

Quality assessment Prep to Year 10: Towards consistency in a national context

Janice Chee

Queensland Studies Authority, Australia

janice.chee@qsa.qld.edu.au

Abstract:

Australia is developing a national curriculum made up of content descriptions and achievement standards. In this context a more nationally consistent approach to assessment seems inevitable. At the same time, there is increasing interest in assessment in a learning culture and with quality teacher assessment as central to local and systemic efforts to improve student learning.

This paper explores the challenges that will shape the debate for a more nationally consistent approach to assessment and the application of achievement standards in Australia. It will discuss an approach to building a sustainable assessment culture and include:

- principles for quality assessment practice
- alignment of curriculum, achievement standards, assessment and reporting
- application of the Australian Curriculum achievement standards
- achieving consistency of teacher judgment
- the role of moderation
- the place of testing.

The paper draws on nearly 40 years of experience and practice of standards-based, school-based assessment in Queensland. It proposes how this can inform classroom practice and reporting student achievement in Prep to Year 10.

Key words

- National consistency
 - Assessment principles
 - Achievement standards
-

Australia is developing a national curriculum made up of content descriptions and achievement standards.

Australian states and territories retain the responsibility to determine assessment and reporting. However, a more nationally consistent approach to assessment and reporting is seen as a likely outcome of the development of the national curriculum.

At the same time, there is increasing interest in assessment in a learning culture that places quality teacher assessment at the centre of local and systemic efforts to improve student learning.

Queensland has extensive experience and practice of externally-moderated school-based assessment – for some 40 years teachers have been responsible for the assessment of student achievement using standards descriptors to make judgments in high stakes assessment in Years 11-12. It is a system that now permeates to varying degrees all phases of schooling, Prep to Year 12.

This is a system that integrates teaching and learning and assessment to create “authentic pedagogy” that caters to the range of students’ learning styles and encourages higher-order thinking. It is a system that has been proven to be fair and reliable. Significantly it is a system that is built on teacher professionalism.

As Australia moves to a more national system of education it is timely to explore how Queensland’s experiences can influence the debate for a more nationally consistent approach to assessment and the consistent application of achievement standards in Australia.

In this paper I will:

- briefly describe the national context
- describe Queensland’s proposal for assessment principles to underpin a national approach to assessment
- outline how Queensland is putting the principles into practice as it prepares its teachers for quality assessment practice in the context of the Australian Curriculum.

The national context

There have been many attempts to implement a national curriculum in Australia. However, in 2009 the Australian ministers for education committed to the goals in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. These goals are:

- that Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence
- that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

The declaration also outlines the blueprint for a world-class Australian Curriculum that will develop:

- a strong foundation in knowledge, understanding, skills and values on which further learning and adult life can be built
- deep knowledge, understanding, skills and values that enable advanced learning and the ability to create new ideas and translate these into practical applications
- general capabilities such as flexible and analytical thinking, capacity to work with others and ability to move across subject disciplines to develop new expertise, creativity and social competence.

The Melbourne Declaration is the policy foundation for the Australian Curriculum. While there have been other national declarations — the Adelaide Declaration in 1999 and the Hobart Declaration in 1989 — the Melbourne Declaration directly informs the development of the national curriculum¹.

The declaration was followed by *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* first published in 2009 which referred to an Australian Curriculum with 4 learning areas – English, mathematics, science and history. The paper was updated in 2010 to reflect further decisions about the Australian Curriculum notably the inclusion of 8 key learning areas. A third and perhaps final version is in preparation for release in late 2011.

The Shape of the Australian Curriculum establishes a rationale for the Australian Curriculum which is improving:

- Quality – an Australian Curriculum will contribute to the provision of a world-class education in Australia by setting out the knowledge, skills and understandings needed for life and work in the 21st century and by setting common high standards of achievement across the country
- Equity – an Australian Curriculum will provide a clear, shared understanding of what young people should be taught and the quality of learning expected of them, regardless of their circumstances, the type of school that they attend or the location of their school
- Transparency – an Australian Curriculum (in tandem with a national approach to assessment and reporting) will improve transparency and allow greater comparability of outcomes across jurisdictions, systems and schools.

The Melbourne Declaration and *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum* describe a learning entitlement for each Australian student. Within the construct of the Australian Curriculum, the entitlement is:

¹ A full copy of the declaration can be found at: www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf

- what young people should be taught, that is the specification of learning area curriculum content, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities
- an expectation of the quality of their learning, that is the depth of understanding and sophistication of skills described through achievement standards.

In addition, there is in place a national agreement that requires schools to report to parents/carers on student achievements twice yearly using A-E grades or an equivalent 5-point scale (noting that there are some differences for reporting in the early years).

What is included in the Australian Curriculum and what is not included

This presents an interesting context for teachers. Typically, teachers plan their teaching and learning programs using four key pieces of information. In Queensland this information is usually found in a syllabus. The syllabus includes:

- curriculum content
- achievement standards
- assessment requirements
- reporting requirements.

The introduction of the Australian Curriculum will mean that this information will come from two sources:

- teachers will find the requirements about curriculum content and achievement standards in the national documents
- the assessment and reporting advice and guidelines will remain the responsibility of the state curriculum authorities.

Towards a more nationally consistency approach to assessment

Discussions have begun about what it might mean to have a more nationally consistent approach to assessment and reporting by 2013 when Phase 1 Australian Curriculum learning areas are expected to be implemented in all states.

These discussions are complicated by some significant issues.

The first of these issues is that the Australian Curriculum will be completed in phases. Phase 1 includes English, mathematics, science and history. The Prep to Year 10 content descriptions have, in the main, been endorsed. However work is continuing on the development of the achievement standards. Phase 2 and 3 learning areas are in development. Work on the Phase 1 Years 11-12 courses is not due for completion until late 2012 and is unlikely to be implemented prior to 2015. The iterative development of the curriculum means that states will have a dual system operating — local curriculum will continue to be used alongside the Australian Curriculum until at least 2015. Any decisions about assessment and reporting need to balance current approaches while building towards a potentially new model.

Another key challenge is that across Australia students are assessed at different times and in different ways — broadly based on a range of school-based assessments and teacher professional judgment. Each state has developed curriculum with embedded standards which identify expectations about student learning. While the Australian Curriculum is standards-based, there are still debates about how these standards are framed. However, for common standards to contribute to raising student achievement they must be supported by effective assessment practice.

In this context, Queensland has been leading a national conversation about what form “more nationally consistent assessment” might look like.

There is already general agreement that the implementation of the Australian Curriculum does not mean that students across the nation need to be assessed at the same time and in the same manner. Recent studies in Australia have demonstrated that it is possible to assess and report student achievement comparably using different assessment systems and approaches.

Rather, the Australian states have been working together to identify a set of shared principles to inform policy development and underpin valid assessment practice across a range of assessment practices and lead to high quality and high equity educational outcomes for young Australians — key goals in the Melbourne Declaration and *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum*.

At the outset of this conversation it was important to agree on what is assessment and what is its purpose. There has been general agreement that assessment is the purposeful and systematic collection of information about students’ achievements and that it is used to provide evidence that enables judgments to be made about students’ learning.

In terms of the purpose of assessment there has been general agreement that, while assessment information is used for a variety of purposes, the primary role of assessment is to:

- improve student learning and help students achieve the highest standards they can within their capabilities
- improve teaching.

The work on this to date is the development of draft principles. It is hoped that the principles will be finalised towards the end of this year. The aim is that the principles will inform the policy context of the national curriculum and local curriculum; they will provide a basis on which local decisions about specific approaches to assessment can be built.

The principles are in draft and are not yet ready for publication. For many people the principles are familiar but they are worth restating — good practice does not change. For teachers, the principles will be a timely reminder; for pre-service teachers they will be a useful resource to influence their practice. In essence the principles include the following sorts of ideas:

- that the principal purpose of assessment is to inform teaching and improve learning

- that assessment is underpinned by equity principles and takes account of the diverse needs of students and contexts of education
- that assessment is aligned with curriculum, pedagogy and reporting so that what is taught informs what is assessed and what is assessed informs the basis of what is reported
- that assessment aims to assess deep knowledge of core concepts within and across the disciplines, problem-solving, collaboration, analysis, synthesis and critical thinking
- that assessment involves collecting evidence about expected learning as the basis for judgments about the achieved quality of that learning and that quality is judged with reference to pre-stated standards and is based on evidence.
- that assessment information may come from a range of assessment activities and teacher observations
- that assessment activities should be selected because of its relevance to the knowledge, skills and understanding to be assessed, and the purpose of the assessment
- that the information collected through assessment activities should be sufficient and suitable to enable defensible judgments to be made
- that evidence of student learning should be compiled over time to show the depth and breadth of the student learning
- that assessment practices and reporting should be transparent so that there is professional and public confidence in the processes used, the information obtained and the decisions made
- that assessment should be summarized and presented in ways that are meaningful and helpful
- that approaches to assessment need to be consistent with and responsive to local and jurisdictional policies, priorities and contexts but also recognising that schools need the freedom and support to develop quality assessment practices and programs that suit their particular circumstances.

In addition, the principles should be supported by quality assurance mechanisms and systematic and regular evaluation and review programs and procedures.

The development of the principles provides a basis for policy and practice that takes account of the local approaches to assessment, the iterative development of the Australian Curriculum and the tensions in a period of transition.

Queensland's preparation for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum

Queensland schools will begin implementing the Australian Curriculum next year. What this will mean for our teachers is that they will use the Australian Curriculum content and achievement standards to plan their programs for English, mathematics and science. For all other learning areas they will continue to use the current Queensland Essential Learnings and Standards.

To support the implementation the Queensland Studies Authority has been developing a range of resources that use the Australian Curriculum content descriptions and achievement standards to

strengthen current practice that has at its heart the building of an assessment culture and teachers capacity to use standards to inform evidence-based judgments about student achievement².

The resources to support the implementation of the Australian Curriculum are characterised by the following principles for effective curriculum and assessment planning:

- High expectations for all students — this is built on differentiation of teaching and learning for all students. This principle foregrounds the importance of acknowledging the diversity of students and the need for strategies to enhance engagement and outcomes of all students. In Queensland this is particularly important as many of our primary schools have multiple year level classrooms.
- Alignment of teaching and learning, and assessment and reporting — this refers to ensuring that what is taught informs how it is taught, how it is assessed and how it is reported. What is assessed must relate directly to what students have had an opportunity to learn. This connection is integral to the development and maintenance of a high-quality education system. This includes specific feedback that is the basis for decisions about continuous improvement in teaching and learning.
- Standards- based and school-based assessment for learning — teachers use standards to build a shared understanding of the qualities of student work, and to communicate student achievement to students, parents/carers and the system. The standards build an understanding about what is valued and where to focus attention.
- Balance of informed prescription and teacher professional judgment — teachers exercise their professional judgment and make decisions about student learning in their school within the context of the specified curriculum requirements and system and sector priorities.

The templates and exemplars for whole school, year level and unit planning all use the same five key elements for planning that place assessment as an integral part of an overall teaching and learning program:

- Identify curriculum □ this focuses teachers' attention on the Australian Curriculum content descriptions – what teachers are required to teach and students are required to learn
- Develop assessment □ this places assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning. It emphasizes that an assessment program that is planned at the same time as the teaching and learning program will guide and support targeted teaching and learning, provide regular feedback to students about how they can improve their learning and clarify future teaching and learning needs.
- Sequence teaching and learning □ teachers select experiences and strategies to support active engagement in learning.
- Make judgments □ the achievement standards guide teacher judgment about how well students have achieved. Teachers are encouraged to discuss and analyse student work to build consistency of teacher judgment and gain a common understanding of the application of standards. At this time teachers become aware of the variety of ways that students

² These resources are available on the QSA website: www.qsa.qld.au

respond to assessment tasks and gain insight into what students need to learn for each level of achievement.

- Use feedback gathered throughout the teaching and learning process to inform future teaching, learning and assessment. Feedback is to recognize, encourage and improve student learning. Assessment feedback is most useful if the specific elements of the content (knowledge, understanding and skills) are identified and specific suggestions are provided. However, assessment alone will not contribute significantly to improve learning. It is what students and teachers do with the assessment and other available information that makes a difference.

The planning at the whole school level draws on the year level plans and shows how the school is achieving its vision within the context of system priorities. It provides a tool for discussing how learning is sequenced and develops across the year levels and how assessment is played out over each year level and within learning areas.

The year level plans identify the specific teaching, learning and assessment over a year. It clarifies the curriculum intent and ensures coverage, balance and responsiveness across the year. It outlines the sequence of learning and assessment, shows how students will have multiple opportunities to learn concepts, practice skills and demonstrate the standards. It identifies how and when evidence is gathered and when feedback is given to students, parents and carers.

The unit plans identify the specific curriculum content, teaching strategies, approaches to assessment and resources. It identifies:

- the specific content descriptions ensuring there is focus on a limited number of key concepts and processes at any one time
- the specific aspects of the achievement standard and describes the evidence of learning that will be gathered in the assessment and the strategies for making judgments
- the teaching strategies linking to prior and future learning.

During the implementation of the Australian Curriculum the templates and exemplars make clear that planning is a key to achieving the teaching and learning aims of both system and school. It is through effective planning that educationally principled decisions about learning are made.

To complement the planning resources a range of assessment resources are now in development. The resources focus on:

- Building a folio of student work on which an on-balance judgment can be made. The folio includes a variety of assessment gathered over the course of study allowing students multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do. Specifically the advice and guidelines will include what could go into a folio of work for a particular learning area in a particular year level — how many assessment items; what sorts of assessment techniques and formats are appropriate for both formative and summative assessment and what sorts of conditions – length, degree of control are suitable.

- Applying the end-of-year Australian Curriculum Achievement Standards in classroom practice and building consistency of teacher judgments. Our teachers use Guides to making judgments to match the standard with the evidence in student work and so inform feedback and improve teaching and learning. The Guides have the following features:
 - descriptors of the valued features that provide direction to teachers about what evidence to look for, what that evidence looks like in student work and a common language or understanding to describe student achievement against the standard
 - degrees of quality on an A-E scale.
- Developing exemplars of quality assessment for the online Assessment Bank. Assessment packages model the five planning processes and provide teachers with quality assured assessments aligned to the exemplar plans. A package includes a student booklet, teacher guidelines, a guide to making judgments, an indicative ‘A’ response and annotated sample student responses. These resources continue to build teacher assessment capability.
- Providing strategies for recording student achievement and advice about how to use this information to monitor student achievement using feedback and include regular opportunities for moderation within and across schools.
- Developing a reporting framework A-E.

These resources focus on assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and the central role of teachers in developing a culture that uses assessment to improve teaching and learning.

So, what is the role of tests? Our position is that tests provide one component of assessment evidence but do not replace school-based judgments about student achievement.

Queensland students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 take part in the annual national tests in Literacy and Numeracy for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Preparation for test has been built into the learning plans and is presented as just one aspect of the evidence of student learning.

In addition, as part of a long term strategy to model quality assessment instruments closely aligned to the curriculum, to support teachers to make consistent judgments about the quality of student work, to increase consistency of teacher judgments and provide information to teachers and students about what students know and can do as well as what is working well and what needs attention in school, the Queensland Studies Authority developed the Queensland Comparable Assessment Tasks (QCATs) in English, mathematics and science in years 4, 6 and 9.

The QCATs are annual, centrally-devised assessments with common requirements and parameters and marked locally according to a common guide to making judgments. The QCATs are a vehicle for a moderation opportunity when teachers come together to consider the task-specific descriptors and how closely the evidence in the student work matches them. Through the professional dialogue teachers develop a shared understanding of the standards and the connection to student work. In this way, the QCATs help build consistency of teacher judgment.

Quality assessment Prep to Year 10: Towards consistency in a national context

International Association for Educational Assessment 2011 Conference

Like the national testing in literacy and numeracy, the QCATs have been built into the exemplar programs so that they are an integral part of the teaching and learning program.

Conclusion

The comprehensive and integrated curriculum and assessment planning resources being developed in Queensland to support the implementation of the Australian Curriculum demonstrate the proposed assessment principles in action.

The approach being taken in Queensland is based on some 40 years of experience and practice of standards-based, school-based assessment. It provides a way of promoting a learning culture through balancing informed prescription with resources that focus teacher attention on the “must do’s” — the curriculum content and the achievement standards — with informed teacher professional judgment that is, guidance and advice about how best to sequence learning, develop quality assessment and use a variety of strategies to collect evidence of student achievement and apply the standards consistently.

Queensland’s approach places teachers at the centre of local and national efforts to improve student learning.

In the quest for greater national consistency in assessment and reporting, the development of principles to underpin assessment policy and practice provides a way forward in a period of transition. The principles can be used to strengthen current practice and to build towards new ways of doing that will achieve the goals of the Melbourne Declaration and promotes equity and excellence so that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.