helpful to students?
  - All students must be confident that they understand the intent and specific requirements of the task.

- **Credibility**
  - Does the task support all students in the production of a performance of best quality?

- **Accessibility**
  - Does the task support all students in the production of a performance of best quality?