

# **Tensions in catering for diverse learners: Flexible options and planning pathways for senior certification**

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## **Abstract**

Schools and students are faced with the increasing challenges and tensions of today's agenda of the Australian Curriculum, flexible pathways to increase retention rates in senior schooling, community expectations and a need for a skilled workforce confident to compete in future global markets. Competing with these issues are the political climate of the release of school, statewide and international comparative performance data and bench marks for literacy and numeracy and national testing.

All young people have the right to gain an education that meets their needs, and prepares them for active participation in an increasing information-rich globalised society. Schools need to provide opportunities for all students to show what they know and can do.

In this context, Queensland has endeavoured to create flexible options for students to improve retention rates. The Queensland Senior Education Profile (SEP) enables students to work towards different pathways in the preparation for further study or employment. Students may work towards the award of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) or if they are undertaking an individualised learning program they receive the Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA). This paper examines how Queensland's system of senior certification provides opportunities for diverse learners and identifies flexible options.

## Introduction

As secondary education broadens its scope to provide learning support for all young people, inclusiveness, as a principle of equity, requires that the learning outcomes of all young people be recognised. Students in schools have multiple, diverse and dynamic needs that are shaped by abilities and individual learning needs as well as cultural, language backgrounds and socioeconomic factors. Improving educational outcomes for all students is central to the goals of the *Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008). Featuring prominently in these educational goals is the commitment to promote equity and excellence. The Australian Curriculum has been purposely designed to acknowledge the *Melbourne Declaration Goals for Young Australians* (2008) to support all students to become 'successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens' (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2011).

However, for a small percentage of students, particularly those with a significant intellectual disability, will the Australian Curriculum's content and achievement standards be appropriate or meaningful even with reasonable adjustments? The Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) *Principles for the Integrity, Quality and Long-term Credibility of Certificates of Achievement* (1999) identifies a number of principles for curriculum, assessment and certification. Within these principles of integrity, transparency and validity, how can we ensure that the recording of achievement and certification for all students embraces inclusiveness? Students with special education needs have a right to the same valued and recognised credentialing opportunities as all other young Australians (Australian Association of Special Educators (AASE), 2010).

Inclusive education reflects the values, ethos and culture of an education system committed to excellence by enhancing educational opportunities for all students (Department of

Education and the Arts, 2004). In Queensland, this statement clarifies the nature of inclusive education and its role in achieving the objectives that underpin education. Major reviews and initiatives during the last decade embrace a school reform agenda with a focus on quality teaching and learning to enable young people to achieve high-level outcomes and to continue learning throughout their lives. However, this commitment to inclusive education brings with it increasing challenges and tensions for schools, students and carers in today's agenda of the Australian Curriculum, accountability, flexible pathways to increase retention rates in senior schooling, community expectations and a need for a skilled workforce confident to compete in future competitive global markets.

## **Challenges**

From an international perspective, Australia has grounds for satisfaction in the relatively high level of the educational performances of its fifteen-year olds in the domains that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses, but it cannot avoid two substantial challenges (*Federalist Paper 2*, 2007).

One challenge is to match those other high-performing countries that have more equitable educational systems than exist in Australia. There is often much debate "about whether a concern for equity requires abandoning a concern for quality" (*Federalist Paper 2*, p.15). Another challenge is to improve our overall level of educational performance. As in all aspects of international competition, other nations are not standing still and seek consistently to improve student performance through high-quality teacher training programs, increased investment and the establishment of education as a central priority of government policy.

At the national level, ACARA has the mandated responsibility for ensuring that the Australian curriculum is inclusive and has sufficient scope and flexibility to cater for the full range of students, including students with special education needs. ACARA also manage the National

Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. The NAPLAN tests are designed to assess the skills of Australian students in literacy and numeracy. Media attention and state comparative report data puts pressure on schools and teachers to perform. In extreme cases, 'schools and teachers have looked for ways to beat the test. These isolated cases are unlikely to undermine NAPLAN's integrity' (*The Australian*, May 15 2010).

NAPLAN is the measure of determining 'the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge that provide the critical foundation for other learning' at a point in time (NAPLAN, <http://www.nap.edu.au/Information>). Artificially bolstering scores could end up denying students with special learning needs the resources they need. Another problem is the potential educational damage to a child who is excluded because they have specific education needs which separate them from the mainstream. Every child in the mainstream system is deemed capable of learning - although under the NAPLAN rules students can be exempted if they have significant intellectual or functional disability or if they are from a non-English-speaking background and arrived in Australia less than one year before the tests (*2011 NAPLAN Handbook for Principals*, p.9).

## **Tensions**

Inclusiveness of all students in the full range of schooling opportunities, together with appropriate recognition of their learning outcomes, is increasingly seen in many countries as a necessary requirement for equitable educational provisions. "All students" is increasingly deemed to include students with disabilities and students with learning difficulties. In many countries, it is already the case that all students are entitled to twelve years of schooling and this raises questions about the most appropriate way to provide for the educational development of all students. In Queensland, government initiatives and reforms have been directed at ensuring that all young people achieve worthwhile end-of-schooling certification that allows access to alternative post-school pathways, including higher education,

employment and training. As all young people are entitled to twelve years of schooling, it is necessary to consider how best to provide certification of their learning at the end of their formal schooling.

In the USA, UK, New Zealand and Australia, certification of student's educational achievements from high school has historically been conceived in terms of meeting certain minimum, predefined standards. In these countries, there has been research about the effects of not receiving a certificate or diploma and what happens to young people who leave school early or "age out", that is, remaining at school for the maximum allowed time but not receiving a certificate or diploma (Pitman 2002). However, the research emphasis has generally not differentiated background characteristics, such as students with particular abilities and students with special disabilities or learning difficulties (Maxwell & Soothill, 2004).

In the USA, in 1997, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) required states to include students with disabilities in district and statewide tests unless an appropriate alternative is provided. Before this legislation, it was estimated that almost one-half of school-aged students with disabilities were being excluded from any state or national assessment (McGrew, Thurlow, Shriener & Spiegel 1992). There is ongoing research and debate about inclusion of students with disabilities in high school graduation certificates and diplomas. Across the USA, there is considerable variation in practice, from awarding a single diploma to several graduation certification options. A common pattern is awarding a diploma for those who pass the state-based minimum requirements or a certificate of completion that records schooling achievements on a range of characteristics (Johnson & Thurlow 2003). This necessarily leaves out some students. In many cases, such students leave early as a result of constant failure (Maxwell & Soothill, 2004). In Queensland, with the publication of *Year 12 Outcomes*, teachers indicate that there is increasing educational sector pressure for all students to "receive a certificate" at the completion of their senior studies.

## **Recognition of Achievement**

Typically, when students cannot manage the expectations of the regular curriculum, they leave school without any formal recognition of their achievements or they receive a certificate that showed little about their achievements. In 2002, Queensland led the other states and territories with the introduction of the Certificate of Post-Compulsory School Education (CPCSE) that was designed to satisfy this need for students with intellectual impairments (or multiple impairments) or with idiosyncratic learning difficulties. With the introduction of the Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE) and new legislation in 2008, the certificate title was changed to Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement (QCIA). The new title recognises the focus on the individual's achievement, rather than on the post-compulsory phase of learning. The QCIA meets the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) requirements of a senior secondary certificate of education. Since the introduction of the certificate, there has been a steady increase in the number of students receiving the QCIA, with the numbers now averaging 580 students from 180 schools yearly.

Access to the certificate is restricted to students who have either an impairment (or multiple impairments) or difficulties in learning that are not primarily due to socioeconomic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. Students from special schools and high schools from all education sectors can receive the QCIA. A restriction on eligibility is necessary to ensure that students who should be undertaking studies in the regular curriculum continue to work towards other pathways. Students who should be undertaking the regular curriculum include students with special needs that are attributable to socioeconomic, cultural and/or linguistic factors.

The QCIA is not an alternative certificate to the QCE. The QCIA is legislated for students who are undertaking an individualised learning program. While school principals make the decision about whether a student fits the eligibility criteria, these judgments are public and open to scrutiny. It is also expected that the parents be consulted about the learning program

and goals. There are eligibility criteria for the QCIA, and schools may need to investigate all inclusive options to provide appropriately and adequately for all students. Some students may not achieve the award of the QCE, and are not eligible for the QCIA as they are not undertaking an individualised learning program. All exiting students receive a transcript of their learning account, a Senior Statement, detailing the studies that were undertaken and the achievement results. Perhaps more emphasis could be given to the value of the Senior Statement as a record of the curriculum studied for these students and their achievements. If an award of the QCE has not been reached at the end of Year 12, students' learning accounts remain open and they can continue to work towards this certificate post-school. Young people are encouraged to continue to work towards achieving the QCE.

### **Planning a pathway**

A student's senior learning program is not an ad-hoc process of simply accumulating sufficient credits to be awarded a QCE. For students, the journey through Queensland's senior phase of learning begins in Year 10, and this may include the development of a Senior Education and Training Plan, or SET Plan. Through the SET planning process, young people start structuring their study, training and career options around their abilities, interests and ambitions. For schools, this not only means working with students to help them build a learning program, but creating more learning opportunities for students. What is important is that SET Plans and career education have similar objectives and processes — developing a personalised learning map for each student.

If a student is eligible for the QCIA, they are able to record achievements for other learning areas of the QCE in their learning account, for example, an Authority-registered subject or a Certificate I in Work Readiness. This exit achievement for this learning is recorded on the Senior Statement and must not be duplicated in the recorded QCIA achievements. However, to receive the QCIA a student must be undertaking a significant individualised learning program. The legislation reiterates that the contributing studies for the QCIA are '...part of

the individual learning program developed by the school' (Section 46A of Education (Queensland Studies Authority) Regulation 2002).

### **QCIA achievements**

The QCIA individualised learning program is designed to meet the specific educational needs of the student and achievements are not standards-based nor are outcomes measured against other students. The achievement activities are grouped into two categories:

Statement of Achievement and Statement of Participation. The Statement of Achievement is a free-form text statement that shows the student's demonstrated educational achievement under six defined curriculum organisers. Schools choose some or all of the curriculum organisers according to the student's individual learning program. Each statement included on the certificate is supported by evidence in the folio of student achievement.

What is different about the Statements of Achievement on this certificate is that there are no pre-specified expectations or standards. Much was learned in the trial period of the CPCSE about teachers' capacity to generate such statements and about how to make the statements meaningful (Maxwell & Soothill, 2004). From this experience, there is a standardised format for writing the Statements of Achievement and teachers are supported in preparing statements by guidelines published in the QCIA handbook to ensure a common framework for the statements. Teachers design statements to describe the achievements they observe. The statements fit the individual student and may be idiosyncratic.

An evaluation of the general implementation of the certificate was conducted in 2005, and feedback was very positive from parents, teachers, employers and students. The focus of the Statement of Achievement is the student's demonstrated knowledge or skills. Employers were asked to respond to several key questions and their responses indicated that the certificate conveyed appropriate and valuable information. These questions and responses

reaffirm the value of the achievement information included on the certificate. A snapshot included:

*Did the certificate provide a clear picture of the students' school achievements?*

The certificate categories enabled employers to gain an overview of achievements and other involvements at school. It also provided specific employability skills that employers could build on.

*Did the statements of achievement convey useful information useful?*

Yes, especially employability skills and pre-knowledge such as levels of work place health and safety knowledge, ability to work in a team and ability to work supervised or unsupervised. (*Evaluation Report of the 2004 General Implementation of the Certificate of Post-Compulsory School Education, 2005. p. 12*)

## **Quality assurance**

The Senior Education Profile (SEP) may contain the QCE, Tertiary Entrance Statement, Senior Statement or QCIA and the processes that lead up to the reporting of student achievement for the award of the SEP are a collaborative effort between the certifying authority (Queensland Studies Authority (QSA)) and the schools. This is seen as a partnership in which both parties have defined responsibilities. Schools are required to accept their responsibilities, especially for appropriate implementation of quality-assurance processes that lie within their domain. The QSA exercises general oversight and checks the overall coherence and consistency of the results reported to it by the schools. Any changes that the QSA considers necessary are negotiated with the school. The school makes any final changes.

ACACA (1999) identified a number of principles for certification. These guidelines are for any high-stakes assessment. In Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, both of which have school-based assessments rather than external examinations, alternative assessments

can be provided for students with impairments to meet the standards articulated in the regular curriculum.

The first of the ACACA principles for certification identified 'high quality curriculum documents, assessment procedures and performance standards' (ACACA 1999). This needs some translation for application to the QCIA – high quality individual education programs rather than curriculum documents, observation processes and other alternative assessment processes rather than formal assessment procedures (especially “examinations”), and performance descriptions rather than defined standards. Implementation of these principles requires deliberate quality-assurance processes (Maxwell & Soothill, 2004). The key quality-assurance processes for the QCIA include support for schools, internal school processes, registering of curriculum plans with QSA and moderation processes that review and verify achievement.

In Queensland, moderation is a qualitative process designed to ensure that school-based assessment decisions are valid and reliable, and there are consistent and comparable judgments. For the QCIA, moderation processes are similar to but different from the moderation processes adopted for other forms of school-based assessment. Teacher-based moderation processes are employed to ensure the value and credibility of the QCIA. This is undertaken at district meetings by having teachers review the student’s curriculum plan and the draft certificate information and then consider and discuss the evidence on which the judgments are based. From the meeting, written feedback and advice is provided to schools about the quality of the certificate information. Final draft certificate information is reviewed electronically by district representatives at a state meeting. Schools receive feedback and advice with suggestions to ensure the quality of the final statements.

## **Destinations of QCIA students**

Research on participation in schooling in Australia (Roussel & Murphy 2000) has shown that, although there has been an overall increase in the number of students completing Year 12 and the academic standard of students completing Year 12, any further increase in participation is likely to come from students who have lower academic achievement. However, there is little research about the school completion rates of students with impairments.

In 2005, Queensland introduced *Next Step* a destination study that collects information about the initial further study and employment destinations of young people after completing Year 12. Young people receiving the QCIA have noticeably different destinations to those of the larger group of students completing Year 12. The 2010 *Next Step* report indicated that the QCIA recipients were only one percent of the total 2009 Year 12 cohort. Almost one in three of these young people had made a transition to Vocational Education and Training (VET) Certificates I-II and other courses. Twenty-three percent of the 2009 QCIA recipients were seeking employment, a comparable number to the previous years; however, those who were working (fourteen percent) and not in further study or training were three times as likely to be working in part-time jobs as full-time jobs (*Next Step 2010*, pp. 59-60).

One in four of 2009 QCIA recipients were neither studying nor in the labour force. This number appears significant; however, comparisons should not be made with other groups of certificate recipients because the QCIA students typically had undertaken an individualised learning program and some students may have had very high-support needs and multiple impairments. What is significant, QCIA students are individual with specific learning needs and may work towards different pathways and utilise a range of post-school opportunities.

## **Consideration for inclusive strategies in the Australian Curriculum**

ACARA (2011) has provided guidance for using the Australian curriculum with students with special education needs. There is an acknowledgement that ‘for a small percentage of students, particularly those with a significant intellectual disability, the Foundation to 10 curriculum content and achievement standards may not be appropriate or meaningful even with adjustments’ (ACARA 2011). During 2011, ACARA will develop additional curriculum content and achievement standards for students with significant intellectual disability to ensure an “inclusive national curriculum”.

Teachers are required to make adjustments to teaching, learning and assessment to enable a student with disabilities to demonstrate knowledge, skills or competencies (*Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and *Disability Standards for Education 2005*). All Australian states and territories provide special provisions or reasonable adjustments for students with special education needs. Adjustments made to teaching, learning and assessment should not impact on judgments made about the extent and quality of student learning against the relevant achievement standards.

Not all students with disabilities will require adjustments to participate and achieve on the same basis as a learner without disabilities. The needs and strengths of the learner determine what, if any, planning is required to determine adjustments to the teaching, learning and assessment process. The questions often asked are ‘who are the learners requiring curriculum modifications?’ and ‘what is the difference between a modification and an adjustment?’ Teachers, especially in senior secondary schools, need to have a clear understanding about “modifying programs” and how this may, if not correctly applied, compromise the judgments of student achievement against clearly articulated curriculum achievement standards.

## Issues

Changes to policy and legislation in recent years voiced powerful and important statements about inclusive education and enhancing educational opportunities for all students. However, Lloyd (2008) suggests that inclusive policy has not necessarily been followed through with inclusive practice. Recent research conducted by the Queensland Parents for People with a Disability (2011) suggests that some families in Queensland are also questioning whether inclusive education is being put into practice. The research did highlight that some parents had experienced positive inclusive practices for their children and valued the advocacy, flexibility, support, skills and knowledge involvement, understanding and curriculum modification as worthwhile attributes of their child's schooling experience (*Diving for Pearls, 2011, pp. 2–3*).

The QCIA focuses on the demonstration of knowledge and skill. It has been a successful innovation and has satisfied a need to formally recognise and report the achievements of students undertaking an individualised learning program. Over time, especially with the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the certificate may evolve. Already there have been changes to the information recorded on the certificate with the introduction of the QCE. At this point in time, there are questions about whether a separate QCIA should be issued or if the individual learning achievements could be captured on the Senior Statement. It also raises questions whether a separate QCIA sends a positive (recognition) message or a negative (different) message. With the publication of the *Year 12 Outcomes* in the media, some teachers have indicated that there has been pressure to issue the QCIA as an alternative qualification.

This pressure alters the QCIA's purpose away from servicing those highly-supported students for whom regular expectations are inappropriate and unachievable. ACARA also acknowledge that the curriculum and achievement standards may not be accessible, meaningful and relevant even with adjustments for a small number of students (ACARA *The*

*Shape of the Australian Curriculum Version 2.0* 2010, p.15). Employers interviewed about the QCIA (and CPCSE) have commended the certificate for the clarity and specificity of language used to describe student achievement.

Erikson (1998) describes alternative assessments as 'likely to include less traditional forms of assessment, such as performance tasks and portfolio development, and may include information gathered through videotape, interviews and direct observation' (p.21). Practicing teachers extensively use these "less formal assessment techniques" to collect evidence and validate QCIA individual achievements. These evidence gathering techniques substantiate "the attainment of individual goals", in a similar way that competency-based assessment gathers evidence of "competency".

A variety of assessment techniques also strengthens the quality of the Queensland externally moderated school-based assessment system; as they are used to gather information about achievement for a variety of curriculum offerings. Perhaps the alternative assessments described by Erikson (1998) have the potential to ensure participation and inclusivity for all students if used as a means of collecting evidence of learning that is judged against the relative achievement standards of the Australian Curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

Some students with special education needs have the capacity to access the curriculum at the same level as their peers when support strategies and reasonable adjustments are implemented. Whereas for some students, there is a need to implement an Individual Education Plan (IEP) to create opportunities to access the curriculum at a different age-appropriate level, in addition to accessing support strategies, individualised programs and reasonable adjustments.

It is imperative that all students have the opportunity to access quality learning pathways; beginning from the early years of Prep through to the completion of their senior year and receive the Senior Education Profile (SEP) that may contain the QCE, Tertiary Entrance Statement, Senior Statement or QCIA. Queensland has endeavored to create flexible options for students to improve retention rates in senior schooling as well as ensuring that students receive formal recognition of their studies.

State and territory governments are increasingly anxious about education standards as reflected in national and international comparisons of student achievement because of the expected contribution to national economic growth and competitiveness. There is perhaps an unhelpful focus on achievement standards and benchmarks as this raises concerns about equity for all groups of students. Wyatt-Smith & Klenowski (2010) also identify increasing individual, particularly parental, anxieties because of the growing importance of formal qualifications in determining success in terms of life opportunities.

As we move towards the Australian Curriculum implementation and are faced with increasing tensions to ensure inclusiveness and flexible options, it is imperative to reflect and consider

...whatever common curriculum standards (that is what students are expected to achieve...) are adopted by jurisdictions, it is important to allow for flexibility in schools to cater for different groups of students to achieve those standards in different ways....it is possible to support each student to progress along a personalised pathway that reflects their specific goals, strengths and motivations, and harnesses other opportunities for learning (Federalist Paper 2, p. 21).

In Queensland, the processes and procedures that are in place for the Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement exemplify the support for an individualised or personalised pathway that recognises and certifies achievements, and strengthens and motivates the transition to post-school options for young people.

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## Websites

Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) <http://acaca.bos.nsw.edu.au/>

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>

Australian Association of Special Educators (AASE) <http://www.aase.edu.au/>

Council for the Australian Federation (CAF) <http://www.caf.gov.au/>

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) <http://www.deewr.gov.au>

Education Act and Regulation <http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au>

Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEEYAA) <http://www.mceecdya.edu.au>

National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) <http://www.nap.edu.au/>

Next step survey <http://education.qld.gov.au/nextstep/>

Queensland Parents for People with a Disability <http://www.qppd.org>

Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) <http://www.qsa.qld.edu.au>

*The Australian* <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/>

The Federal Resource Centre <http://www.dssc.org/frc>

## Abbreviations

Australian Association of Special Educators	(AASE)
Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities	(ACACA)
Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority	(ACARA)
Australian Qualifications Framework	(AQF)
Certificate of Post-Compulsory School Education	(CPCSE)
<i>Disability Discrimination Act 1992</i>	(DDA)
Individual Education Plan	(IEP)
<i>Individuals with Disabilities Education Act</i>	(IDEA)
Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs	(MCEETYA)
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's	(OECD)
Programme for International Student Assessment	(PISA)
Queensland Certificate of Education	(QCE)
Queensland Certificate of Individual Achievement	(QCIA)
Queensland Studies Authority	(QSA)
Senior Education and Training Plan	SET Plan
Senior Education Profile	(SEP)
Special education program	(SEP)
Vocational Education and Training	(VET)