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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION

(Subcommittee)

Reference: Academic standards of school education

TUESDAY, 26 JUNE 2007

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SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON

EMPLOYMENT, WORKPLACE RELATIONS AND EDUCATION

Tuesday, 26 June 2007

Members: Senator Troeth *(Chair)*, Senator Marshall *(Deputy Chair)*, Senators Barnett, George Campbell, Fisher, Lightfoot, McEwen and Stott Despoja

Substitute members:

Matters relating to the schools and training portfolios—Senator Allison to replace Senator Stott Despoja

The current level of academic standards of school education—Senator Crossin to replace Senator George Campbell

Senators Fifield and Birmingham to replace Senators Lightfoot and Fisher, respectively, on 25 June and 26 June 2007

Participating members: Senators Allison, Bartlett, Bernardi, Birmingham, Boswell, Boyce, Bob Brown, George Campbell, Carr, Chapman, Cormann, Crossin, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Fielding, Fifield, Forshaw, Hogg, Humphries, Hutchins, Joyce, Kemp, Ludwig, Lundy, McLucas, Ian Macdonald, McGauran, Milne, Moore, Murray, Nash, Nettle, O'Brien, Parry, Patterson, Payne, Polley, Robert Ray, Sherry, Siewert, Stephens, Sterle, Stott Despoja, Trood, Watson, Webber, Wong and Wortley

Senators in attendance: Senators Barnett, Fifield and Troeth

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The current level of academic standards of school education, with particular reference to:

1. Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:

   a. the extent to which each stage of schooling (early primary; middle schooling; senior secondary) equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to the next stage; and

   b. the extent to which schools provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.

2. The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for the senior secondary school certificate in each state and territory.

3. How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries.

WITNESSES

EWBANK, Mr Nicholas Ian (Nick), President, History Teachers Association of Australia 1

FIRTH, Mr John, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 18

GAUDRY, Professor Garth Ian, Director, International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics 27

KNIGHT, Mr Rodney David, President, History Teachers Association of Victoria.................................... 1

McINTOSH, Ms Janine Louisa, Schools Project Officer, International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics.. 27

PECK, Ms Dianne, Acting General Manager, Student Learning Programs, Department of Education, Victoria 18

SPURR, Mr Michael Adrian, Executive Director, History Teachers Association of Victoria 1

SUGGETT, Dr Dahle, Deputy Secretary, Office for Education Policy and Innovation, Department of Education, Victoria 18

THOMAS, Ms Jan, Executive Officer, Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute and International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics 27

WATT, Mr Chris, Assistant Federal Secretary, Independent Education Union of Australia 11

Subcommittee met at 9.25 am

EWBANK, Mr Nicholas Ian (Nick), President, History Teachers Association of Australia

KNIGHT, Mr Rodney David, President, History Teachers Association of Victoria

SPURR, Mr Michael Adrian, Executive Director, History Teachers Association of Victoria

CHAIR (Senator Troeth)—Good morning, everyone. Thank you for being so gracious as to come earlier. That is very good. This is the second day of public hearings in Victoria for the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee's inquiry into the academic standards of school education. As indicated yesterday, the purpose of the inquiry is to inform the Senate about current standards and achievement levels in schools and to examine whether schools are preparing students adequately for the immediate workforce and for higher education. We will consider such issues as whether basic skills are being adequately imparted and whether the academic curriculum is sufficiently rigorous to meet the requirements of university study.

I remind all witnesses that in giving evidence to the committee they are protected by parliamentary privilege. It is unlawful for anyone to threaten or disadvantage a witness on account of evidence given to a committee and such action may be treated by the Senate as a contempt. I also remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence to the committee may constitute a contempt of the Senate. Witnesses may request that part or all of their evidence be heard in private. I welcome any observers to this public hearing and I ask that people ensure that their mobile phones are either turned off or switched to silent. I welcome our witnesses. The History Teachers Association of Australia has lodged submission No. 51 with the committee. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to that submission?

Mr Ewbank—No, I do not.

CHAIR—I now invite both organisations to make a short opening statement and then we will move to questions.

Mr Ewbank—It is a pleasure to be here this morning. We have already introduced ourselves. I am here in my capacity as national president but I am also a teacher of some 19 years experience. I currently teach in the ACT. Rodney Knight is president of the HTAV. He teaches in a non-government school and I teach in a government school so we have both sectors covered today. Michael Spurr has been the executive director of the HTAV—essentially an administrator, teacher and professional development provider for about three years. I would like to briefly reiterate some of the main points in the HTAA's submission. First of all, I know that you, Senator Troeth, as a former history teacher—

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Ewbank—know the worth of history in the classroom.

CHAIR—I do.

Mr Ewbank—I would like to reiterate, in case anybody is in doubt, that the History Teachers Association of Australia sees history as a primarily important subject for the education of Australian students. That said, it is apparent, not least through the work of Professor Tony Taylor, that the degree to which a coherent pattern of history education is provided to students across Australia is very uneven. Some states have compulsory exams in history at the year 10 level—that is, New South Wales—while some other states barely mention history at all, history having been subsumed into studies of society and the environment or other nomenclatures.

We would essentially argue that the most important thing in the teaching of history is having good history teachers. It is the history teachers that will make good-quality curriculum come alive in a meaningful way for students and connect those students to their pasts and their possible futures. Whilst we welcome cautiously the government's initiatives in Australian history, the committee and the government need to be cognisant of the fact that merely the wave of a political wand is not going to provide 10,000 well-trained quality history teachers. I think that is all I want to say at the moment.

Mr Knight—There is nothing more I would like to say.

CHAIR—Mr Spurr?

Mr Spurr—No.

CHAIR—We have had evidence both for and against apparently declining literacy levels generally in education. I wonder how concerned history teachers are about that. I would like your view on that and on whether or not the style of history teaching has adapted to that, if indeed it exists.

Mr Ewbank—I am happy to be the first cab off the rank. It is quite difficult in an absolute sense to measure literacy. Obviously, we have the national numeracy and literacy testing, which provides hard numerical evidence about literacy. I come from a jurisdiction where literacy and numeracy are fairly well ingrained with consistent results in our testing—well above the 80 per cent or, in fact, often above 90 per cent of the benchmark. That said, I think there is a change—not necessarily a degradation—in the nature of literacy that students are manifesting. Literacy, which is the common conception of literacy—that is text based literacy, sitting and reading something from a book, a photocopy or something like that—may be more challenging now for students than it used to be. Perhaps that is compensated for by their increasing skills in visual literacy in terms of making meaning of visual texts in particular.

I think, as a generalisation, history teachers have adapted. I certainly would rarely give students now significant slabs of text. By 'significant slabs', I mean 10 pages plus. I still expect my students to read, to be literate and to make meaning of the printed word, but I would also use interactive whiteboards, videos, computer simulation games et cetera to augment students' understanding.

Mr Spurr—I would add to that the point that, within history, there is the capacity to enhance students' abilities to engage in a variety of modes of literacy beyond the traditional text base. I think history can act as a great carrier for a range of literacy beyond the text.

Mr Knight—My experience in recent years has been primarily at the senior end of the school, year 12, and I do not know that I have noticed a great decline in literacy standards in the students at the upper end of the school.

CHAIR—Did either of your organisations make a contribution, either in person or by submission, to the history summit that was held?

Mr Ewbank—I was at the summit and I was on the working party.

CHAIR—What about the Victorian organisation?

Mr Spurr—We were not represented as summiteers, but we have been involved in some of the review of the draft curriculum.

Mr Ewbank—And also in the preparation that was done before the summit to establish a common position across the country for me to articulate at the summit.

CHAIR—There has been some comment in the last week and more particularly today about perceptions of history and the way in which history should be taught. Without wishing to ask you personal questions about your view, I would be interested to know, in your view, how that has changed over, let us say, the last 30 years.

Mr Ewbank—Again, I will take this one first—I seem to be doing the majority of the talking. I suppose I will answer this partly by reflecting on the history that I experienced as a student. I went through probably the first SOSE generation in Tasmania.

Senator BARNETT—Where are you from?

Mr Ewbank—I am English by birth, Tasmanian by adoption and have been in Canberra for 19 years, so I am not sure what that makes me—confused, perhaps. In my own education experience in Tasmania in what I would call high school, by which I mean years 7 to 10, I did experience two years of history within SOSE—year 8, year 10—basically ancient and then modern world history. My main memories of that are that we had a textbook, we read out of the textbook, we talked about the textbook and then we answered questions. It may well be that I experienced more innovative teaching than that, but I do not recall it. I will take that as my baseline.

Whilst history teachers still do use textbooks—some use them more than others; they are a useful starting point, particularly for people who are beginning teaching—I think teachers now feel freer, particularly given the prevalence of, first of all, the photocopier and then the internet and various other electronic means, to range widely. I think there is now a much greater emphasis in high school on the use of historical sources, be they written, visual or of an artefact nature, such as the museum books that are put around by the Australian War Memorial. That means that students get to grapple firsthand with the evidence rather than work through the filter of a secondary source all the time. I think that is a positive advancement. For a start, it allows for kinaesthetic learners—kids who like to see, feel and touch rather than just sitting still, reading a book and talking about it. For academically able students, which I regard myself as having been, that approach works. But you have to deal with the full range of students and, therefore, you have to employ a range of strategies. I think teachers these days are happy employing a range of strategies.

CHAIR—Do you think that the changing approach has modified in any way the actual curriculum or the view of history?

Mr Ewbank—That is a hard question for me to answer because I am a history teacher and, therefore, I have my own set of prejudices about the way history should be taught.

CHAIR—Without describing them as prejudices, given your position, I would be interested to hear your views.

Mr Ewbank—I think history is now taught, certainly more than I experienced it, as contestable. The use of evidence tends to open up ranges of interpretations, such as saying, ‘Well, we’ve got this bit of evidence saying this and this bit of evidence saying that.’ We encourage the students to do that sort of weighing of evidence, which I think is an incredibly valuable skill in itself. I think the way that history has been perceived has now changed. It is no longer the textbook version. I am not saying that I was taught the ‘memorise the dates and the kings and queens’ approach, but I am saying that the pedagogy has changed to adapt to that sort of inquiry based way of approaching the teaching of history. I think that is very good for students, because they deal with a very information-rich or information-saturated world, and they have to learn to evaluate what they are reading, what they are seeing and what they are experiencing. So I think, in that sense, curriculum has been reflective of the changing nature of the world that we live in and that is a positive.

Mr Spurr—I might add that not only has the pedagogy changed over the last 30 years but also the curriculum has incorporated wider developments in academic history.

Mr Ewbank—Yes.

Mr Spurr—That was my prior experience before coming to the association. I think over the last 30 or 40 years there has been an expansion in what constitutes the studiable past. So, over the last 40 years, there has been an increasing prominence of Indigenous history within Australia and also, more generally, cultural, social and gender history as a historicised subject. I think those sorts of developments are also reflected in the curriculum documents that are now informing the nature of teaching within the school system. I think that is an important development and it reflects a relationship between the academic pursuit of history and the practice in schools.

Mr Knight—Certainly, at the senior end of the study of history in Victoria, we are fortunate that historiography is very much alive and well. In Australia we have a rich and diverse range of writers and views and so forth which we are able to bring to bear on the study of history. I think students go out of year 12 to their postsecondary destinations pretty well aware that history is a contestable discipline.

Mr Spurr—And that history has a history.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Ewbank—In the New South Wales senior syllabuses, with which I am passingly familiar although I do not teach them, certainly the place of historiography is very strong in year 11 and year 12. The study of historians as well as the history that they write is good because it is a way of providing real intellectual rigour in the subject.

Mr Knight—And I think students respond really well to the historical debate.

CHAIR—With regard to the differing emphasis on gender and the other elements that you have mentioned, nevertheless it would be true—please correct me if I am wrong—to say that, even with all those newly introduced elements, the older elements, such as time, place et cetera, still have a valid place in history?

Mr Spurr—Absolutely.

Mr Ewbank—Yes. Whilst historiography and contestability is not absent in the junior years of high school—year 7 and year 8—I think the emphasis on it actually increases. Certainly by the time you reach what is effectively the optional senior syllabuses it has a primary place, but it is not as evident—although it is there—further down in the school years.

CHAIR—From the perspective of history teachers, are you satisfied with what look to be the outcomes of the history summit?

Mr Ewbank—Mostly. I think the questions and the chronology identified by the working party—and, again, I acknowledge that I was on the working party and therefore I am self-satisfied—were a good model. I think they were a sufficient and satisfactory compromise between the differences of opinion—not hugely significant differences of opinion—and the different positions that were represented at the history summit. I

am a little frustrated with the time that it is taking to get anything happening. The minister has said, and the assumption has always been, that we are talking about implementation for 2009, which is the next round of quadrennial funding by the government to schools. It strikes me that we are now 10 months out from the summit. The working party, which assumed that it was going to meet fairly quickly, only met after quite a lot of behind-the-scenes agitation by Professor John Hirst, me and others on 31 October, so that was a two-month-plus lag. Obviously, Australia closes down over Christmas. Tony Taylor's work went to the department in early April. We are now at the end of June and we have had a reference committee established.

Whilst the minister's office has assured me that this is nothing out of the ordinary and that there is nothing—'sinister' is too strong a word—untoward happening, it does strike me that we are putting a lot of time into this front end. It is good to have front-end design and time spent wisely on that front-end design. But there is the second half of the process, which is actually turning whatever the document turns out to be into something that is workable in the classroom, the development of resources and thought about strategies for teachers and how to support teachers. Given that we are moving into an election cycle very soon, I am starting to wonder whether it is going to be implemented for 2009 or, if it is implemented for 2009, whether there is going to be insufficient time post this review process. That would be my one huge caveat on the process. I personally thought that the outcomes of the summit were quite reasonable, but others may have different views.

Mr Spurr—I think, as a document to frame a curriculum, it puts forward something that is teachable and certainly doable. The issues around sustainability are probably the ones that will be addressed over the immediate term.

Mr Knight—Yes, and the issue of resourcing as well. Having qualified and enthusiastic teachers to deliver what is being proposed is an issue.

Mr Ewbank—Regarding the 200 hours proposal, which is what the working party recommended in October for the syllabus, finding 200 hours in any school timetable is going to be incredibly challenging. What the working party came up with was an aspirational request. The bitter bit is going to come when we actually try to implement this. Trying to wangle 200 hours, even out of years 8, 9 and 10, let alone 9 and 10, in any school is going to be quite challenging. It may mean that other subjects that have worth—such as the other subjects that have been shoehorned along with history into SOSE—do not get the coverage that their practitioners want and perhaps deserve.

Mr Knight—The other side of that too, I think, is that 200 hours of compulsory history teaching may not necessarily deliver the desired outcomes that have been floated. It could turn out to be quite counterproductive. Unless it is taught really well and the kids are engaged, it could defeat the purpose. The purpose is, I guess, to enthuse students and to impart an understanding of and a pride in our past and so forth. The 200 hours for students in those middle years is a lot of time. Unless we have really able and enthusiastic teachers who can engage them—

Mr Ewbank—The other issue that arises though is that HTAA has no particularly partisan point of view. We value the teaching of any history that our members teach. I am an ancient historian. One of the risks of having 200 mandated hours of Australian history is that the place of medieval, which is incredibly popular across almost all jurisdictions, and ancient will be: 'Well, you've got your 200 hours in years 9 and 10; we're not giving you any in years 7 and 8.' So, while at first blush it looks to be a good idea, there may be knock-on implications which are in fact deleterious to the teaching of history in the broader sense.

Mr Spurr—That would flow on to postcompulsory history as well.

Mr Ewbank—New South Wales experiences have been instructive here. There have been two New South Wales years 9 and 10 Australian history syllabuses. The first one was—I have to be careful with the language I use here—seen as less desirable by teachers because of the amount of stuff that was in it. Certainly the impact of compulsory Australian history in years 9 and 10 seems to have been to depress numbers doing Australian history in years 11 and 12. In fact, ancient history in New South Wales is now booming. Students may feel that they have done Australian history in the two years of 9 and 10 and therefore they flee to ancient history. A number of students still continue on to do another two years of Australian history, but there will be impacts and they may not all be positive.

CHAIR—I guess the inclusion on the advisory board as it has been announced of the person from the New South Wales Board of Studies would provide that curriculum overview and that would be extremely helpful?

Mr Ewbank—Yes. Ms Lawless is a very knowledgeable and authoritative person in both history teaching and curriculum more broadly.

CHAIR—She was also at the history summit, I understand.

Mr Ewbank—She was one of the summiteers as well; that is correct.

Senator FIFIELD—By virtue of the fact that you are history teachers and you are here representing your association, you are clearly committed to the teaching of the discrete disciplines. In the light of that, I assume that you are not necessarily huge fans of SOSE. Do you think that the SOSE beast should be put to the sword once and for all?

Mr Ewbank—We thought this question would come up, which is why I am grinning slightly. SOSE can be well taught. It can be a meaningful part of any worthwhile school curriculum. One of the problems has been that too often SOSE has been a residual subject. By that, I mean they do the timetable and then they have a PE teacher with two spare periods. What can that period teacher do? They can do two periods of SOSE, because any fool can teach SOSE—not that I am calling period teachers fools and I am glad I am protected by parliamentary privilege here. In my own experience as a head of department, SOSE sometimes became a dumping ground for other things that people did not want to do or which were deemed necessary—for example, driver education. I will start that sentence again. Whilst it is important for students to have a knowledge of geography both in terms of skills and in terms of political geography, anthropology, sociology, psychology and those sorts of perspectives which have much to add to our understanding, I do tend to believe that many of those can be developed through a broad teaching of history. I am not saying that I am a good psychology teacher. I would never want to teach psychology; I just do not have the skills. But, for example, you can bring psychological perspectives into the teaching of history. SOSE had its value and it gave a voice to subjects that were not previously valued, but too often the implementation—because of the teaching, or the timetabling or the resourcing—did lead it to become a mishmash. I think I will leave it there before I say too much.

Mr Knight—I think the introduction of SOSE was certainly well intentioned. In terms of intellectual development, it was well reasoned. What we should be doing in schools is making links between disparate disciplines rather than creating barriers between them. But it is another example of an initiative which in theory sounded good but which in practice, for a range of reasons, many of which Mr Ewbank has outlined, did not materialise terribly well at the chalkface. Another example of that in Victoria was certainly Australian studies, which was well intentioned but certainly not terribly well received nor terribly well taught, I guess, nor well resourced.

Senator FIFIELD—So the view of the association would be that there is still a place for a general studies subject as such—

Mr Ewbank—There are many perspectives to it. I am being fairly casual with my words.

Senator FIFIELD—but that it should not be at the expense of the teaching of discrete disciplines.

Mr Ewbank—Yes.

Mr Spurr—Yes.

Senator FIFIELD—Given the announcement by the premiers recently that they were going to ensure the re-establishment of the discrete teaching of the disciplines of history, geography and economics, which I think is a great thing and long overdue, in your view will there be a shortage of qualified history teachers given that SOSE has taken up the space of history to some extent?

Mr Ewbank—We did some back-of-the-envelope calculations last year suggesting that we would nationally need 10,000 history teachers. I very much doubt that there are 10,000 history teachers out there. There are probably more than 10,000 SOSE teachers. One of the challenges for our association, when the Australian history initiative comes to fruition, whatever that is, is going to be to support our colleagues who will have to teach history, who do not have the method background in terms of some sort of academic study or development in their teaching degree and giving them skills and materials so that they can do it successfully. That is a huge opportunity for us in one sense, but it is also going to be a huge challenge.

Senator FIFIELD—So that is 10,000 additional teachers or 10,000 people who—

Mr Ewbank—Ten thousand teachers.

Senator FIFIELD—might have been doing something else who will then do history.

Mr Ewbank—Yes.

Senator FIFIELD—In your view, are the best history teachers—the best teachers of any particular discipline—people who are experts in that discipline? Or is there a role for a more generalist teacher to turn their hand to—

Mr Spurr—I think a teacher with qualification and academic experience in a discipline and pedagogical training in that discipline makes for the person with the greatest capacity to teach within that discipline. I think part of the problem that emerges within the current SOSE informed model is in pre-service contexts. The method—I think specialism is the language used to describe it at the moment—does not necessarily prepare a SOSE specialist to teach history, geography, economics et cetera. While there are some similar skills between each of those disciplines, it is an imperative that a teacher of, for example, history has a background in the specific skills of history, the process of evaluating evidence, the knowledge of what historiography is and these are not contained in the SOSE methods training. Lack of undergraduate academic history probably compounds that problem. It is vital that the training is also adapted or reflects that need of teachers to be able to act as specialists in the classroom.

Mr Ewbank—I would agree with Mr Spurr.

Mr Knight—That it is the nub of the problem really. If this is implemented and we have 200 hours of history teaching that is compulsory and schools do not have qualified staff to teach it, then, referring to the example Mr Ewbank used before of the PE teacher who is light on in terms of allotment in the middle years, science teachers or any manner of people would be drawn into this to teach it.

Mr Ewbank—They will have a textbook and they will teach it.

Mr Knight—That is right.

Mr Ewbank—To answer the question more generally, I have had a number of colleagues who I would rate as exceptional teachers and I would be comfortable with them teaching history in the junior years because they can make it come alive for students and they can engage students. That is really the No. 1 thing—engaging students. But certainly the further up the school you get the more detailed subject knowledge you do. I think both associations would argue very strongly for having trained history teachers who have some significant academic background in their training in history methodology; otherwise, you run the risk of it becoming SOSE by a different name.

Senator FIFIELD—Clearly there will be a huge demand on current history teachers and something of a crunch coming because I imagine that many SOSE teachers would not want to teach history specifically and many SOSE teachers would not be appropriate to teach history because SOSE comes with a whole philosophical view which would not naturally lend to the teaching of history as you have described it.

Mr Ewbank—Yes. SOSE teachers would reply that they are already teaching history. That is because of their background and the mindset with which they come in.

Senator FIFIELD—So what needs to be done to fill the gap?

Mr Ewbank—Professional development is the obvious clue there. Some people will resist if they are forced to do this—some people resist any change. I think it has to be down to professional learning and mentoring by skilled history teachers of non-skilled teachers of history. There is a subtle important distinction there between history teachers. I think Rodney and I would both regard ourselves as history teachers, but we have many colleagues out there who are teachers of history.

Senator FIFIELD—Given league tables are in vogue, could you rank the jurisdictions in terms of how well they do history?

Mr Ewbank—Again, it is good that I am under parliamentary privilege. Do we want to do this question or pass it on?

Mr Spurr—What is the measure of wellness? If it is taught as a discrete discipline—

Mr Ewbank—Victoria and New South Wales.

Mr Spurr—you would be at the top. If you do not teach it as a discrete discipline you will be at the bottom. If you do teach it as a discrete discipline but it is really SOSE by another name, you would be somewhere in the middle.

Mr Ewbank—Victoria and New South Wales would be at the top.

Mr Spurr—Higher ranking.

Mr Ewbank—Higher ranking. I would think Western Australia would then come next, because they have a strong presence. They have a bunch of very committed teachers and Australian history was compulsory in their old syllabus for year 11 and year 12. I do not know much about the Northern Territory, but I would suggest that the other five probably come pretty much in a group below that again. That ranking is based solely on New South Wales having the subject identified and that it has an external exam at level 9-10. Victoria has under the VELS—and these gentlemen are much more qualified than I am—

Mr Spurr—It is constructed as a discrete discipline in which students have to attain particular standards of knowledge and—

Mr Ewbank—So it has been foregrounded in Victoria and, as I said, Western Australia and then, in the other jurisdictions, history appears as a subcategory of SOSE often using the national profiles' title of 'time continuity and change' or some such nomenclature. Even that sort of statement has its problems because there are some schools in the ACT—my own I hope would be one of them—that teach history extremely well. But the place of history in the formal curriculum documentation is not as overt as I would like it and it is certainly not a separate discipline.

Senator FIFIELD—Is there a wooden spoon in it?

Mr Spurr—I refuse to comment.

Mr Ewbank—I will have to live with my colleagues afterwards.

Senator FIFIELD—I will not press the question.

CHAIR—By the merit of omission, you may have stated that already. Given the representative views of your organisation then, can I take it that you are happy with the perceived balance of the advisory panel that has been announced to go on with the history curriculum?

Mr Ewbank—Are you talking about balance in terms of politics or balance in terms of expertise brought to the panel?

CHAIR—Expertise and view of history.

Mr Knight—I do not have a problem with Geoffrey Blainey being on there. He has I think received some difficult treatment over the years. I was fortunate enough to study at the University of Melbourne under him and I agree very much with some commentary in the *Australian* this morning. He was a sensational teacher and a very wise man. He strayed into territory unfortunately that got him into hot water a few years ago. But I think his perspective on teaching and the national curriculum would be valuable. I do not know about Gerard Henderson's contribution, to be honest.

Mr Ewbank—Certainly I would not question Professor Blainey. He is obviously one of the most eminent of our crop of historians. Whilst I have met Dr Nick Brown briefly, I cannot really make any judgement. But given that he is an academic historian, I think he is well placed to be there.

CHAIR—Was he also at the history summit?

Mr Ewbank—No, he was not. He is the one person on the panel who was not. Ms Lawless is an exceptionally good choice. One of the things that puzzled us a little about the constitution of the history summit last year was the number of people who were described as commentators and the place of commentators on this panel. Whilst I acknowledge that Dr Henderson has written a history, it is in fact a history of the Liberal Party; therefore, he has expertise in terms of writing in history. I do not really have a problem with any of the four, but Mr Henderson's appointment is the most curious to me.

CHAIR—I just wondered in view of your holding the top position, I guess the fact that Professor Stuart McIntyre has approved of the constitution of the board would be a mark in its favour for its broad expertise.

Mr Ewbank—Yes.

Senator BARNETT—Thank you, firstly, for your submission and your presentation. They are most useful and informative and I think excellent. Senator Troeth has just asked the question I wanted to ask and Senator Fifield has asked a number of questions as well, so this probably will not take too long. I want to draw you out on the current curriculum boards around the country. In Victoria it is the VCAA, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. Each state has its own curriculum authorities. Do you have a view as to the make-up of those authorities and as to whether they could be improved in terms of having a better balance? I assume from what you have already presented today that you have been reasonably unhappy or dissatisfied with the lack of

history as a core subject in the curriculum in the past. I assume, as a result of your views, that you would have hoped that these authorities could have done better. Perhaps you could respond to that and then respond with your views of the composition of those authorities.

Mr Ewbank—I think this is territory we have not talked about, so this is top-of-the-head stuff. I personally believe that curriculum authorities should be constituted by a range of what might be called stakeholder groups—parents, students themselves, academics, vocational providers or people who are associated with the provision of vocational education, and teachers. I cannot really pass comment on the constitution of individual bodies. I am really only familiar with the ones in the ACT and very slightly with those in Tasmania, and my knowledge is old as far as Tasmania goes. So I would say that if a curriculum body has informed members from each of those groups it has a good start. Curriculum is subject to fashion—I do not think there is any doubt about that—and the downgrading, disappearance or subsuming of history into SOSE was probably a result of fashion, I think, and I do not think I can say anything more specific than that. Perhaps these gentlemen would like to say something about VCAA.

Mr Knight—I think history in Victoria is done reasonably well under the present administration of VCAA. History as a discrete discipline has been represented well within the VELS framework and certainly the study of history in this state is alive and well. I would not like to comment on jurisdictions beyond Victoria, but certainly the VCAA is representative and responsive to concerns. I think that Nick is right, that a lot of the ebb and flow of curriculum development has been rather fashionable and trends come and go, but in Victoria I think history has weathered reasonably well.

Mr Spurr—It has remained strong and has a consolidated place in the sort of prep to 10 range and has continued to be strong in postcompulsory years as well. Perhaps it is not as strong as in New South Wales at a postcompulsory level, but certainly it is very solid in Victoria. The other thing to add is that curriculum direction is not just something that is informed by fashion but it is also driven by politics as well as social pressure.

Mr Ewbank—Politics is fashionable as well though.

Mr Spurr—Yes. I was not going to reduce politics to pure fashion. But I think that is one of those drivers within the reform and construction of curriculum so it is very difficult to speak across nationally.

Senator BARNETT—You touched before on SOSE and Senator Fifield asked a number of questions in that area. But your submission states that the Council of Australian Federation’s decision to abolish SOSE is yet to take effect across the country. But can you put the next sentence or follow through on that? You obviously have some sort of support for that approach. What is the reason you believe that is the right way to go? Do you think politics has played a part? You mentioned earlier, I think, that driving lessons or whatever were being thrown into SOSE. Are you a bit concerned that politics has played its part in forming the basis of the SOSE subject?

Mr Spurr—I do not think that politics necessarily fully informs the foundations of SOSE as a discipline. Like any discipline, it does have an inherent political perspective and outlook. But I think SOSE was envisaged as a form of integrated curriculum to achieve particular forms of learning outcome. Whether or not it actually achieved those in practice is another question and whether or not the practice of SOSE, as it was envisaged on an abstract level, was what was actually realised in the classroom is quite a different relationship. In many senses I think SOSE does actually function more as an administrative umbrella term to describe a series of discrete disciplines sharing the same department office or the same block of classroom time.

Mr Ewbank—That varies tremendously between states and between schools. At my last school I was the head of SOSE but I had people who were discrete business economics teachers, discrete geography teachers, and I was the discrete history teacher—maybe not so discreet! SOSE can be implemented in that sense as an administrative nomenclature or it can be genuinely taught as an integrated subject, which I have also experienced. I think it would be relatively clear which of the two versions I prefer.

Senator BARNETT—You did mention earlier in your presentation that it can be in some respects a dumping ground for particular subjects.

Mr Ewbank—Yes. Things which are too hard or do not fit neatly with other subject areas of science, maths, English or whatever can become, ‘Whose job is that? I’ll give it to SOSE.’

Mr Spurr—If it is to do with society and the environment it can go there.

Mr Ewbank—Yes, and anybody can teach SOSE because we all live in society.

Mr Knight—And given the internal politics of schools as well, when you are looking at the imperatives of literacy and numeracy and the allocation of periods, once the range of humanity subjects—geography, history, economics and so forth—are lumped together under the one umbrella it is very easy to start to diminish their significance in the total curriculum offering within the school.

Senator BARNETT—You mentioned earlier the need for 10,000 teachers. I want to drill down in terms of the numbers and our ability to meet the need, as it were. These are not extra teachers; this is the total number in your view, is it?

Mr Ewbank—This was our back-of-the-envelope comment.

Senator BARNETT—Can you just expand on that?

Mr Ewbank—If history, for example, had the 200 hours, you cannot have the one history teacher teaching the whole school history—there simply would not be the capacity for it. I must admit that I cannot be a lot more detailed because that envelope is eight or 10 months old and I cannot remember the sort of premise we were putting at the time.

Mr Spurr—But if you make an assumption that there are in the vicinity of 3,000 secondary schools in the country, roughly—

Mr Ewbank—That is three history teachers per school.

Mr Spurr—Yes, so perhaps 10,000 is a slight underestimate.

Senator BARNETT—How many do we have now?

Mr Ewbank—The HTAA is a federal body. Each of the states has its own association and then the HTAA is the federal body. Our total membership across the country would be of the order of 2,500. That is, if you like, history teachers and not teachers of history.

Mr Spurr—But that also includes school membership as well.

Mr Ewbank—It does. We do not have a lot of hard statistics. It is not something that we have spent a lot of time thinking about measuring.

Senator BARNETT—So you are not sure how many people are out there now that are capable of teaching history? Would you have a stab at that?

Mr Spurr—I think one point to note in that sort of discussion is at Monash and Melbourne this year there is in the order of 100 to 120 history method specialists in training.

Senator BARNETT—That is—

Mr Spurr—Between the two institutions. They are students who have chosen to specialise in those two disciplines. Not many tertiary institutions, taken as a whole, offer a specialty history method. The Melbourne and Monash examples are perhaps slightly unrepresentative of the numbers coming through. Within Victoria, Deakin, La Trobe, Ballarat, and VUT do not have history specialism.

Mr Ewbank—Another example is that in the ACT of the two universities—that is ACU and UC—that offer teacher training, neither of them offers history as a specialty. UC certainly offers SOSE and I think that at AUC there might be some students who are getting some sort of SOSE exposure as part of primary education but on a limited basis within that SOSE framework.

Mr Spurr—Another way to identify some of the numbers within the system would be to think that within our particular organisation’s membership—and we have approximately 400 school members within Victoria and a number of interstate school members as well—if you make the assumption that each school has four to five people who are teachers of history, you are looking at Victoria then with a couple of thousand plus individual—

Mr Ewbank—New South Wales would be more, because of its size and the fact that history already exists there. Western Australia would be much smaller; ACT would be much smaller; Tasmania would be much smaller; South Australia would be much smaller; and I do not know about the NT because we do not have an active branch up there.

Mr Spurr—So I think, on those sorts of ballpark figures, we would be coming in under the conservative estimate of 10,000, so there is a need for the enhancement of capacity of existing teachers through professional learning and an expansion of the offering of history specialist teaching qualifications.

Mr Knight—The interesting thing about this in the school context, though, is that 200 hours have to come from somewhere, and I do not think school principals are quite clear about where the 200 hours are coming from. It is not just 200 hours; it is 200 teaching hours. There are people there with teaching allotments. Your point about being able, Senator Barnett, is one side of the equation, but the willingness factor is another one, I think, in terms of making the implementation of this work successfully.

Senator BARNETT—A good point. Thanks very much.

CHAIR—Thank you. That has been a most valuable discussion. As a former history teacher, I found it most interesting, so thanks very much.

Proceedings suspended from 10.19 am to 10.32 am

WATT, Mr Chris, Assistant Federal Secretary, Independent Education Union of Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. We have received your submission. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to your submission?

Mr Watt—No.

CHAIR—I now invite you to make a short opening statement and then we will move to questions.

Mr Watt—Thank you. The Independent Education Union would like to ask: to what extent do the current education arrangements meet the needs of a student's development, the community and the workforce in terms of preparation? Our answer is that they meet the needs generally pretty well. Are there areas of concern? Yes, there are areas of concern. Can we do things better? Like in most things, yes, we can. Our view generally would be that, given the resources, schools do a good job in terms of the education of young children in their care. That is borne out by evidence, both nationally and internationally, that shows that our students are doing well. In terms of the areas of concern, that could be briefly summarised by the fact that some students, as we know from the national reporting data, do not meet the benchmarks. In a perfect world, every student would reach the benchmark. But we know that there are a range of reasons and issues as to what happens with some students in the classroom, and some of that has to do with what they bring to the classroom. Some of that includes issues around their family background and the fact that some kids turn up at school without even having had breakfast, perhaps without even having had dinner the night before. Of course, if you are starting from that base, it makes learning during a day particularly difficult.

Our view is that more needs to be done to support kids, particularly in the early years. The longer we leave issues in schools, the more difficult they are to address. The more difficult those students find the classroom, the more likely they are to act out inappropriate behaviours. Our view is that, despite many reports, many investigations, into education there still have not been sufficient resources applied in the schooling sector and in the early childhood sector, even in preschool, to make sure that kids have the best possible start. If they get the best possible start and have the mediation, the reading recovery resources, or whatever is needed in those early years, it is much more likely that kids will maintain those levels of achievement throughout their schooling, and they will be less likely to act out. Those acting-out behaviours impact on other students in the classroom, and as children move into high-school years that becomes problematic all around. Teachers who struggle with difficult students, with difficult classes, are less likely to be able to achieve the best outcomes for all kids.

The only other comment I would make is that there needs to be, as we have highlighted in our submission, another look at all the work that has been done over the last decade. There have been many reports, many investigations, and in our view most of the recommendations arising from those have not been acted upon, whether by state, territory or federal governments. There is a need to go back and say, 'What do we know?' We do not necessarily need to do a whole lot of stuff again. The answers are there. We just have not provided sufficient resources to deal with those recommendations that would have put us in a much stronger position than we are in even at this stage.

CHAIR—One of the more recent inquiries was with respect to the national teaching of literacy. We would like to extend the standardised testing, as it were, from years 3 and 5 to years 7 and 9 as well. What is the view of your union?

Mr Watt—There are two elements to that. The first one is the most critical one: what is the purpose of it? Our concern is that in the past there has been too much focus in the standardised testing on the need for reporting, whether it is community reporting or reporting to government, and too little stress on the assessment by way of diagnosing kids' levels of achievement and then providing appropriate learning-remediation strategies to deal with those kids who are not meeting the benchmarks. The time it takes for schools to receive the data is an indication to our union that, in fact, the stress is not on assisting kids but on reporting. From that perspective, we have a concern about rolling it out into further years if, at the end of the day, we still have kids in year 3 who are not being appropriately remediated. There is no point finding out that eight to 10 per cent of kids in year 9 are still behind the benchmark. We need to know that in year 3. In fact, we need to know in kindergarten, year 1 or preschool where those kids are up to. We know generally how things are going. What we need is information for teachers and then the resources arising from that to deal immediately with those kids at an individual level.

Our response to the standardised testing is: for what purpose? If it is really just about reporting and not about remediation, let us take the money that would otherwise be spent there. And that is the second point. If the issue is about reporting, we do not need to test everybody in the cohort. ACER over the years has developed mechanisms, and TIMMS and PISA have illustrated that you do not have to test every student to get a picture. What we want is a global picture. Let us do an audit, effectively; let us test a selection of students. If it is actually about helping the kids then we need to start earlier, and it needs to be immediate in terms of the testing and the information arising from that so that teachers and schools can do something with it. It is no good finding out at the end of the year what the results are and having to leave it for someone else to try to pick up. That is our concern about rolling it out in the current format.

CHAIR—I think we have had evidence that indicates the earlier that literacy problems are diagnosed and remediated the better for the child's ultimate school career. Is your union satisfied that reading, for instance, is being taught properly—and I use the term in its widest sense; I do not want to get into the whole word versus the phonics—in terms of it equipping a child for a school career through primary school and into secondary school?

Mr Watt—The only thing I would touch on in terms of the broader debate is simply to say that, as in many areas, not just education, simplistic positions are put, particularly by the media, about what goes on in schools. I think the notion that there are various schools of thought that compete with one another in schools about how to teach kids is a nonsense. When you talk to teachers about what they are doing, they are using strategies not just from those camps but from a range of camps. I think people get distracted at times, unfortunately, from the essence of the debate. When I go home at night and talk to my wife, who is a primary teacher, about this, she says, 'It's a nonsense.' Sure, there might be a teacher somewhere doing it entirely that way, but the fact is that the broad selection of teachers are in the middle. They are picking and choosing.

What is important in that is that teachers have access to quality research that indicates which things work and which things do not, and how you put things together. The other element of it comes back to the individual student: individual students' learning styles and needs are different. Unless you cater for those, there is no point in saying, 'This is the only way you can do it.' It is not going to work for some of those kids, and you are going to need different strategies. We have put that in our submission. There is a continuing need in the education sector for more and better-quality research to inform the work of teachers. I guess that is how we would respond to that.

CHAIR—If you are not keen on that national standardisation of reporting, how then can we go about meaningfully supporting national consistency, because you also argue for that in your submission?

Mr Watt—I could do it by illustration, I guess, with a system I am very familiar with. When the New South Wales government registers its schools, it does not do every school every year. Schools have a lifespan in terms of their registration, at which point they put up the details of how they are implementing the curriculum—they put up their teaching programs and they put up a raft of other policies as well. Even in those five-year periods, not every school has a visit necessarily; a lot of it is done by paper. I come back to the word I used earlier, and that is the point of audit or sample: you do not have to do everything religiously and slavishly. I think the issues around national reporting requirements and consistency can be achieved by sampling.

The other thing about schools is that not only are they collegial in nature internally; they are also quite collegial between schools. There is a lot of sharing of resources and a lot of sharing of ideas between schools and between teachers in schools. In a sense, that produces a level of consistency at any rate. So our view would be that you do not have to have testing of the entire cohort in particular years or in fact even in every year, if you went to the one extreme—and I know you are not proposing that. There is no need for it. I think there is sufficient data there to have an overview about what is going on, and you have to layer it against the fact that, as well as that testing, there are arrangements within the state and territory jurisdictions about how schools meet curriculum requirements.

Senator BARNETT—Thanks for your submission and your comments today. In terms of the benchmarking and the national testing that you have just been referring to, I notice that the ALP shadow spokesman made a comment yesterday in the media that he is not opposed to league tables and that benchmarking approach. Do you oppose that approach? You have expressed your view generally, but do you have a view in terms of league tables?

Mr Watt—Yes, we have been and remain opposed to the concept of league tables, because we do not see how it advantages anybody and, in particular, individual students. That is our concern about league tables—

that they become, allegedly, a mechanism by which schools get compared to each other. But what you do not see in those league tables is any indication about the other things that are going on in those schools, which can be positive, or in some cases negative, for a range of reasons. It is entirely unfair, in my view, to compare schools, when they start from a different basis, and one of the simplest bases is socioeconomic status.

We know from the research over years and years that kids from home backgrounds where the parents are highly educated, where there are books available, where there is just a bit of an expectation or a nurturing and love of learning, are going to be more likely to take a positive view when they go to school. Kids who do not have that background are going to have a more difficult starting place. That does not stop some of those kids or most of those kids from achieving at high levels, but they start from a harder place.

I will illustrate it by telling a very brief story about my sister's child. My sister's child is in year 3 in a New South Wales Catholic systemic school. My sister was bemoaning the fact that her child was being disadvantaged at the moment because her classroom teacher was away on sick leave. Even in the current IR climate I would have thought the nature of the teacher's sick leave—that is, she had a detached retina—was valid. She was probably having some bed rest on doctor's orders and doing what needed to be done. My sister was bemoaning the fact, though, that the daughter of a friend of theirs had for the previous three weeks been preparing for the skills test. I thought: 'How therefore does a national reporting league table indicate, for example, that one school is preparing kids for the test, and another school is going on and doing its program of work, as you would expect it to be doing, and might do a bit.' So my concern about the league table reporting is that you may well drive schools—and there is evidence of it in other countries such as the US—to spend a lot more time on preparing, training and coaching kids for the test rather than on the broader life of schooling that you would hope they would undertake.

Senator BARNETT—Thanks for your feedback on that. I am interested in your views on the parent's right to know the educational status of their children, particularly in literacy and numeracy. We had a submission yesterday from Ms Yvonne Meyer, who shared her experience of not knowing that her child in grade 5 was not literate and could not write. This caused her great concern. This was in an independent school in Melbourne, and she pursued that and it has been resolved. But surely that would cause concern to you if that were your child. The concern she expressed to this committee was that she was speaking on behalf of many parents who would like to know how their kids are performing.

Mr Watt—We need to be careful, therefore, in that we are talking about two different issues. League table reporting is going to rank schools against each other. Short of publishing the results of every student in year 3 in Australia in some unbelievably long list—although I have no doubt computer programs could do it—that is not going to help that respondent in knowing where her kid is at.

Senator BARNETT—The results of the benchmarking I am talking about go to the parents.

Mr Watt—Sure. But I am saying that that is different from league table reporting—

Senator BARNETT—Indeed. I accept that.

Mr Watt—So we move to the issue about the individual, and I do not have a problem with it at all. Every teacher that I speak to—and maybe I am only talking to teachers who are committed to their kids—is more than aware of the need to have good reporting to the students and to the parents. To the extent that a parent or a group of parents feel that they do not realise that something is going on, I have two responses. One is that, yes, there should be mechanisms that require schools to report in a clear fashion about where kids are up to. There is no question about that whatsoever. My second concern is: what is going on that a kid gets to year 5—10 or 11 years old—and there is no connect with what has been going on at the school over those six years so that you finally discover at some point that they cannot read and write? I do not wish to blame the parent entirely, but the parent has a role to play in ensuring that they are engaged as much as the school has a role to ensure that the parents are as connected as they can be. I find it concerning at many levels that a parent would get to that point with their kid and discover it. Not all of my children have been brilliant students by any stretch of the imagination, and we knew pretty early where they were struggling and when they were struggling. I am talking about kinder to 1. I think we need to address what is going on in that process as a matter quite distinct from the league table and more and more standardised national reporting.

Senator BARNETT—The Australian Education Union yesterday gave a submission to our inquiry, and they said that the system should 'recognise teachers for their excellence'. That is a quote from them yesterday. Do you agree with that and, if so, how would you recognise teachers for their excellence?

Mr Watt—I would agree, absolutely. I guess I would refer to the research group of teachers in the US that the education minister pointed to just recently. The first point they made in their list of a dozen or so things about recognising expert teachers was that the first thing you have to do is get the base pay right—in other words, what teachers generally should be paid and how they should be resourced in their work. If you do not get that right, the rest of it falls apart. That is the first part of it.

We get politicians—and I do not mean you because you are all, of course, unbelievably reasonable people! But, from time to time, people will come up and you will hear glib statements about, 'Yes, we respect teachers,' and 'Teachers deserve more pay,' as a general view. I imagine you would also get comments to say that that would be true of nurses, dentists, bus drivers and a range of professions, which I would agree with. But, unless you get the base right, you do not get the profession having the standing and the capacity to recruit. At the next level, there are, no doubt, teachers of significant accomplishment, and there are many things that teachers do. We need to look at ways of recognising not just the achievement of students in class by way of standardised testing but also the fact that some teachers go out of their way to engage kids in broader cocurricula and engage kids in subjects that cannot be assessed formally in a standardised test—for example, in music, in the arts. If we do not recognise all of those things then we are failing those very teachers that some of our kids are going to benefit most from.

I am trying to underpin what I am about to say—that is, therefore, in our view, it needs to be establishing a set of indicators of what quality teaching is about, and if teachers meet those standards then they should be recognised and appropriately remunerated. It cannot just be a particular small snapshot of achievement of some group of kids in a literacy or numeracy test, because all this other stuff that is so important to the vast bulk of kids is going to be skipped over.

Senator BARNETT—I see where you are coming from, but it is fair to say that the results of the students in how they are performing would be part of the overarching criteria that you would set, presumably, where there is some objective assessment and that they are, using your words, 'remunerated appropriately'.

Mr Watt—I would not use the word 'would'; I would use the word 'could', for those very schools where kids are struggling for a range of socioeconomic reasons. Some of the language issues that our schools and teachers are facing are not historic ones—they are not European languages; there are now kids from the Sudan and Ethiopia. If you take schools like a school in Lidcombe, in Sydney's outer west—which is a school I am familiar with, which has a very large Sudanese population—if student results must or 'would' form part of the assessment, I would say no because those very teachers are probably doing unbelievably good stuff and are not necessarily going to be able to even indicate relative improvement. It is going to be incremental and take time. Should they be disadvantaged in being recognised as accomplished? In my view, they should not be.

Senator BARNETT—Who should make the decision?

Mr Watt—I would say that it is a question of 'could'. Who should make the assessment? Let us have a sufficient breadth of standards that teachers can aspire to and be recognised in. You are not going to necessarily cover every single possible standard that would describe a highly accomplished teacher. Those teachers would not be sleeping; they would be too fraught and wrung out. It has to be some independent process.

Senator BARNETT—What is the role of the principal?

Mr Watt—The principal has a contributing role and, in general, they should be involved in the process. I have a concern about saying that the principal is critical—and the principal is unquestionably important. The reason I think you have to move away from the issue of the principal having the major or determining position is that some schools—in rural Victoria, in remote Western Australia—are very small schools. Is it right for that person, if they only have one or two other staff members, to make the determination? Not necessarily. More than that, in the independent school sector, we have some very small schools where the principal is the boss. The principal effectively runs the school, which is quite a distinct and different arrangement from a Catholic system parish school or a government school, where they have other support mechanisms and they are not the hirer and firer. So we have concerns about putting it entirely or proportionately overwhelmingly in the hands of the principal, because we have had some negative experience with some—fortunately not many—principals. I think we have to, again, be careful not to say that it is primarily the principal who makes decisions around this.

Senator BARNETT—Who is the hirer and firer?

Mr Watt—In?

Senator BARNETT—In your view, who should be the hirer and firer?

Mr Watt—It works differently across the school systems. I cannot comment on the government school system, because I do not know how it operates at a—

Senator BARNETT—In your non-government system.

Mr Watt—At the end of the day in the Catholic system of schools the hirer and firer is the Catholic Education Office or the Catholic Schools Office in most jurisdictions. In the Victorian situation it is more devolved to a school level, and the principal has a greater degree of autonomy. Does that make the hiring and firing process better in Victoria than in New South Wales? I do not think so; I do not think there is any evidence to point to that fact. Two different models operate there. In the independent schools it is often the principal but not necessarily; it could be the college board.

Senator BARNETT—Who should it be in your view?

Mr Watt—I do not know that I can answer the question because of the multitude of ways in which schools are managed and organised. I do not have a single answer.

Senator FIFIELD—The members of your union clearly have more experience of having a principal as the person who hires and fires, and therefore I assume that a lot of your members are a little more comfortable with the concept of greater principal autonomy not just in relation to hiring and firing but in the allocation of resources and the ability to do a whole range of things in the classroom—we will put the issue of hiring and firing to one side. Why do you think your colleagues in the state sector are basically terrified of the concept of principals having greater authority or greater autonomy?

Mr Watt—I think part of it is—you may be right—the question of the experience of the sectors. But the fact is that some of the independent schools in our sector, by their very nature, are not going to have another structure. They do not have support mechanisms. It would be painting too rosy a picture to suggest that some of our teachers in those schools have a more relaxed view about it. In fact, it is anything but relaxed in some of those schools. The tensions are rife. When things go wrong between the principal and the teacher, let me assure you that it is the teachers in the long term who invariably lose out. We have schools that are notoriously difficult schools. They are in the minority, thankfully, but our experience is not that because there is local autonomy things necessarily work better.

It is arguable that, in fact, the best mix that we see arises where principals have support mechanisms so that they are not hiring and firing or acting in a totally autonomous way. A support mechanism may well be a well-resourced, well-supported college board. We are more likely to see it in a Catholic system of schools where the principals are supported by an administrative structure and, before making any decisions or recommendations, they have experts that they can go to whose job is to oversight them and provide leadership mentoring for the principal's role.

Our colleagues in the government school sector would rightly have seen, from time to time, some of the difficulties that our members have faced in stand-alone schools where at the end of the day the teacher misses out, unlike in a system of schools. If it is a question about the teacher's fundamental capacity or competence in the classroom, that is one thing, but where it becomes issues of personality—and, as you would appreciate, those exist in all sorts of workplaces across the country—if the teacher misses out, where does that teacher go? In a system of schools, whether it is a Catholic system or a government system, there is capacity for that teacher to be moved to another school and continue providing quality education without the tensions that existed elsewhere. In an independent, stand-alone school this does not happen; the teacher then has to go and get another job.

Our experience around the hiring and firing is far from rosy. There are good and bad managers of schools, and so it is rightful that our colleagues would say that having total autonomy is problematic. I agree with that. It is a question of support mechanisms and how that increased autonomy could be supported.

Senator FIFIELD—So you are comfortable with the concept of greater school autonomy as opposed to principal authority?

Mr Watt—Absolutely.

Senator FIFIELD—We have been talking about teachers and their levels of pay. I think we all acknowledge that, for the job that they do, they should be paid more. What is the differential in general that exists between the independent sector and the public sector? Also, is there greater freedom and capacity to pay

teachers differently in the independent sector according to their experience, according to whatever standards are set at the school or within the sector?

Mr Watt—That is a paper in itself. As a general picture, there is not a great difference in terms of the market rate—I will use that expression—that is paid in a government school or a Catholic systemic school because the Catholic system schools effectively pay the government rate. The vast bulk of independent schools pay in that market range and, historically, they may have paid up to $2,000 a year more. You are talking about $2,000 on $50,000 or $60,000. So that is the maximum margin. There are some independent schools that have historically paid five per cent or six per cent above the award, so there is a further margin. They could be effectively paying, therefore, eight to nine per cent more than the government school rate.

Having said that, the next part of your question then says it is partly about what happens in the independent school sector. I will illustrate it by way of two figures. By 2009 the new agreements that our union in New South Wales has signed a large number of independent schools on will provide for a teacher rate of around $90,000 on this top band. At the same time, and judging by the fact that some of these other schools have not moved in the last couple of years, there are some schools that are currently paying their top teachers about $48,000, and that is unlikely to move other than by AFPC increases. So they will be paying about $50,000. That is the disparity that exists within that sector. There is much greater disparity, in our view, in salaries within the independent schools sector than there is between the independent schools sector and the Catholic system or the government sector. That is a source of concern for us. There is only a handful paying at that $50,000. Our fundamental concern about that has been that those schools nevertheless are still funded on the same basis as those schools that are paying the market rate or above the market rate. That remains an issue of concern for us and one that we have raised with governments for probably two decades.

Senator FIFIELD—Thank you for that. I guess the solution ultimately is for the state jurisdictions to pay more, because I am sure the independent sector would then be forced to follow to be competitive.

Mr Watt—As I said, some of those independent schools are paying that $48,000 in an environment where the current going rate is in the high 60s or $70,000, so they are already $20,000 behind. That is ongoing, unfortunately.

CHAIR—Does your union think there is any role for a form of independent inspectorate, similar to that operating in the UK which assesses the quality of work in schools and which is available to advise teachers on curriculum and teaching methods?

Mr Watt—In some ways it already exists. I will go back to the example I gave before of one I am familiar with: in the New South Wales and the ACT jurisdictions, schools are regularly checked and, in a sense, it is inspectorial. People come and check programs. Do they go into classrooms and support? No, not at this stage. Have they historically? Yes. Is there a value in it, having an expert coming in and providing mentoring and leadership and exhibiting quality education? Absolutely. I think those things could be invaluable in schools. We have to work out at the outset what is the basis of it, though. What is the purpose of it? Is it inspectorial—which may be the wrong word in the sense that it is there to judge and determine? Or is it rather a support and mentoring role that at the same time provides an audit, an overview and, in a sense, a checking? But if its fundamental purpose were to support the work in schools, I would say: absolutely. As I said, even within systems there is that supporting role that goes on. Could there be more resources and better resources employed? Absolutely. I think most teachers would absolutely welcome that opportunity to have expert advice and support.

Senator BARNETT—I have a supplementary question, Mr Watt. You mentioned that there are good and bad school managers, so can we assume that there are good and bad teachers or less well-performing—

Mr Watt—I think we should assume that across the population as a whole and the workforce as a whole.

Senator BARNETT—Probably politicians as well.

Mr Watt—Surely not!

Senator BARNETT—In terms of the current system, how are those perhaps poor-performing teachers best managed, as it were—counselled, mentored? How does the system work, and how could we improve that system?

Mr Watt—It is one of the critical issues that we face in dealing with members when they get into strife—that is, what resources and support are they provided with, and are those resources and that support provided

early enough? It is a bit like kids with their learning: the earlier you get in and support, the better it is going to be for all concerned. What we see at times is too little and too late, and sometimes nothing at all.

Senator BARNETT—How does it work with poor performance? If you have had your counselling and mentoring and it is not working, what happens?

Mr Watt—If it is a Catholic system, there is a capacity to put that teacher in another workplace and give them another chance. If it is an independent school, that sort of capacity just does not exist.

Senator BARNETT—And what then?

Mr Watt—There is an overlay over the top of it, though, as well, that either exists or is emerging in every jurisdiction, state and territory, and that is the role that the institute of teachers or college of teachers plays. That goes beyond just issues around child protection or looking at issues around competency. So there is capacity in those mechanisms as well. It is a question often of resources, and it is also sometimes a question of goodwill or knowledge about how to manage situations. Sometimes it is done very well; sometimes it is done badly.

Rest assured that we see many examples, despite what the media would have you believe, of teachers being moved out of the profession because they are not up to the game. Our members themselves would say that, where those teachers exist, they would rather that something be done because there is nothing more distracting at times than having a very difficult, problematic classroom next door which interferes with their capacity at work. It is one of those things where again the portrayal is either that this does not happen or that it is resisted by the union—keeping in mind that our union is the membership.

Senator BARNETT—Sure, and I respect the fact that you have to do everything you possibly can to work through the system. But, using your words, if they are not up to the game and they have to be moved out of the profession, who makes that decision?

Mr Watt—Again, it depends on the employment. If it is an independent school, it is either the principal or his or her recommendation to the college or the school board that makes that determination. In most jurisdictions, if that teacher is removed for questions around competency, that has to be reported to the institute or college of teachers. That is on the record, and, when that person seeks employment in another workplace, that can have implications for their capacity to be re-employed. It is no longer easy, one might argue, to hide from your past record.

Senator BARNETT—Do you know who makes the decision in the public sector?

Mr Watt—No, I would not know.

Senator BARNETT—That is fine. Thanks very much.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for appearing before us today, Mr Watt.

Mr Watt—Thank you, Madam Chair.

[11.12 am]

PECK, Ms Dianne, Acting General Manager, Student Learning Programs, Department of Education, Victoria

SUGGETT, Dr Dahle, Deputy Secretary, Office for Education Policy and Innovation, Department of Education, Victoria

FIRTH, Mr John, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority

CHAIR—Welcome. You have lodged submission No. 64 with the committee. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to that submission?

Ms Peck—No.

CHAIR—I now invite you to make a short opening statement, and then we will move to questions.

Dr Suggett—Thank you. I welcome the opportunity to do so. I will do that in the required five minutes and then, if my colleagues note that I have omitted anything, they will add it and then take questions from there. I want to just quickly take you through the key points in the submission, which is mainly around the structure of the curriculum and some of the outcomes. The Victorian curriculum is structured by two policy frameworks: the Victorian Essential Learning Standards and the postcompulsory curriculum framework. They apply across all Victorian schools. While there are different patterns in government, independent and Catholic schools, essentially I am talking across all the schools.

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards were adopted in all schools from 2006 for years preparatory through to 10. The standards define what students should know and be able to do at the different levels of compulsory schooling. The standards are set for achievement to be reached at the end of preparatory year, or prep, year 2 and years 4, 6, 8 and 10. They were developed through national and international benchmarking and exceedingly wide input from subject specialists and professional bodies, teachers and the wider community. In particular, they tackle the issue of the crowded curriculum, which was something that we and ministers had certainly heard about from communities and from teachers, by paring back the curriculum framework and stating very clearly what essential learning is for the key stages of schooling. For example, in preparatory to year 2, the core focus is on literacy, numeracy, the arts, physical education and interpersonal skills. That is the essential framework for those years.

As well, the standards state clearly what each standard requires in student achievement. They require schools to plan their curriculum within that standards framework and to tailor what is taught in the classroom to meet the needs and circumstances of teachers. So it is a blend of a set of very explicit curriculum standards at levels and the imperative that the curriculum is tailored to the particular needs in the classroom and in the school.

The standards require the blending of three strands—and I know that in curriculum policy there are terms that differ throughout the country, and I will not go into those technical details—that hold the framework together. One is the disciplines: arts, English, languages other than English, humanities, mathematics and science. I note, because I presume it is an area of interest for you, that in the humanities Victoria has replaced the study of society and the environment with geography, history and economics. The disciplines are the core of the curriculum. The second strand is the interdisciplinary skills of communication, thinking, design, creativity, problem solving and research. They extend the content beyond the formal disciplines. The third strand is the physical, personal and social learning skills—civics and citizenship, health, physical education and personal learning. Those three strands then, in a hierarchy, break down into the equivalent of subjects, and the framework is delivered in a practical way at the school level.

There is a parallel assessment and reporting system—and that was introduced at the same time or slightly after the Victorian Essential Learning Standards—which records students' progress against the standards. To enable teachers to assess students' progress against the standards, we have a series of progression points, which provide further guidance for teachers by showing examples of the typical steps in learning taken between the standards. For mathematics, English and science, we have gone into a finer grained series of development steps. So we have the standards as the overall framework and a series of progression points that show movement and development between the standards, and, for maths, English and science, we have a finer grained series of developmental steps and diagnostic tools. This combination of tools provides a road map for all students to reach the required standards and to be extended beyond their potential. Indeed, we expect

students to be achieving at a range of levels in the one classroom. Teachers have the tools to achieve that, and that is an area in which we are developing more support on the request of teachers. So it is really catering for a wide variety of achievement levels within the one classroom.

The assessment and reporting policy requires teachers to assess and report students' progress on an A to E scale against the state-wide standards each semester. The report also requires student and parent input, along with teacher judgement. The student achievement data is also collected in the centralised data system for the state of Victoria in government schools as part of the accountability system for government schools. Complementing the assessment and reporting scheme, we have state-wide testing in numeracy and literacy in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, and the results of those tests go to parents to indicate their children's standards against our state-wide standards and against the state-wide distribution of results and national benchmarks.

That is the framework for curriculum standards P to 10. Within that there is a particular focus on literacy and numeracy, which I know is also an interest you have, and the details of the scope of some of those initiatives are in the submission. They include additional staff, online diagnostic tools and explicit advice for teaching English and maths.

In 2005, the national report on schooling had Victoria at or above the national average in every domain and every year level. A recent commitment by the Victorian government is to provide every student with an academic number, and that will mean continuity in assessment and better monitoring of student progress. We anticipate in the future more comparative data and particularly data that follows students throughout their schooling and beyond. With the new technologies and the commitment to improve the information and communication technologies at the school level, that becomes a more attainable objective.

In the postcompulsory programs—and I will move through this quickly—we have the Victorian Certificate of Education, and that is recognised internationally as an outstanding qualification. It includes the general education components as well as vocational education and training qualifications. We have approximately 30 per cent of our VCE students studying a VET subject. In 2003, we introduced the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, referred to as VCAL, and that has grown 240 per cent since its introduction, from enrolments of 5,000 through to just over 12,000 in 2006 and rising. We also have the International Baccalaureate that was accredited in 2006 by the Victorian Qualifications Authority as a Victorian senior secondary certificate, and approximately 600 students would be studying that across all the systems.

To promote participation in the postcompulsory years, we have a range of support structures and initiatives. In particular, we have 31 local learning and employment networks, most chaired by industry or other community members, that facilitate students' pathways between the systems and broker partnerships. We have extensive careers and transitions advice. We have funding for each school in the government system and in TAFE for an initiative which is around individual learning plans, managed individual pathways, which is really a counselling mechanism. That covers all students and all schools at the senior level, and we have a series of programs of youth transition support workers. We have extensive support to enable young people to negotiate the pathways between the various systems and between the various offerings. We also have a funded guarantee of a place in TAFE for young people aged 20 and under who have not completed a year 12 or equivalent. So, in fact, there is a youth guarantee for a place in either a school or a TAFE institute for year 12 or equivalent qualification.

Our postcompulsory completion rate for 15- to 19-year-olds is the highest in the country, with a rate of 81.4 per cent in 2005, compared with the Australian average of 76 per cent. In 2005, 85 per cent of Victoria's 20- to 24-year-olds had completed year 12 or equivalent, compared with 82.9 per cent in 1999. That is higher than the national average of 82.9 per cent, so it is a distinctive feature of the Victorian system that the postcompulsory completion rate and quality is very good.

We have a very extensive student exit survey population study, called On Track. The percentage of year 12 completers for all schools from last year who enrolled in university has increased from 46.1 per cent in 2003 to 47.4 per cent in 2007. If you take into account the number of young people who defer a university place, it probably takes us over 50 per cent, which is a pretty good standard.

With regard to the terms of reference about comparing standards, in developing the Victorian Essential Learning Standards we benchmarked those standards against 14 international and national jurisdictions. We published the standards in March 2005, and through the remainder of 2005 we had a validation process with input from the profession, as well as comparability studies in five main subject areas and scrutiny of the international achievement tests—the TIMSS and the PISA tests. In international comparisons Victoria

generally performs the same as the rest of Australia, and Australia performs well internationally. You would be well aware of those performances, which have Australia mostly in the top ranks.

I want to mention the report titled *The future of schooling in Australia* that we highlighted at the beginning of our submission. It is a report by the states and territories in April 2007. It was chaired by Professor Peter Dawkins, who is the Secretary of the Victorian Department of Education. It foreshadows a sharpened national purpose for schooling. In particular, it highlights national curriculum standards and improvements in performance monitoring.

CHAIR—Are you happy to table that?

Dr Suggett—Yes.

CHAIR—The committee has agreed to accept that. How is the availability of specialist teachers in the literacy and the special education areas holding up in Victoria?

Dr Suggett—I will ask Dianne Peck to comment on this.

Ms Peck—Could I ask you to clarify what you mean by 'specialist literacy teachers'.

CHAIR—In the sense of children with disabilities, for example, who are taking part in the normal school curriculum. I do not mean special education groups or schools; I mean special education and literacy.

Dr Suggett—So the question is about the number of them?

CHAIR—Yes, the availability.

Dr Suggett—We would probably have to take that on notice in terms of precise availability.

CHAIR—Yes, if you would. And, as well as the numbers, would you comment on whether you are experiencing shortages. Also, I note with approval, as I am sure Senator Fifield will, the policy of expanding—or minimising I should say—SOSE into history, geography and economics. As a former history teacher I certainly applaud that. If generalist teachers want to specialise in a particular subject, does the department have a policy of funding them to take a course in order to teach a particular subject?

Dr Suggett—Yes, there are a range of professional learning opportunities for teachers. Funding for government schools in Victoria is holistic in terms of a student resource package. That was a significant change made a number of years ago—probably in 2004. In that, there is a proportion of funds that the school allocates to meet the needs of individual teachers. That is a very strong area in terms of professional learning. There are also discrete employment initiatives run as part of the human resource policy of the department. Then there are initiatives that the Victorian Institute of Teaching pursues. Dianne, do you want to add anything to that?

Ms Peck—There are certainly discrete programs, such as the Career Change Program, which is partially for people who have been in other occupations and want to move into the department. Then there are programs offered for LOTE—languages other than English—and so on. It depends on the particular area.

Dr Suggett—We are currently examining a strategy for increasing the number of mathematics and science teachers. That is in development at this point. There was commitment made in the past Victorian government budget for additional funds for that purpose. But, as I said, there is a very strong pool of funds that we go to.

CHAIR—Would that be to recruit mathematics and science teachers or to further train the ones that you already have?

Dr Suggett—We have not developed the recommendations as yet, but we expect it will be a mix. We have found industry very willing to engage with us in innovative approaches to improving both the quality and the number. The Governor of Victoria convened a roundtable a number of weeks ago with industry and community, and with leading scientists and tertiary education providers, to look at innovations we might make in terms of improving the quality of mathematics and science.

CHAIR—Yesterday Ms Meyer, the former parent representative on the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, appeared as a witness before the committee. Her child was at school here in Victoria. She had specific complaints about her child being taught literacy given that, by the time he was in grade 5, she realised he was not able to read or really write. Her general complaint was that the national benchmark for literacy tests in grades 3, 5, 7 and 9—and these are her words—'is routinely manipulated by state governments so that a majority of students always meet the benchmark regardless of what their actual capabilities might be'. How would you respond to that claim?

Dr Suggett—I would ask my colleague John Firth to respond.

CHAIR—I do not expect you to take Ms Meyers's case in particular, just to respond in terms of her comments.

Mr Firth—I will explain how the results are reported. At the moment each state conducts its own state-wide literacy and numeracy test. We run what is called the AIM in Victoria. That is run by the VCAA. The results of that are published against the agreed national minimum proficiency benchmark. At the moment in the national testing there is only one benchmark, and it is a minimum proficiency one. It is admittedly not at a spectacularly high level. The point of establishing a minimum proficiency is to give a warning sign, if you like, that if a student is below that then they genuinely need additional support. So typically we have seen figures in the reports showing that in the high 80s to 90 per cent of students at most levels reach the benchmark. They are very consistent figures around the country. They vary up and down by one or two per cent by and large, but they are reasonably consistent. The Northern Territory, because of its particular characteristics, performs less well than the rest of the country. But most of the rest of the states and territories bubble up around the average. These are tests that are set by experts against the standards that we all have. There is certainly no manipulation of the data. They are objectively marked. They are subject to quality assurance processes. The data are published freely back to schools. Schools get detailed feedback from us. In addition to what the parent reports get, they get information about every student's response on every question, and they are able to use that for diagnostic purposes. So it is a transparent process as far as schools are concerned. I am not quite sure what the origin of that sort of comment is. But from my perspective it is run according to standard international assessment processes and we use experts to do it.

CHAIR—If the parent were particularly keen to learn more about their child's performance, is it possible for them to learn that from the school?

Mr Firth—Yes.

CHAIR—So that every detail, if necessary, of the child's performance could be communicated?

Mr Firth—We make available a service that we call the AIM data service, which gives detailed information. As I say, we can track individual student's responses question by question. That data is available to schools.

CHAIR—I think about three weeks ago in the *Age*—which, being a Victorian, I read every day—there was a report that some schools in our western suburbs are not doing as well; and I expect you know the report to which I am referring. I take your point that every effort is being made, but what particular resources are you using in those schools to bring them up to the standard of the schools in the rest of the state?

Dr Suggett—I will not quantify those resources, but there is a very wide range of both policy positions—policy and strategies for underperforming schools—and funding that are targeted to the areas of most need. Then the funding that is targeted is to be used in certain ways. So there are two ways that that is managed. There are then the systemic structures around the accountability system and school reviews that apply everywhere and that are then targeted to those schools.

There is a particular initiative that gives additional financial and leadership support to those schools to work through their performance issues. One particular approach to supporting those schools and other areas where the viability of Victorian schools is declining, often through demographic changes, is to link the considerable infrastructure funds that were announced in the past budget to what we call regeneration of schools in a locality. In the Broadmeadows area of Melbourne, we have 17 schools going down to nine. I think I am right on those figures. It might be 19 going down to seven. Those schools are re-forming into an arrangement that will improve viability and performance. To build critical mass, these schools have agreed to merge where they are too small to provide a rich curriculum, to come together in these newer arrangements with new buildings, new technology and new leadership plans to go forward and improve their performance. There are a very wide range of approaches that we are taking to improve performance. I think that you would know from international research on this that there is no one hit that works in terms of schools in areas where there is low socioeconomic status and a mix of students.

CHAIR—This problem is not new, of course, but are you reasonably satisfied through the accountability mechanisms that everything possible is being done to assist education in those regions?

Dr Suggett—I cannot speak for my ministers but I would say that we continue to research very closely what works for those schools and continue to examine how to boost performance and to retain the high levels of equity that we know our international competitors have achieved.

Senator BARNETT—Thank you for your submission. Does rewarding of excellence for teacher performance happen in Victoria? If it does, what criteria do you use and what criteria should you use?

Dr Suggett—We cannot comment on future policy that ministers may wish to make. Dianne, are we able to comment on—

Ms Peck—There is certainly a performance appraisal system in every school. Every teacher in every government school undergoes performance appraisal which is managed at the school level. There are criteria around that; however, they vary at the school level in terms of how schools actually look to the evidence that teachers bring forward. One of the initiatives that have recently been introduced in Victoria as part of the blueprint that we talked about is the performance and development culture. That is a system that obviously sets about developing a culture where schools have to be externally accredited as to whether they meet the criteria. Part of that, getting back to the question, is a real emphasis on teachers using student data, student feedback and a range of mechanisms to look at their practice and how they are going and they would then discuss that with the person who is doing their appraisal. There has been quite a strong move in concert with international work, I think, on the need to use student data more strongly within schools to look at where students are achieving, where they are stressed, where they are not making progress and, therefore, as a teacher, what I am doing with that data to better monitor student progress and intervene when needed. Obviously, within Victoria there are a range of different classifications of teachers, which is similar to other systems.

Senator BARNETT—Are the criteria set? Are they known?

Ms Peck—Yes, there are broad areas that schools work against.

Senator BARNETT—Is that something that perhaps you could take on notice and send to the committee?

Ms Peck—We could get the information from HR.

Senator BARNETT—You referred to the testing earlier and the parents' right to know the information; the results of 3, 5, 7 and 9 do go back to the parents. Do you have a position on benchmarking and the release of that information publicly? Do you support the release of that information? There has been some debate in the last few days about league tables and things like that. With respect to parents' right to know and the release of that information for my child and the performance of the school, what is your policy position?

Dr Suggett—Perhaps John could reiterate the data availability and then we will talk about the school—

Mr Firth—We do not publish school-by-school results for 3, 5, 7 and 9. Parents get their own students' reports. The report identifies the individual student's performance against the Victorian standards and the national benchmark. They also get information on their individual reports which indicates what the state-wide distribution has been, so there are indications of the 10th percentile, the 90th percentile and the state-wide average. The student's performance is plotted against each of those so that parents can see where the student lines up against the state-wide distribution as well as against—

Senator BARNETT—Why don't you publish them for the schools?

Mr Firth—It is the Victorian government position that they not be published.

Senator BARNETT—Do know the reason for that? If you cannot expand on the reason, that is fine, but I thought you might know the reason for it.

Dr Suggett—No, I cannot expand on that.

Ms Peck—It might be worth noting the new student report cards in Victoria, because they are different to what there is in many other systems. Certainly in government and Catholic schools, which do the same policy for every area within the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, and which Dr Suggett took you through, parents receive information on a graphic, showing where their student is up to. There is a band showing the expected level of achievement and, in addition, for the first time ever—it will not happen until next year—where the child was 12 months previously. So there is certainly a move in areas other than English and mathematics, which is where the AIM data has been provided, to provide parents with much clearer data about where the child is up to for every area of learning with respect to expected state-wide standards. That is really coming into force now. It is the first time that we have done that—with the intent obviously of providing much clearer information to parents about where students are up to. Because it is against expected state-wide standards, it is not simply a school's view of what an A is or what an E is; they are linked very clearly to standards.

Dr Suggett—The final point I will make is that there is a new Victorian education and training act about to be proclaimed and, in that—I have not got the exact text or clause—there is a commitment to information for parents and information to promote choice. Hence, subsequent work will be examining how that is to be done.

Senator BARNETT—We will wait and see what that means. I want to ask about the VCAA. I have had a look at the website and I have had a look at the membership of the board. From looking at the website, I am not entirely clear about community and parent representation on the board. Could you clarify the composition of the board, who is on it, how many are on it and the parent representatives on the board?

Mr Firth—Under the act, the minister appoints members of the board for expertise, basically, so it is not a structured representational board, unlike some boards in other states. There are not a set number of categories or places for particular categories. It is an expert board. The minister takes into account potential members' experience and expertise, of course. There is a maximum of 15. At the moment, I think we have 13 members on the board.

Senator BARNETT—It is eight to 15, I understand.

Mr Firth—Yes. The chair at the moment is Professor Peter McPhee, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne and chief architect of the Melbourne model. We have members on the board at the moment from each of the sectors. We have members from primary and secondary schools. We have someone who is a TAFE director. We have a representative of the Koori community who is also an independent consultant. We have one other university person, but the majority are from schools education.

Senator BARNETT—So my question is: do you have any parent representatives on the board?

Mr Firth—We do not have any formal representatives of any organisations on the board. We do not have a parent representative per se. The office of the authority consults with key stakeholders, including the parents federation, the state school parents and the parents from independent schools, once a quarter. So we meet them four times a year, together with stakeholders from principals organisations, subject associations, school council organisations and so on.

Senator BARNETT—In terms of history being a core part of the curriculum, we have had the history summit, the agreement of the states and the federal minister and so on, and the reference group was announced yesterday by the federal minister. We had the history teachers here earlier today, and they were certainly very commending of Professor Blainey. I am just wondering what your thoughts are about the reference group. Do you see that as a good step forward to get on with the job in implementing the objectives from that summit and the agreement of the states and territories et cetera?

Dr Suggett—I guess in a formal way we have not digested that new sort of structure, but Australian history is an important part of our curriculum. Like the chair, I have a double major in history, so it is a very positive thing. John, do you want to outline briefly our Australian history commitment?

Mr Firth—We have not seen, other than the press release, the details of what was announced yesterday. But, as Dahle said, as part of the standards, Australian history is a compulsory part of years 9 and 10 in Victoria already, and it is also a significant part of the upper primary school curriculum in years 5 and 6. So, coupled with our requirements in civics and citizenship, there is a large amount of material that students are required to cover in the compulsory years in Victoria. We also have a year 12 Australian history subject—one of the minority of states that do that. I guess we would have to take on notice what the minister's comments might be in relation to the announcement of yesterday. We responded to the survey work and so on that was done as the first round of this, but we have not yet seen anything other than the press release about what was announced yesterday.

Senator FIFIELD—Firstly, can I congratulate you. As we have travelled around Australia taking evidence, the Victorian jurisdiction, with the New South Wales jurisdiction, has often been referred to as one of the more academically rigorous jurisdictions, particularly by the history and geography teachers. When we asked them to do a league table of the states, Victoria was up there with New South Wales, so congratulations.

I have the view that, when you are looking at academic standards, you also need to look at not just the curriculum but also the structure and architecture of the particular school sector. I think you have acknowledged that when talking about what is happening in Broadmeadows, bringing various campuses together. I think you are also doing that in Dandenong—

Dr Suggett—That is correct—

Senator FIFIELD—with a number of campuses, and I think that is a good thing. I think one of the pities in Victoria is that, in the eighties, under previous governments, there was a decision to take the school sector down a very monochromatic path where basically every secondary school was coeducational and comprehensive, and Victoria lost some of the diversity that it had. New South Wales did not go down that path. They maintained their diversity. If you will bear with me, I have a series of factual questions. I acknowledge that Victoria has taken some steps to reintroduce some diversity into the structure of the school sector. How many tech schools does Victoria have at the moment? Does it have any stand-alone technical colleges at secondary level?

Dr Suggett—Are you referring to the technical education centres that were announced in previous budgets? They are TAFE located facilities for young people.

Senator FIFIELD—Of school age?

Dr Suggett—Yes. Wangaratta would be a very good example, where the two schools realigned their work with the technical education centre built on the site of that TAFE. I have forgotten how many we have now—it is five TECs, I think. I can come back to you with that detail.

Senator FIFIELD—Five that are running, or five that are in process?

Dr Suggett—They are being established, because the funding was for new capital facilities. Their establishment is being negotiated in the localities in which they operate. Part of the provision policy at that postcompulsory level to expand the number of young people doing applied learning that has a vocational relevance and is in areas of skill shortage is to negotiate that in a locality so that we are getting really good leverage from the infrastructure and from the skills in the teaching and training workforce.

We also have a number of secondary schools, many schools, which are quite strong themselves in their offering of vocational education—VET in Schools—and the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning. Often that happens in a partnership with the local TAFE as well. So we are finding at the postcompulsory level that there is a great diversity of structures, as you would imagine, fitting the location and fitting the business profile, the industry profile, in certain areas and the mobility of young people. It is a very fertile area for us.

Senator FIFIELD—So that is five. Are there any plans for any more in addition to the five?

Dr Suggett—We are currently doing some major reviews around how the needs of young people are being met and how we are meeting the expectations of business—so obviously we could not commit further, but, as I said, it is a very fertile area—to better understand what will work. We are certainly looking at shaping the existing resources more to consciously look at skills shortage as well as look at retention. We have a challenging retention target, and we are working towards that. This is part of the solution.

Senator FIFIELD—How many students will there be in those five?

Dr Suggett—I cannot give you that answer—they are very high numbers—and I will take that on notice. The Holmesglen TAFE also has the equivalent of a technical education centre. It is a separate strand, with a different label, and it is well into the hundreds of young people. So they are high numbers.

Senator FIFIELD—Just turning to academically selective government high schools, obviously high-profile ones are Melbourne High School and MacRob. Is University High School academically selective to some extent or not? It is not? My question is: how many academically selective government high schools are there?

Dr Suggett—We have two existing—longstanding, highly credible, highly competitive—and there is a commitment to open a further two schools. The feasibility for precise location, building infrastructure and access policy is being established as we speak.

Senator FIFIELD—Are either of those two in regional areas, or are they both planned for Melbourne?

Dr Suggett—They are intended for metropolitan Melbourne, including outer.

Ms Peck—There is also the Select Entry Accelerated Learning Program, which is again a school’s choice. It operates in a number of schools across the state. That is a year 7 select enrolment: it will be operating within mainstream schools, but with a particular cohort who have been selected through the procedures that the schools put in place. There are recommendations around the testing and so on that goes on. So that is an attempt across the state to provide for that diversity of student need.

Senator FIFIELD—Are there currently any secondary schools which specialise in particular disciplines? I know South Australia has a maths and science high school; Queensland has one, and I think it is in the process

of establishing some other schools that specialise in particular disciplines. Does Victoria have anything apart from the Victorian College of the Arts, which I think has years 10, 11 and 12, or it might just be 11 and 12?

Dr Suggett—And that is a longstanding, successful—

Senator FIFIELD—That is a longstanding thing, but are there any other schools which do not just have a tendency towards focusing on something but are specifically designated as a maths and science high school or a performing arts high school?

Dr Suggett—Yes, we have Maribyrnong sports college—a commitment was made in the last budget for extensive capital works—nominated as a specialist school. We have the Monash maths and science school being developed in conjunction with Monash University. It is not the same as the South Australian school, but it is in that ballpark. I am not sure of the number, but we have a series of primary schools that are bilingual—Japanese, French, German—and which are very well known internationally. We have three existing specialist science centres. The Gene Technology Access Centre, connected with the wonderful facilities at the University of Melbourne, is located at University High School. The space science centre is similarly connected with RMIT and is at Strathmore. The environmental science school, EchoLink, is at Bacchus Marsh. We have announced two further specialist science centres, and they become a resource for students and for teachers. We are looking at further issues around specialisation. Given the commitment to choice and the recognition that we need diverse provisions in a locality or a region in the state to meet the needs of all, the question of what the specialist offerings are is clearly on the table.

Senator FIFIELD—In relation to single sex government schools, I believe there is MacRob and Mentone Girls' Secondary College. Are there any other single sex government schools?

Ms Peck—There are other single sex girls' schools. There is only one single sex boys' school remaining in the system, and that is Melbourne High School.

Mr Firth—There are seven girls' schools.

Senator FIFIELD—There are seven girls' schools and one boys' school. Are there any plans for more single sex schools?

Dr Suggett—Not that we know about—at this point there is no commitment.

Senator FIFIELD—I want to turn to curriculum. You mentioned the cluttered curriculum, which is something we have heard a lot about. How many subjects are currently caught in years 11 and 12 in Victoria?

Mr Firth—Most students would take six subjects in year 11 and five in year 12—that would be a typical program. We have about 40-odd VCE subjects available for schools to choose from—it is about 44. If you count languages—and Victoria has a huge commitment to languages—we have 50-odd languages available at year 12 level, but they are mainly through specialist provision. Then there is the whole range of VET programs that is available as well.

Senator FIFIELD—Does SOSE cease to exist as a subject?

Mr Firth—SOSE never existed as a subject in Victoria.

Senator FIFIELD—It never existed. Hallelujah!

Mr Firth—There is no SOSE in Victoria. We have history, geography and economics. When I say that it never existed, there was a SOSE subject back in the mid-1990s as an overarching descriptor of a learning area. But we moved back to history, geography and economics in the late 1990s. It was under the rubric of SOSE, with SOSE consisting of these things in Victoria. Now we have dispensed with SOSE altogether as a title.

Senator FIFIELD—Are there any plans to cut down the 44 subjects on offer?

Mr Firth—We review them regularly. Each subject in Victoria has a fixed period of accreditation; we do not have open-ended accreditations. When an accreditation period is coming up for expiry—and particularly for those subjects that do not have huge enrolments—one of the first questions to look at is whether there is a need to continue the subject and whether there is the possibility of some rationalisation. We have deleted some subjects in the past which have fallen right down to, say, 100 or so enrolments state wide, because they were not viable. We had a general science subject which pretty much nobody took. Australian studies was eventually dispensed with. There are some subjects that reach the end of their term and are not reaccredited.

Senator FIFIELD—Thank you for that. You will have heard no doubt this morning that Minister Della Bosca has declined the offer to have a member of the New South Wales Board of Studies on the reference

group for the teaching of Australian history. It looks like there is a vacancy on that reference group. Is that a vacancy Victoria would be happy to offer to fill?

Mr Firth—I would have to discuss that with my minister. I have eminently suitable staff available, but I am not sure what the Victorian government's view is.

Senator FIFIELD—It would be a crying shame if Victoria missed out on that sort of opportunity. I will not push you to answer that question. Finally, in the area of music education—and you would be aware of this statistic—only about a quarter of kids in the government school sector Australia wide have an exposure to a formal music education program as part of their schooling. Do you know what the figure is for Victoria—the percentage of students who have an exposure to music education?

Dr Suggett—We could take that on notice. There is an instrumental music initiative that funds instrumental music teachers.

Ms Peck—There would not be any data on music as such.

Dr Suggett—As a subject.

Ms Peck—Instrumental music is an additional program.

Senator FIFIELD—So music education is not a core part of a Victorian student's education in primary or secondary?

Mr Firth—There is a compulsory arts component, but there is some discretion at the school level in the performing arts area as to what combination of music, drama and dance components that is met through. Different schools, according to their expertise, priorities and access to resources, would choose different combinations. Performing arts is a compulsory part, but it is not absolutely necessary that they do music.

Senator FIFIELD—Thank you for that. That has been helpful in filling in some gaps for me.

Senator BARNETT—I asked this question in Queensland, and there was a reasonably lengthy response and I was not sure if it was a yes or a no. Do you support children learning the times table and, if so, by what age?

Ms Peck—I do not think there would be a difficulty in any school supporting students to learn the times table, and schools would be doing it. We are perhaps more concerned that students understand what the times table means. There has been an enormous amount of work done, particularly in Victoria, on early years numeracy. We had a huge research project here a number of years ago that did extensive research, and we have a number of academics here who are also very well known in that area. As well, in our maths developmental continuum, we have been looking at—and it is certainly expressed in the standards—what the critical understandings are that students need to have as they move forward, at all levels of schooling. Certainly, understanding multiplication is one of those critical understandings. We know that if they do not understand multiplication they are unlikely, for example, to ever get to algebra. There is a real link between understanding algebra and multiplication. We would certainly support rote learning of multiplication tables but, more importantly, we would support understanding what that multiplication actually means.

CHAIR—I must say that the maths lecturers who were presenting to us in Queensland immediately turned the tables on the senators by asking us to calculate fractions. Some time later on the plane to Melbourne, some of us had worked it out. There are obviously basics lacking in our education! As a Victorian I am really pleased that we do well in the national survey. Best wishes. Thanks for attending today.

[12.08 pm]

THOMAS, Ms Jan, Executive Officer, Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute and International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics

GAUDRY, Professor Garth Ian, Director, International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics

McINTOSH, Ms Janine Louisa, Schools Project Officer, International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics

CHAIR—Welcome. Thank you for your submission. Do you wish to make any amendments or alterations to it?

Prof. Gaudry—No.

CHAIR—I now invite you to make a short opening statement, and then we will move to questions.

Prof. Gaudry—Thank you very much. I would like to kick off by saying that everything that underlines our submission is the knowledge and belief that Australian students are as clever as any in the world. I can certainly base that claim on my personal experience of having worked and taught in other countries at the tertiary level, so I am able to make that kind of comparison.

I would like to make an underlying point to possible discussion. Essentially, in the question of success of our school system, everything depends on the quality of the teachers, provided of course that those teachers have clear, unambiguous and useable guidelines, road maps, of material that they are meant to be covering in their classes and that their day-to-day lives are manageable and not overburdened by extreme bureaucracy or anything like that.

The third point I would like to make is about the International Centre of Excellence for Education in Mathematics. Naturally, the philosophy we have underpins our submission and what we are going to say to you today. First of all, we are funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training. Fortunately, in our contract we are allowed a great deal of independence, and we appear before you today as independent witnesses. We have been able to carry out the programs we put forward and, at the school level, those are based on a simple premise.

The simple premise is that the way to maintain and improve standards in school education—and I am talking about academic subjects; I am not going to stray into phys ed or areas that are not known to me—is to have high-quality partnerships between subject experts and the best teachers you can lay your hands on. That, in essence, is what we are doing in our program. The box of papers you saw me carry in is not meant as a threat; there will be no exams later or anything like that! It is in case you are interested in having some of the material we have produced.

We are working with schools throughout Australia, and we have about 30,000 students in our pilot program. We have so far produced pilot and final books in years 5 through to 10 for the whole of Australia, consistent with the national curriculum guidelines as agreed by MCEETYA at one of its fairly recent meetings. So we have a great deal of experience in what is going on in the schools that have put up their hands to work with us. We are very pleased with the feedback we are getting from teachers. They are a key part of this partnership because we get feedback from them about what we have written.

Our writing teams consist of academics and very experienced teachers, one of them being Janine, who is on my right. She is a fabulously experienced and good primary school teacher. We feel that that model is one that needs to be supported and expanded upon, not just in our subject area but more generally.

CHAIR—Thank you. Do you wish to add anything, Ms McIntosh or Ms Thomas?

Ms McIntosh—No.

Ms Thomas—Only to say that I was on the working party for the national strategic review of mathematics in Australia, and I have brought some copies of the strategic review because it underpins issues relating to teacher supply and some of those other key issues relating to standards.

CHAIR—That will be very helpful. Should I take it that as a result of the MCEETYA decision these books which were developed have gone into primary and secondary schools in every state?

Prof. Gaudry—We began our work before MCEETYA held its meeting and before that work was undertaken. Our people, Janine McIntosh and Michael Evans—unfortunately he cannot be here today because

he is on leave—did a thorough study of the curriculum requirements of all of the Australian states and territories. We made sure that what we wrote was consistent with those and that it covered all of them. I am not saying it was consistent in the sense of being a carbon copy or that it reproduced attitudes but that it covered the material required by all of the states and territories. The assessment of what we had done against what MCEETYA agreed to came later, and we were confident all throughout that we would get a tick in the box, as indeed we did, because Janine and Michael were in fact consulted by the people who were drawing up the document. So our expertise was made available to the people working on that, particularly here in Victoria.

CHAIR—I would like to ask you about some points of view that we were presented with in Queensland, where the mathematics lecturers from James Cook University spoke to us at length about the fact that many of their first-year students were unable to cope with the maths syllabus. You are probably familiar with this.

Prof. Gaudry—Yes.

CHAIR—I am particularly interested in your view that there should be greater collaboration between the secondary and tertiary sectors because of the vicious cycle of no longer requiring prerequisites, subjects being dropped, and then the universities not being able to go on with it. How widespread do you think that particular situation is?

Prof. Gaudry—I think it is quite widespread. It is particularly acute in James Cook. I know at least one of the people concerned, and I have been in contact with all of them and probably the ones that put in a submission to your committee. The situation in Queensland is particularly acute. There are no external examinations in Queensland, and this is something I am very strongly opposed to. I think you can only keep a system honest if you have external examinations. There is an inevitable drop, and there are always arguments about something being too hard or not worth examining. Things become stereotyped, and that is probably the worst thing.

A good external examination system draws on the expertise of subject experts and the best teachers, which is the sort of model I was talking about. To a large extent that has been true in New South Wales. I know a great deal about that because I was a professor at the University of New South Wales for 10 years. That model worked very well, although I think it is now creaking quite a bit. The examinations for the HSC are at really quite a high level, especially the highest level, of course, which is extremely good.

You contrast that with the situation in Queensland, where the examinations and other assessments are all internal. I can recount to you what I was told by a senior mathematics teacher who was working—well I should not disclose too much, but obviously an extremely good person—and showed me the examinations that were set in his school, which had to be vetted in some formal sense by the Queensland authorities. In the course of that conversation, he told me that 80 per cent of the questions on the exam paper had to be things that the students had done, literally, before. I had a look at the examination questions themselves, and I think it was two questions that formed the other 20 per cent. They are called indicator questions or something like that, because the higher grades are based on those particular questions. By New South Wales standards, they were abysmal. Probably the highest level question would be considered a routine question, essentially theory, in three-unit mathematics in New South Wales.

CHAIR—It would be your view that external examinations at the end of year 12 are a much more independent way of viewing student achievement?

Prof. Gaudry—Absolutely essential.

Ms Thomas—I will just follow up on what Garth was saying. Until September last year, I was also in a part-time position as Executive Officer for the Australian Mathematical Society. As part of my role, I convened the annual heads of mathematical sciences departments each year, so I have had contact with the mathematicians and statisticians across Australia for a long period of time. At an individual state level, you get bodies like the years 11 and 12 authorities here picking off one or two people to work with in the universities with years 11 and 12, but it is not uniform. I cannot remember a single occasion in that 10 years where any sort of national review into mathematics or mathematics education was conducted where the maths society was actually asked to provide information. There has been a serious disconnect in Australia between the people writing school mathematics syllabuses, assessment tasks and examinations and the discipline people in the universities, who often have very broad knowledge about areas that need to be built up for success at the university level. There is a lack of consistency, but there is also a lack of dialogue going on at that sort of level. It is very disturbing, and it is not the way to build up standards in this country.

CHAIR—So—without putting words in your mouth—you would like to see much greater collaboration?

Ms Thomas—Undoubtedly. Until we had AMSI and ICE-EM there was very little involvement of any mathematicians in looking at a lot of issues. We have been able to do it through AMSI and ICE-EM, but we are still in a situation where, for example, in just the last week or so we have been asked to comment on best practice in numeracy teaching—I hate the word; I would prefer that we were saying 'mathematics teaching' and 'best practice in mathematics teaching'—but all of the people involved in the committee that is doing that are education people. There is not a single discipline expert in that group. It has a reference group of people from the states who do not even necessarily have any background in mathematics. I contrast that with the history committee which came up earlier in the day. I commend the way in which that committee has been put together. It seems to me to have a balance of discipline people and people with some sort of background in education. I think they will come up with a very good document.

CHAIR—And they obviously have had a degree of involvement in not only the history summit but also the way in which history curriculum is formulated.

Ms Thomas—They have all the right connections, both into the academic discipline and into the teaching discipline. We need to start working with really good teachers and mathematicians and the occasional maths educator, but they have to be part of a tripartite arrangement. There are three groups here. At the moment it is controlled by one group, and it is not working. They are disconnected from what is happening in modern mathematics and disconnected from both the way in which mathematics operates in the vocational education sector and particularly how it operates within other disciplines such as biology and the finance sector. So there is this disconnect between what is happening in school mathematics and what is happening in the real world across the whole use of mathematics—from the everyday use of it through to advanced research, but particularly in the cross-disciplinary areas.

CHAIR—We did have an interesting comment yesterday, but before I go on with my question: is it also the case in New South Wales that there is a lack of connect between the two groups?

Prof. Gaudry—I had quite a lot to do with the Board of Studies in New South Wales when I was there. I was involved in the revision of the K to10 mathematics syllabus as an adviser and a critic, and I know a great deal about the recent revision of the year 12 mathematics subjects. I do not know whether I can paint a clear and succinct picture for you of what has now happened. In direct answer to your question, let me say that up until quite recently—and that means about 15 or maybe 20 years ago—there was a very good structure in New South Wales, mixing the best teachers and subject experts from the university. That produced the quality that I was referring to before. But there has been quite a noticeable shift in New South Wales. For example, in the review of the HSC mathematics, the reference group—I think that is what it is called—which contained the experienced teachers and university academics all took a very strong position on the amount of statistics that should be taught in the most advanced courses. In fact, they wanted it confined to courses other than the most academically demanding ones. That position was backed up by a group of advisers headed by Gavin Brown, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney. So there was absolute unanimity in that regard and also with regard to the use of graphics calculators, but the recommendations that came out from behind the dark doors totally ignored that and put forward a syllabus draft which places a very heavy emphasis, an inappropriate emphasis, on the teaching of baby statistics.

That is what you are grappling with; this is the real-life difficulty of being effective when you are willing to work and to do good things in the interests of the education system broadly speaking. I suppose everyone would claim that anyway, but quite a degree of clandestine manipulation goes on right throughout Australia; it is not really an open process.

CHAIR—We also had the comment from a witness yesterday that in his view 80 per cent of the present content of year 10 maths could be done away with. I did not ask him, but I assume he meant that only 20 per cent has a degree of academic value. From your knowledge of the year 10 maths curriculum, what is your response to that?

Prof. Gaudry—I think it is an exaggerated position, no matter which state's paper curriculum you look at. I do not think that is a sustainable position. I would say there is too much emphasis on rather trivial aspects, and I refer again to what is called 'chance and data and statistics'. I am not for one moment seeking to diminish the importance of those areas, but there is a very strong push from educationists to spend a lot of time playing around badly with areas that are in principle quite difficult, even from kindergarten. It pops up in every syllabus and there is really not much to say. Suppose you start at year 6 and go through for a couple of years of secondary school. You are starting to repeat yourself because to go much further you require serious mathematical tools. I would make comments like that but certainly not the extreme comments.

Ms Thomas—Was that statement made in the context of, 'We have calculators and therefore you do not need to do a lot of this mathematics'? This dominates a lot of people's thinking—that somehow or other the availability of technological tools does away with the need to understand the concepts underpinning these things. That is wrong, in fact. Everyone is saying that you need to have better conceptual skills and better knowledge of core mathematics because otherwise you do not understand the tools that you are using, and you cannot use them appropriately without that knowledge.

CHAIR—That witness did not, but on the other hand the earlier witnesses I referred to from James Cook University certainly made that point: that it was now assumed that because students had calculators they did not need to understand the basic concepts of maths. They made exactly the point that you are making.

Ms Thomas—You have heard about the introduction of the technology-free exam in Victoria, I assume?

CHAIR—Do tell us.

Ms Thomas—Victoria led the way in allowing graphics calculators into year 12. I think they were doing a very good job of it. They had some very good people involved, and they constructed good questions that having a calculator could help but a bright kid could do without a calculator. Increasingly, as that became embedded in year 12, the students were saying, 'I don't really need to worry too much about the actual concepts.' So it was moving to more and more reliance on the calculators, which were getting more and more powerful. So last year was the first year where they reintroduced into Victoria a technology-free exam as part of one of the harder year 12 subjects.

The teachers welcomed it with open arms because it meant that the students once again had to start thinking about what they were doing and be able to do things with pen and paper as well. There has been no adverse reaction to that at all, and we believe that the IB exam is going to pick up on that and introduce a technology-free exam. They are also looking at that possibility with their new exams in WA. It really has focused curriculum in Victoria again on how much the students actually understand the key concepts. Mathematics has got to be about that; it cannot just be playing around with ideas and shoving a few things into a calculator. If these students are really going to compete internationally they have to understand key concepts.

Senator FIFIELD—On the subject of curriculum, we have been talking a lot over recent days about league tables ranking schools. Would one of you care to rank the various jurisdictions with respect to their maths curricula? I am assuming that Queensland would be at the bottom, from what you have said, Professor Gaudry, but do you have a sense of the relative strength of the various jurisdictions in their maths curricula at secondary level?

Prof. Gaudry—I need to be a little careful in answering as broad a question as that. I can give you chapter and verse on years 11 and 12 because we did a detailed study of that, and we have copies with us if you would like to see them. This study was done by Peter Brown of the University of New South Wales and Frank Barrington of the University of Melbourne, both of whom are actually former high school teachers but work in universities. They have had a huge amount to do with first-year students, so they have the right sort of background. We pointed to the strengths and weaknesses of the various states at that level.

I will not go on too much with that except to say that, certainly at that level, the New South Wales curriculum stood out head and shoulders, particularly by virtue of their four-unit mathematics course, which is an extremely high quality course and certainly demanding. We found very considerable deficiencies in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia. That is in a nutshell. A comparison of the primary syllabuses was undertaken about two or three years ago. Janine can speak about this.

Ms McIntosh—The comparison showed that, if you are looking at curriculum content, the differences are in when the subject matter is taught. Something might be taught in year 8 in South Australia but in year 7 elsewhere and so forth. What is difficult is the degree to which teachers are required to interpret the material that is put before them. As each iteration of the syllabus revisions has come through in Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania, that interpretation has been more demanding of the teacher. The curriculum has been a bit more vague; it has been a little bit more constructivist; it has used a lot more pedagogical and psychological jargon than we might have been used to before, even though there was a lot of that in versions before.

I was a curriculum writer for the CSF2, which was the 1995 revision of the Victorian curriculum. Where that was clear and there were marked things, which you got through as a teacher, I feel the latest iteration is less clear, has more jargon and mathematical terms that are not in common use in schools and yet, I think, does not meet the mathematical standard of the previous iteration. It just does not seem to get there. So I agree:

New South Wales is quite sturdy. The South Australian curriculum is easy for a teacher to use because, if you are looking at year 6, it has the year 5 curriculum and the year 7 curriculum side by side so that you can see that there is some progression. Victoria lacks that. Queensland lacks that completely. I cannot see a vertical thread through, say, a geometry topic or something like that. The content is there, and that is what we have based our materials on. It is often there for a teacher to dig out, interpret and pull apart. Teachers do not have time to do that or the expertise in most cases. A junior secondary teacher may not even be a qualified mathematics teacher. I would not like to put a figure on it, but I know there are a number of schools up to year 10 which do not have qualified mathematics teachers teaching the mathematics subjects. That is a bit of a worry.

Senator FIFIELD—It is over 20 years since I did senior secondary maths in the HSC in New South Wales, but there is a choice of four-unit maths, three-unit maths, two-unit maths and two-unit general maths such that in effect students self-stream. If you have a particular aptitude, you can be extended by doing three-unit or four-unit maths. If, like me, you found maths a challenge, you could find a level that was right for you. Is one of the problems in other jurisdictions that they do not have the diversity of maths subjects so that students can be stretched or can have more focus on the fundamentals where they need that?

Prof. Gaudry—There is a little truth in what you are saying. For instance, three-unit mathematics is a very important subject because the knowledge in that is critical to quantitative studies at university. Four-unit mathematics is very demanding. With regard to the difference in demand, you need to keep in mind the difficulty of the actual subject. Three-unit mathematics is a very good-quality course. It picks up the people who have reasonably good ability in mathematics but who are not absolutely the top students. It is very valuable from that point of view. It leaves them a little bit of freedom to do some other things, too. They can pick up some other things. The traditional picture is quite different. It is pretty much the case in all of the states—and it was certainly the case when I went to school—that you have two mathematics subjects of equal value. There is no reason why that should not—

Senator FIFIELD—Is that pure, applied or—

Prof. Gaudry—Not necessarily. It was not in my case. The second subject had more emphasis on applied mathematics and was quite closely related to physics, but it also contained substantial pure mathematics—much more advanced calculus, for example, and geometry than the first subject had. That is the situation in Victoria, where you have the specialist maths—that being the top course—worth the same as mathematical methods, which is the main university entrance course, I should say. But you have to qualify all that a bit, too, because in New South Wales and equally here there is another course again which is not calculus based. The one in New South Wales is called 'general mathematics'. Here it is called 'further mathematics'. These serve a certain important purpose, too. People who might be going into paramedical studies—not medicine or medical science—and a whole swag of different things will be catered for by that kind of subject. It is important to have, within reason, a spread—there is no doubt about that—because otherwise you compromise everybody.

Ms Thomas—Victoria did experiment with subjects at year 12 which were meant to be suitable for all students. It lasted for about 18 months. It was a disaster.

Senator FIFIELD—Not surprisingly. Turning to teacher education, are there particular issues in the educating of teachers to teach maths at university? Is there enough dialogue between the maths faculties at universities and the education faculties? Are there particular flaws there? Could you also tell me if you have a handle on the extent to which you have at schools people teaching maths who are not necessarily experts in that discipline—like PE teachers teaching maths, for instance?

Prof. Gaudry—Let me take up the last points in a constructive way. One of the objectives of what we do in ICE-EM, knowing the difficult situations in schools, is to write our materials in such a way that people who are not experts in the subject can learn and improve. We have some quite positive feedback—I do not want to put it too strongly, but some quite positive feedback. Indeed, we have had feedback from one physical education teacher.

Ms McIntosh—An arts teacher, an agricultural science teacher—I could list them all, and they are all completely inexperienced in mathematics but were thrown into year 7 or year 8 maths.

Prof. Gaudry—That is the actuality. It is very important to respond to that in a constructive manner and not be seen as a critic sitting on a fence, especially if you are a professional mathematician, as I am. That is one thing. To come back to the rest of your question, there is a fierce and rigid divide—a kind of no-go zone—

between the education faculty and the mathematics departments in virtually every university. There are individual instances—

Ms McIntosh—Individual people.

Prof. Gaudry—That is what I was going to say. For example, I know very well and work closely with a couple of people in education in New South Wales and, frankly, I think they are both extremely sensible and very good people. They were always very supportive of what I was trying to do—and, for that matter, vice versa. So it is not an absolute divide, but the broad picture is that the educationists want to keep mathematicians out of the picture. There is no question about that. As for the training of teachers—perhaps Janine will speak more about this because she did a lot of the work at the primary level—we did a study on that and produced a report for presentation to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Vocational Training. Perhaps Janine might like to talk about that—in particular, what is required for primary school teaching.

Ms McIntosh—One of the first projects I worked on when I came over to the international centre for excellence from a classroom was to look at the substantive mathematics content in a teacher-training course for primary teachers. Both Jan and I have experience in lecturing in mathematics education to primary teachers. We looked at state curriculum documents and those sorts of things to inform what we are doing—and the parliamentary inquiry certainly forced us to look very closely at the content. We found that, while there were subjects that were named ‘mathematics education’ in the wording of the course content as described on the web—which was the only source we had for that—a lot of it was not mathematics; it was preparing curriculum documents, writing a work program, targeting a particular learning need and so forth. So that was one concern we had. The other concern we had was that, at most of the universities across Australia, only between six and nine per cent of the units that are done in a teaching degree course are mathematics education subjects. I was quite shocked. I went to what is probably one of the better universities, which got up to around 12 per cent, I think. But, even in that course, a lot of it was preparing documents to get you ready for being a teacher in a classroom—having paperwork ready—and not necessarily understanding the developmental stages a child might go through or the mathematics that underlies those stages—and, to me, they are two different things. A lot of our primary teachers come in with a phobia of mathematics. They are not strong mathematicians to start with. There is not a lot in most courses to address those concerns. That certainly leaves a few gaps.

Ms Thomas—Can I come back to the review in regard to this question. The strength of mathematics in Australian universities and in the broader community depends on mathematics being taught by mathematics departments. If you are dealing with teacher education, biology or any other area, the curriculum development has to be in conjunction with those other discipline areas, and often it is valuable if there is shared teaching—in other words, if you are working with education people then the teaching may be shared between the mathematics department and the education people in a collaborative arrangement. But if you do not have those arrangements you end up with very poor quality mathematics that increasingly becomes entrenched and irrelevant to the modern world.

If you go to somewhere like Charles Darwin University, if they do not start employing mathematicians to teach their education students up there—which are a significant part of their enrolment—they will never have enough mathematicians on staff to be able to offer even the minimum degree. Until a year or so ago, they were at least able to put together a degree course. It was a very minimalist degree but at least a few people could actually graduate in mathematics from Charles Darwin University. They can no longer do that, so they cannot produce any of their own secondary teachers with a degree in mathematics. The students in the high school were already saying: ‘Why do mathematics? We have to go away to study it if we are any good at it.’ That is a big expense and some of them just cannot afford it. So we need to restore mathematics particularly in the regional and remote universities—universities with a huge number of student teachers. It is actually about building up mathematics as well as about building up mathematics within the education degrees, because it enables more employment of mathematicians and we can get to the stage where that is also supporting better mathematics options for the broader community and not necessarily just student teachers.

The international reviewers in particular could not believe the extent to which service teaching had drifted away from mathematics departments into all sorts of things, where it was often renamed and there was just-in-time teaching for that bit of a particular course. So that was one aspect of it. It was great that the recent budget upped the funding per mathematics student in universities. That needs to flow through to the mathematics departments, and there is no guarantee of that. Yes, there is more money per mathematics student, but it has to

now flow through to the mathematics departments. We also need the vice-chancellor to take some sort of leadership role in addressing what is international practice—that, if it is mathematics, it is controlled by the mathematical sciences departments. It does not necessarily have to be all taught by them, but the integrity of the courses has to be maintained by people who actually know what is going on in the mathematics world at the moment.

Senator BARNETT—Thank you. I have found the advice and evidence most useful and informative, and I really appreciate it. It is also concerning. We will take that on board. You referred to a couple of reports. I am not sure if it is the same one, but as a committee we would appreciate it if you are happy to table that. We have agreed to table that?

CHAIR—Yes.

Prof. Gaudry—There are two reports that I think are highly relevant. There is the one that is a comparison across the states of the syllabuses of year 12.

Senator BARNETT—When was that done?

Prof. Gaudry—Two years ago. It is pretty up to date. The other one, which has actually been updated in the last couple of months, deals with the enrolments in the different levels of mathematics courses across the spectrum we were talking about before. It showed, first of all, alarming differences among the states. I have to say, rather sadly, that those alarming differences are being smoothed out, to the detriment. In Victoria, for example, they were holding up extremely well in specialist mathematics, but there has been a precipitous decline in participation in that very important subject in Victoria. It has happened just since that report was done. I think there has been a further drop-off in other places as well.

You might well ask: why is that so? In our view the primary reason is that the universities are dropping the requirements. That is reason No. 1. Reason No. 2 is whether or not those subjects are being sufficiently rewarded relative to what I would think of as pretty soft subjects. If a student can get a high mark by doing the metaphorical underwater basket weaving, even though the person is very talented in mathematics they will do the underwater basket weaving. One of the members of our education advisory committee is deputy principal of a leading school in Melbourne. She cries on my shoulder every time she comes, and begs for help actually, about exactly this point. She wants the girls in her school to continue with the higher level of mathematics, but they—the parents and their advisers—are of course winkling out ways of finding easier credit. It is having a bad effect.

Senator BARNETT—Thank you very much for that. I look forward to perusing those reports. If there is any further information or evidence, as you have just indicated, that you want to take on notice to update the committee on the situation since those reports have been completed, obviously we would welcome that.

Prof. Gaudry—I can undertake to give you the updated figures. We have not put them up on our website yet, just through pressure of work. We have not got around to it yet. There is also a comparison with the International Baccalaureate, which may be of interest. We can give you both of those.

Senator BARNETT—Thank you for that. I take you back, Professor, to your comments. We talked about Queensland and the merit of an external assessment. I think you specifically referred to the critical importance of that, particularly at grade 12 or that year level. What about the other year levels? Would you agree with the external assessment approach? I just want to get that on the record, as well as your views on an independent objective external assessment.

Prof. Gaudry—I think external assessments generally keep the system honest. That is my personal view; it may not be totally shared by Janine and Jan. Let me refer to the United States in answer to your question. One of my very close colleagues in the United States, an excellent mathematician who is now retired, works in ghetto schools. He is a very good teacher. He said to me, ‘As much as I don’t like saying it’—and he was referring, I suppose, to his political leanings—‘I have to say that the No Child Left Behind testing in the United States has been extremely beneficial.’ It has its faults. You could practically write books about the subject. But having expectations, even if they are only testing the basic competencies and not looking at the highest level of achievement—which is the case in Australia, where the 5, 7 and 9 tests are not testing high-level stuff at all; they are basically looking at essential competence at a fairly ordinary level—is enough to cause people to concentrate a little and, if necessary, lift their game.

Ms McIntosh—There is also the trickle-down effect. Since having the calculator-free exam at year 12 in Victoria, there has been a trickle-down effect right down into years 7, 8 and 9. Schools are saying, ‘If that is the case at year 12 then we will have to do the same at years 7, 8 and 9 to prepare you so that you will be quite

capable of completing that exam when you get to year 12.' It does have an effect right through primary school. It has an effect on teacher competence as well.

Senator BARNETT—And you are concerned about that?

Ms McIntosh—No, I think it is a good thing. I think it means that if we are maintaining standards by asking teachers to look very carefully at what they are teaching at year 12 then we are also asking the year 11 teacher to look carefully at how they prepare the students for year 12, the year 10 teacher to prepare for year 11, and so forth. I think it is a good thing. It maintains the standard in two ways.

Senator BARNETT—I want to ask you about the parents' right to receive information on how their kids are going. They receive the results in years 5, 7, 9 et cetera. What about the results at the big picture level for the school and for the state? Do you think those results should be available to parents and to the public?

Prof. Gaudry—I think you have to be careful of the way you treat them. Perhaps Janine should give the main answer to this—although I am not going to shirk the question; I am not that kind of person. You have to be very careful not to be unfair to schools in disadvantaged areas. They generally do not get the better teachers—it is sad to say but it is often the case—and the students have adverse conditions in their homes and things like that. So I think you have to be sensitive to that. But in the broad, I think it is very important for people to know and to act upon obvious shortcomings in the performance of schools, generally speaking. How you do that, I am not sure. Janine has much more experience in this.

Ms McIntosh—I have seen the state-wide testing results used very successfully in a very small, struggling western suburbs school of 100 children where the principal has taken those results on board. People would say, 'These are the results for year 5 from four years ago,' or it would be year 5 from two years ago or whatever. He has said, 'Well, this is our school as a whole, we have moved up, down or sideways in this particular topic area, and we are going to use the results of this test to focus on our teaching and our learning for the next 12 months.' It has had incredibly positive results. The problem with that is that schools need teachers who can understand the results and then design a program that caters to the gaps in the students' understanding, but I have seen it used quite successfully at a school level. With support, it works quite well.

I would be a little concerned about publication of results like that, having worked in a western suburbs school and seen the effect of parents' perception of academic standards in that school, the move away from the school as those standards appeared to drop, and the hard work done by the teachers to get the standards back up again and turn things around. A simple change of principal turned it around so much that now the school is turning children away.

Ms Thomas—As Garth was saying, the biggest problem with testing is that we sometimes tend to do too much of it. I think less testing but with a lot more feedback to teachers probably works better because teachers want their schools to be successful and, if they are constantly preparing for the next test, then they end up looking at what might be on the next test rather than really looking at the problems that individual students might be having or ways in which they need to improve things across the school. A lot of the external testing that is done at the moment gives teachers very little feedback on where the problems are and very little help afterwards. The idea is that, by measuring something, somehow you are going to magically improve things. It just does not work like that.

First of all, I think we need what Garth and Janine have been talking about. Teachers need the road map for what kids at particular age levels should be able to do so that then they can assess against those criteria for where there are problem areas, where they need professional development and where we may have made a mistake in the curriculum and put something in too soon, which can happen.

There is one other point that has not come out today. In terms of mathematics, the states that have only five years of secondary education also tend to do worse in participation and achievement in year 12 mathematics. We have talked about the inadequacy of a lot of primary teacher preparation. A lot of students are basically standing still for the last few years in primary school and, if that goes on for another year, that is another issue that is probably a bigger issue in mathematics than when they actually start school.

Prof. Gaudry—May I just chip in with a related point? I think it is a very important one. It is about the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, otherwise known as VELS. Janine will give you a more authoritative account on the reporting that is going on in Victoria than me. I am reporting what we are hearing back from our teachers as we go around the schools. The VELS reporting system is overwhelming teachers. That is point No. 1. The amount of record-keeping involved—and Janine can give you chapter and verse on that—is just staggering. It is little wonder that that acts as a disincentive for teachers to stay in the classroom.

Point No. 2 is that I am told that—and, again, Janine will elaborate—under the VELS reporting system, a student cannot get an A grade without being judged to be 1½ years ahead of the class standard. It is obviously a priori nonsense if you assume that there is a clear understanding of what students are expected to learn in a particular year or in a particular pair of years—the curricula around Australia are broken up into two-year bands. It was always the case when I was at school and when my children were at school that getting an A meant that you were performing very well on the material of your year. It was as simple and straightforward as that. This is causing absolute dismay because students who are doing very well are not getting As. They are not getting the rewards that they necessarily should, or the issue has been obfuscated by the teacher to make sure that the student is rewarded. I suspect that, but I do not know.

The other explanation is that there is a strong remnant of a pernicious philosophy, which is the philosophy of a continuum of learning. There is nothing wrong with a continuum of learning; we all hope that we are still on a continuum of learning, but it has a particularly unfortunate interpretation here because it means that you do not really have year-by-year standards or even two-year by two-year standards. The idea is that, as long as you are progressing, you are doing okay. If that is the context then of course talking about being 1½ years ahead of your class probably makes some sort of sense. But, at least in my opinion, it is a pretty pernicious interpretation of reporting on students' work to their parents.

Ms McIntosh—Apart from the fact that a student who receives an A may not have ever seen material from 1½ years ahead of their age group, and yet they are given the mark. It is a bit of a concern. Teachers are extremely confused about the A to E reporting system and how that should be—

Senator BARNETT—I know what happened in Tasmania with the ELs program, and I am sure you do too. It was trashed because it was a total failure. They have replaced it now, of course—just this year. I am not sure what is happening in Victoria, but I do know what is happening in Tasmania.

Ms McIntosh—This is still fairly new, so I do not know—

Ms Thomas—Here in Victoria the core VELS statement is liked by the teachers because it clearly outlines what students should know at particular stages. I am getting positive feedback from the teachers on the core VELS document. But then a whole lot of other people were brought in to work out the reporting. They have now got these endless progression points and it just goes on for many pages against one little concept. So it is the reporting against the VELS. Garth talks about external examinations. The teachers would be far happier at the moment if there were a single external examination and they could get on with teaching, rather—

Senator BARNETT—I fully understand that and I appreciate the feedback. I have a question on the slightly different matter of teacher performance and rewarding excellence in performance, whether it be with further education or what have you. Do you have a principle or a policy position that says, 'Yes, we should reward excellence, and teachers could be remunerated for achieving those higher levels of excellence'?

Prof. Gaudry—I will make a few observations then I will pass it over to Janine to give her more down-to-earth experience of the idea. In my mind there is little doubt that in any employment situation you should be rewarding performance. There is no question about that. How you do that is another question. You spoke about extra qualifications. One of the ways in which teachers have gained promotion—certainly in the secondary system and probably more broadly—has been by doing master's degrees in educational administration. We at the University of New South Wales and our counterparts at the University of Sydney ran a successful program—we called it 'Mastering Mathematics'—that was directed specifically to high school teachers. Both of those programs died. The teachers who did them found them very good—but they were not a pushover; they were not a trivial sort of thing to do—but they were not getting the rewards. I highlight the fact that subject expertise surely has to be rewarded, particularly in mathematics in a climate in which merchant banks, for example, are grabbing people with good degrees in mathematics. These are the very people we would love to have teaching our children—at least in senior secondary and, perhaps better still, in junior. There is a market force issue there too. Teachers are idealistic, wonderful people and they go into it with that sort of idealism, but what are they going to be paid for their skills? In an area like mathematics, that cuts very quickly into the issue.

Ms McIntosh—Another issue for teachers who are good at their jobs and who successfully move students along a continuum or get good results with their students is that the only way they will be promoted is by being moved out of the classroom. That is a tragedy that is happening on a regular basis. The other issue with rewarding teachers is that it must be done by some measure across the country and not at the choice of a principal or a parents committee, or by choosing the most popular or friendly teacher, or the teacher who marks easiest in maths tests or whatever. It has got to be done a slightly more rigorous basis.

Senator BARNETT—Do you support more rigorous criteria?

Ms McIntosh—I support some criteria that would have to be agreed upon. But I am nervous about delegating the responsibility to a group of people who may not make choices for the right reasons.

Senator BARNETT—We appreciate your advice.

Ms Thomas—The other issue overall is that teachers have a very high starting salary—it compares well with most professions—but it plateaus too soon. If starting salaries were held for the next few years and any real increases went to the upper levels, it would have quite a profound effect on people staying, I think. But I think there has been too much emphasis on the starting salary and not enough on the teachers who have been in the system for five or six years.

CHAIR—I think we were told yesterday that teachers can reach their salary peak in nine years, in their mid-30s, and that after that it is more of the same, unless they want to be promoted out of the classroom and into the principal's office, which works against developing excellence in teaching.

Ms McIntosh—It does. The most impact a teacher can have is on that one-to-one basis with a group of students.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. I have enjoyed our discussion. If you could leave those books with us, that would be great.

Subcommittee adjourned at 1.06 pm