



Australian Government

Department of Education and Training

# Departmental Report

Review of the Australian Curriculum,  
Assessment and Reporting Authority



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## 1. Acknowledgements

The Australian Government Department of Education and Training would like to thank all those who contributed to the consultations that were held as part of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) review process. Their experience with ACARA and their frank input into this review have provided valuable insights into what has been achieved to date, and what might be the future steps for ACARA.

## 2. Acronyms

ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACARA Act	<i>Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008</i>
ACECQA	The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
AEEYSOC	Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Senior Officials Committee
AITSL	Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
ESA	Education Services Australia
NAP	National Assessment Program
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment

# Departmental Report

## Review of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

### 3. Executive Summary and Recommendations

Consistent with the Terms of Reference, this Review of ACARA (the Review) assesses the appropriateness of ACARA's ongoing role and functions against the aims and objectives of ACARA's Charter.

In doing this, the Department has considered ACARA's delivery against the assigned functions as set out in the ACARA Act, the ACARA charter, the previous letter of expectation, and Ministerial Council directives, including a qualitative assessment of the quality and impact of ACARA's work.

The Department has examined the level of satisfaction with ACARA's role, functions, processes and how organisational structures and governance have impacted on the delivery of ACARA's functions and the connection to ACARA's annual and quadrennial work plans. This includes any advantages or disadvantages associated with the co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities.

This Review draws on a substantial stakeholder consultation report and the outcome of other reviews and evaluations relating to the role and functions of ACARA, specifically the Review of the Australian Curriculum that was published on 12 October 2014, the Review of *My School* that was published on 23 March 2015 and an unpublished 2013 Review of the national architecture to support Standing Council for School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC)<sup>1</sup> reforms by the Nous Group<sup>2</sup>.

The establishment of ACARA by the Ministerial Council was a major milestone in education in Australia and the work that has been delivered in the subsequent six years represents a significant achievement in collaboration in the national interest. ACARA is guided in its work by governing Commonwealth legislation and a Charter that is also approved by all Education Ministers.

The Charter of ACARA describes its primary purposes as working on a national curriculum from Foundation to Year 12, an aligned national assessment programme and a national data collection and reporting programme that supports evaluation, research and accountability. It is also the general opinion of stakeholders that ACARA has delivered significant achievements against the priorities set out in its Charter, although there are areas upon which ACARA can improve.

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<sup>1</sup> Currently known as the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) Education Council.

<sup>2</sup> The report is not publicly available. Refer to: <http://www.nousgroup.com/au/work/advice-on-the-national-architecture-to-deliver-education-reform-priorities>.

ACARA's first six years of operation have seen a Foundation to Year 12 curriculum in English, mathematics, science and history developed and endorsed by Education Ministers. The Foundation to Year 10 curriculum is being implemented in schools across Australia. National curriculum in the other learning areas set out in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* has been developed for Foundation to Year 10 and is awaiting final endorsement. ACARA has also managed a national assessment programme (NAP) comprising a mix of whole of cohort assessment in literacy and numeracy and sample testing in other learning areas. Finally, ACARA has designed and implemented the *My School* website for all Australian schools and made contributions to other areas of national reporting.

Qualitatively, the Australian Curriculum is generally regarded as a valuable resource, particularly the Foundation to Year 10 curriculum. The results of the NAP have informed policy and practice in systems and schools, and *My School* is generally regarded as a valuable reporting resource that contributes to informed comparisons.

Both the whole of cohort literacy and numeracy assessments in the NAP and *My School* engender significant community discussion and have contributed to a heightening of community engagement in school education. In some cases, NAPLAN and *My School* generate concerns in school communities. Under Education Council direction, ACARA's other contributions to reporting, and particularly the National Report on Schooling, requires further attention. ACARA's work on the Australian Curriculum has also been criticised by some for creating a curriculum that was overcrowded, particularly for primary school years.

Looking ahead, ACARA has a significant challenge to ensure the quality delivery of NAPLAN online on time and budget and to maintain momentum in reporting, including taking a stronger leadership role in improving the National Report on Schooling. ACARA will need to do this while making a case to the Education Council and the broader education community in Australia for future curriculum development – both in senior secondary years and the next iteration of the Australian Curriculum.

ACARA's work cannot yet be demonstrated as leading to significant improvements in the outcomes of education in Australia. This is not surprising as education is impacted by a number of factors outside of ACARA's remit, such as quality teaching. It will take many years for ACARA's national work in curriculum, assessment and reporting to reach implementation maturity, noting that the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum is conducted on a phased basis<sup>3</sup>. However, stakeholders saw that ACARA's work has had a significant impact and will continue to do so as it shifts its primary focus from curriculum to online assessment. Stakeholders also saw continued value in the co-location of the curriculum, assessment and reporting functions that ACARA undertakes.

The functions of ACARA have required it to work in areas of education policy and delivery in which the Commonwealth and state and territory governments have strong and legitimate interests. In this

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<sup>3</sup> Phase one learning areas were English, mathematics, science and history. Phase two learning areas were geography, languages and the arts and Phase three learning areas were health and physical education, civics and citizenship, economics and business, and technologies.

context, achieving national collaboration between levels of government in the federation can also be seen as an achievement by ACARA.

The Department is of the view that changes to the governance arrangements for ACARA can help address some of the issues raised in this Review. While appropriate for the start-up period, the Department reflects the views expressed by other stakeholders that ACARA can now be subject to less oversight. Governance documentation can be more strategic in nature and senior officials can take on the primary role of progressing ministerial and Education Council directives. These changes are appropriate given the maturation of ACARA's role and as an organisation. These governance-related changes are also necessary for ACARA to become a more flexible, strategic and forward-looking organisation.

Given the findings and recommendations outlined in this report, the Department is also of the view that changes to ACARA's governing legislation are not necessary at this time and that the successful operation of national collaboration that has marked ACARA's first six years of operation can guide it well into this next period.

The Department is of the view, based on the evidence about ACARA's role, function and governance that informs this Review, that the three roles in curriculum, assessment and reporting remain as strategic directions and part of ACARA's Charter for the next quadrennium.

The Department also sees it as important that Education Council discuss any changes pertaining to the recommendations in this report. Hence these recommendations are framed as propositions to inform discussion at the Education Council about ACARA's role, function and governance – including as they relate ACARA's next quadrennial (2016/17 – 2019/20) work plan.

## **Recommendations**

The following set of recommendations requires no amendments to the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008*. Consideration of these, or any related propositions, would be beneficial in the work to finalise ACARA's next quadrennial work plan for 2016/17 to 2019/20. It is anticipated that Education Ministers will consider the next four-year work plan and associated budget at its scheduled September 2015 meeting.

### **Curriculum**

- C1: ACARA seeks endorsement by Education Council of the full suite of Foundation to Year 10 curriculum developed in all learning areas once any changes arising from the Review of the Australian Curriculum are finalised.
- C2: ACARA undertakes a six year cycle of review of the Australian Curriculum.
- C3: ACARA systematically collects curriculum implementation information and international evidence over the next quadrennium to ensure it is well positioned to lead development of the next generation of curriculum in the subsequent quadrennium.

- C4: ACARA scopes options for further development of the senior secondary curriculum, in partnership with interested jurisdictions, including the possibility of focusing only on curriculum content and opt-out arrangements for approval and funding of this work.

### **Assessment**

- A1: Acknowledge, as part of the new Charter, that ACARA's highest priority is to shift the balance of the available resources and attention to its assessment function and collaboration with Education Services Australia and all Australian governments to ensure successful implementation of NAPLAN online.
- A2: ACARA provide a more comprehensive and cohesive suite of online assessments that reflect the curriculum and improve the understanding of educational outcomes of Australian students.

### **Data collection and reporting**

- R1: ACARA investigates ways it can take a stronger leadership role in relation to national performance reporting particularly in making the National Report on Schooling in Australia more useful and timely.
- R2: ACARA assesses data needs to enable introduction of new performance indicators in the measurement framework including for senior secondary attainment.

### **Organisational and governance structures**

- G1: Education Council revises the current Charter with reference to the next endorsed quadrennial work plan and budget.
- G2: Education Council removes the Letter of Expectation from the suite of authorising instruments under which ACARA operates.
- G3: Education Council delegates authority to AEEYSOC to monitor the progress of ACARA's work against the Charter including progress against the one and four year work plan and budget within the agreed parameters set by Education Council.
- G4: AEEYSOC maximises alignment between ACARA's planning documents – the annual work plan, the four-year plan and related budget as well as the Commonwealth Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 requirement for a four year corporate plan.
- G5: Education Council reviews ACARA's role, function and governance every six years against the aims and objectives of ACARA's Charter.
- G6: Education Council considers moving towards an ACARA Board appointment process that retains the current representational nominations and includes a more collaborative assessment of the skills of board members.
- G7: ACARA reviews and simplifies its advisory and consultative mechanisms to make them more efficient, effective, timely and strategically aligned with future priorities.



## 4. Purpose

This is a report by the Department of Education and Training to the Australian Government Minister for Education and Training to review the ongoing role and functions of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), as required by its authorising legislation and in accordance with Terms of Reference as set by the Minister.

ACARA is a body that is owned and jointly funded by all Australian governments, the work plan of which is endorsed by all education ministers. ACARA was established as an independent inter-jurisdictional statutory authority under the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997*<sup>4</sup>. It operates under the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 (the ACARA Act)*.

Section 44 of the ACARA Act requires the Australian Government Minister for Education and Training to cause a review of ACARA six years from enactment. Given that the ACARA Act received royal assent on 8 December 2008, the legislative review commenced on 8 December 2014.

## 5. Background

### 5.1 Scope

The Terms of Reference for the Review of ACARA are at **Attachment A**. They acknowledge that the scope of the Review of ACARA includes the appropriateness of ACARA's ongoing role and functions against the ambition and intention of ACARA's Charter primarily in the three key areas of curriculum, assessment, and data collection and reporting at a national level.

The delivery of these three national education functions also needs to be considered in light of ACARA's organisational structures and governance.

The Review also considered the outcomes of any reviews, evaluations or other relevant projects/documents relating to the role and functions of ACARA.

### 5.2 Methodology

This report draws broadly on the feedback, themes and recommendations in the stakeholder consultation report, which is at **Attachment B**, prepared by an external consultant. The independent consultations were undertaken with the co-funders of ACARA and a selection of other key stakeholders with strong interest in ACARA. These included senior officials in education departments and non-government education bodies, senior officials in state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities and current and former members of the Board of ACARA and representatives from national principal and parents' associations.

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<sup>4</sup> Agencies operating under the Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997 became corporate Commonwealth entities under the new *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2014* when it came into effect on 1 July 2014.

The stakeholder consultation report is structured around ACARA's primary function, which is to execute the three strategic directions relating to curriculum, assessment and data collection and reporting at a national level which are set by the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) Education Council.

Within each of these three areas the Review considers the extent to which ACARA, in delivering on these strategic directions, has also undertaken other aspects outlined in the Charter around its work priorities and reporting. This report also explores a range of options, including recommendations, regarding ACARA's role, functions, governance and work plan as ACARA heads into the next funding quadrennium.

This Review is an opportunity to consider carefully issues relating to ACARA's role, function and governance. While initiated by the Australian Government Minister as required under the ACARA Act, the recommendations of this Review will need to be discussed and a response agreed by the Education Council.

### **5.3 Related considerations**

This Review intersects with a number of other projects that have independently considered aspects of ACARA's work, including the *My School* review<sup>5</sup>, the findings and recommendations of the Review of the Australian Curriculum<sup>6</sup> as well as the Review of the national architecture to support SCSEEC reforms - Final Report.

#### **My School review**

A review of the *My School* website and the Australian Government response, *Making My School better*, considers possible improvements to the website and proposes a strategy to ensure *My School* provides parents and the community with consistent, comparable and reliable information in a user-friendly and accessible manner. Both documents were published on the *Students First* website on 22 March 2015. Any changes to the *My School* website will be considered and agreed by the Education Council prior to implementation and thus are not further canvassed in this review of ACARA.

#### **Review of the Australian Curriculum**

The Australian Government's initial response to the Review of the Australian Curriculum flagged support for consideration of changes to ACARA's governance including two recommendations, one relating to the purpose of ACARA, and the other goes to the balance of representation versus expertise on the ACARA Board:

- *Recommendation 24: ACARA be restructured, and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 and ACARA's Charter be revised, so its role is limited to:*
  - *development and cyclical updates of the Australian Curriculum*
  - *curriculum research*

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to <http://studentsfirst.gov.au/news/making-my-school-better> for a copy of *Making My School better* and the review of *My School*

<sup>6</sup> Refer to <http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/review-australian-curriculum> for a copy of the Review of the Australian Curriculum – Final Report and the Australian Government's initial response to the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

- *international benchmarking of curriculum*
- *development and administration of the National Assessment Program.*
- *Recommendation 26: ACARA’s Board not be representative of education authorities but comprise curriculum and assessment experts, independent of education authorities.*

At the Education Council meeting of 12 December 2014, it was agreed that these two recommendations relating to ACARA’s functions and governance (as outlined in the Australian Government’s initial response to the Review of the Australian Curriculum) be considered further by education ministers in conjunction with the findings of the legislated Review of ACARA.

### **Review of the national architecture to support SCSEEC reforms - Final Report**

The Nous Group was commissioned by the Australian Education, Early Child Development and Youth Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC) to review the institutional and governance arrangements for national schooling entities against the backdrop of proposed new national functions. It reported in July 2013 and was not published.

## **6. Delivery of ACARA’s functions**

Section 6 of this report focuses on ACARA’s delivery against its Charter and assigned functions as set out in the ACARA Act as well as the letter of expectations and Education Council directives. In doing so, it provides relevant context, an assessment of delivery and future roles and priorities which may assist in information discussion around finalisation of ACARA’s next quadrennial work plan for 2016/17 to 2019/2020. This section draws predominantly on evidence provided in the stakeholder consultation report and considers the key function, organisational structures and governance of ACARA:

- Section 6.1 focuses on ACARA’s curriculum priorities,
- Section 6.2 focuses on ACARA’s national assessment priorities,
- Section 6.3 focuses on ACARA’s data collection and reporting priorities,
- Section 6.4 examines the co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities, including the advantages and disadvantages, and
- Section 6.5 examines the impact of ACARA’s organisational structures and governance on delivery.

ACARA’s mission, as determined by education ministers, is to improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment and reporting. Reflecting the priorities and expectations of Education Council, the Charter sets ACARA directions relating to a national curriculum from Foundation to Year 12 in specified learning areas, a national assessment programme aligned to a national curriculum and a national data collection and reporting programme. The Letter of Expectation then provides more details of work required by ACARA in each of these areas.

The Department acknowledges that through national collaboration ACARA has achieved a great deal in its first six years of operation related to these three key agreed national priority areas. This is

further evidenced in the stakeholder consultation report, which reflects a general level of satisfaction that ACARA has delivered significant achievements in each of these three areas.

The Department is generally satisfied that ACARA has met the expectations set out for it in its Charter particularly around the delivery of the national curriculum, the successful management of the National Assessment Program (NAP) and the continuous improvement of the design and quality of assessments, as well as the development and management of the *My School* website. Most stakeholders concur with this view and they note that these key achievements are now part of the national educational landscape and will have further positive impacts over time.

The Department recognises that many of these achievements have been made possible through ACARA's processes which utilise active engagement of stakeholders. It is noteworthy in the stakeholder consultation report that a number of groups, including those who represent the perspectives of parents, provided positive comments on the level of engagement they have received from ACARA and its executive on an ongoing basis.

It is apparent through the stakeholder consultation report that ACARA has continuing support as part of a shared national commitment and endeavour to improving educational outcomes for all Australian students.

While recognising these achievements, the Department notes that there are areas in which further improvement is both possible and necessary. Some stakeholders were positive about their engagement with ACARA and others voiced a frustration that ACARA did not explain in what ways and why their feedback had not been accepted. The Department also notes that there have been issues regarding the timeliness of delivery of key products against timeframes agreed by Education Council.

## **6.1 Curriculum**

### **Context**

In accordance with the ACARA Act and the Charter for ACARA issued by the Education Council, ACARA was tasked to develop a national curriculum from Foundation to Year 12 (including content and achievement standards) in specified learning areas under the Melbourne Declaration 2008, as directed by the Education Council. As such, the development of the Australian Curriculum has been a major priority for ACARA and a significant focus of attention and resources over the first six years of its operation.

Many countries, including high performing ones, take a national approach to curriculum and the stakeholder consultation report notes that Australia has made a number of attempts at achieving a national curriculum over the past 40 years. The rationale<sup>7</sup> for an Australian curriculum centres on improving the quality, equity and transparency of Australia's education system. In particular, a national curriculum ensures that every child in Australia, regardless of where they live or the school they attend, has access to a world-class curriculum.

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<sup>7</sup> Shape of the Australian Curriculum version 4.0, October 2012, ACARA.

Development of the Australian curriculum<sup>8</sup> has been guided by the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. The Australian Curriculum is a key driver in the goal for Australian governments to improve genuine quality educational outcomes for all Australian students in a competitive and globalised world.

### **Delivery**

The development of the first Foundation to Year 12 Australian Curriculum in English, mathematics, science and history is a significant achievement by ACARA.

Stakeholders reported continuing value in having an Australian Curriculum and that ACARA has produced a valuable resource consistent with the principles of federalism. In terms of impact, all states and territories are implementing the Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum for English, mathematics, science and history. In addition, other Foundation to Year 10 learning area curricula are available for state and territory use on the Australian Curriculum website. Curricula for senior secondary years in English, mathematics, science and history have also been endorsed as the agreed and common basis for development of state and territory senior secondary courses.

The Department acknowledges the level of satisfaction expressed by stakeholders with the extensive consultation and national collaboration by ACARA to develop the first Foundation to Year 10 Australian Curriculum in all learning areas. This level of satisfaction with the quality of the work done by ACARA extends to the endorsed curricula for senior secondary years, although support from stakeholders for the senior secondary curriculum *per se* is not strong, as is evident in the stakeholder consultation report.

The Review of the Australian Curriculum also found strong support across the country for the development, implementation and continuation of the Australian Curriculum. It was widely supported and seen as a positive development in school education. There was also general acknowledgement that ACARA sought to consult widely and often. Stakeholders interviewed for the Review of ACARA reported that the flexible approach to implementation of the Australian Curriculum is an important feature in schools being able to meet the diverse needs of students in different educational settings, and to set priorities about what and how students will learn.

The stakeholder consultation report also found that there is ongoing stakeholder concern in relation to ACARA's role in monitoring the implementation of the Australian Curriculum. The Department agrees with the view of states and territories, and in particular the view of curriculum, assessment and certification authorities, that curriculum implementation is within their remit. This notwithstanding, to fulfil priorities under its agreed Charter, ACARA is required to provide advice to AEEYSOC on curriculum implementation.

The Department shares the views reported by stakeholders that the most fundamental criticism in relation to the development of the Australian Curriculum is overcrowding, particularly in the primary school curriculum. In the primary school context, the capacity to set priorities about what and how students will learn significantly influences the manageability of the curriculum. This practical concern was discussed in the Final Report of the Review of the Australian Curriculum and also raised again in

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<sup>8</sup> The Australian Curriculum can be viewed at [www.australiancurriculum.edu.au](http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au).

the consultations for this Review. While there are differing views as to the factors that have led to overcrowding in the Australian Curriculum, including governance, processes of operation, timelines and the lack of transparency, ACARA has been responsive to the Review of the Australian Curriculum and provided advice to Education Council around improving clarity and reducing unnecessary volume of content in the primary Australian Curriculum.<sup>9</sup>

The Department notes that the commitment to an Australian Curriculum from Foundation to Year 12 has been diluted over the course of the past six years. The roll-out of the curriculum continues to progress although, six years on, even Foundation to Year 10 phase one learning areas of English, mathematics, science and history will not be fully implemented across all states and territories and sectors until 2016. There is also no formal commitment as yet to the endorsement, yet alone the implementation, of phases two and three learning areas<sup>10</sup>.

As part of ACARA's role in developing the Australian Curriculum, some stakeholders reported that ACARA could have been more responsive in debriefing them on the outcomes of stakeholder consultation processes, including when, and why, stakeholder feedback was not always accepted.

### **Future role and priorities**

#### ***Research to inform curriculum development in the subsequent quadrennium***

The Department's view is that curriculum development should remain a core function for ACARA, even though for the next quadrennium, ACARA's primary focus will be online assessment.

The Department sees it as desirable that Education Council use the collaborative development of an updated Charter for ACARA for the next quadrennium to agree to ACARA's priorities for curriculum development for this period.

It is the Department's view that ACARA's first priority is to finalise both the changes to the Foundation to Year 10 curriculum arising from the Review of the Australian Curriculum tasked to it by Education Council and endorsement of the phase two and three learning area Foundation to Year 10 curriculum. Once these two priorities have been achieved, there is merit in having a significant period of curriculum stability. This period of stability implicitly recognises that ACARA's primary focus for the next quadrennium will be on delivering online assessment. It also acknowledges stakeholders' desire to fully implement the Australian Curriculum and gather evidence on its impact on education in Australia.

The Department conceives that this period of stability could be around one quadrennium, although the exact timing of future curriculum work will need to be cognisant of states and territories cycles of curriculum renewal and future priorities for curriculum development agreed by education ministers.

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<sup>9</sup> All states and territories identify Foundation to Year 6 as the primary years of schooling except South Australia which includes Foundation to Year 7.

<sup>10</sup> Phase one learning areas were English, mathematics, science and history. Phase two learning areas were geography, languages and arts and Phase three learning areas were Health and physical education, civics and citizenship, economics and business studies, and technologies.

The Department's view is that another key curriculum priority for ACARA should be for it to position itself as the expert body in curriculum practice and international developments. There is a general interest on the part of stakeholders in ACARA having this as part of its core functions. ACARA should use this time to assemble the evidence base required to develop the next generation of national curriculum that will continue to equip Australia's children with the education they need to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Department anticipates that a second generation national curriculum will incorporate enhancements and innovation in delivering an even stronger Australian Curriculum.

The Charter requires ACARA to support AEEYSOC to advise Education Council on, inter alia, 'implementing and sustaining the national curriculum' and 'the support required for states and territories to implement national curriculum as it is developed'. The stakeholder consultation report identified sensitivities around ACARA's role in monitoring the Australian Curriculum.

It is the Department's view that these roles are both necessary and important. Fulfilling these roles requires ACARA to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the Australian Curriculum. This work should include monitoring the manageability of curriculum implementation, including to inform future curriculum revisions.

To date ACARA has identified a number of areas for further development based on the feedback from systems, schools and teachers currently implementing the curriculum. While acknowledging that implementation is clearly the remit of states and territories and the systems and schools within them, ACARA must have a clear and reasonable understanding of issues arising from implementation of the Australian Curriculum to determine if any issues warrant evaluation and to inform future work.

### ***Senior Secondary Curriculum***

The period of curriculum stability, as described earlier, does not diminish the need to progress senior secondary curriculum development work. Senior secondary curriculum was an integral part of the initial work plan for ACARA as agreed to by Ministerial Council. The rationale for a national approach to curriculum in Australia is as valid in senior secondary as for the Foundation to Year 10 curriculum. Hence, the Department's view is that senior secondary curriculum development should remain within ACARA's remit under any future revisions to its Charter.

While there is not significant support for ACARA developing senior secondary curriculum at the present time, the stakeholder consultation report found that some states and territories expressed interest at a future point in time. Given this, ACARA should be equipped to fulfil the requirement to develop senior secondary curriculum at an appropriate time in the future. The Department's view is that the approach adopted by Ministerial Council in December 2012 to endorse senior secondary curriculum as an agreed and common basis for course development by states and territories is a robust and flexible basis on which to proceed further work in this area.

The Department acknowledges that states and territories have a strong commitment to their own assessment and certification regimes, particularly where external assessment is involved. It is also clear that not every state or territory wishes to implement the Australian Curriculum for senior secondary schooling. However, education ministers have agreed that ACARA will continue to work

with state and territory curriculum authorities around the strategy and processes for the further development of the senior secondary Australian Curriculum.

Acknowledging these factors, the Department has the view that future development of senior secondary curriculum by ACARA could focus on the development of curriculum content and not on accompanying achievement standards. This approach explicitly recognises the primacy of the senior secondary assessment and certification regimes in states and territories. Consideration could also be given to permitting individual states or territories from ‘opting out’ of involvement of senior secondary curriculum development. This could extend to funding for senior secondary curriculum development being shared only amongst participating jurisdictions.

It is the Department’s view that ACARA could be encouraged to take a stronger leadership in building support amongst states and territories for further development of senior secondary curriculum.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations may assist in informing discussion around finalisation of ACARA’s next quadrennial work plan for 2016-2017 to 2019-2020:

- C1: ACARA seeks endorsement by Education Council of the full suite of Foundation to Year 10 curriculum developed in all learning areas once the changes to this suite of curriculum arising from the Review of the Australian Curriculum are finalised.
- C2: ACARA undertakes a six year cycle of review of the Australian Curriculum.
- C3: ACARA systematically collects curriculum implementation information and international evidence over the next quadrennium to ensure it is well positioned to lead development of the next generation of curriculum in the subsequent quadrennium.
- C4: ACARA scopes options for further development of the senior secondary curriculum, in partnership with interested jurisdictions, including the possibility of focusing only on curriculum content and opt-out arrangements for approval and funding of this work.

## **6.2 Assessment**

### **Context**

Reflecting a key national assessment priority as outlined in ACARA’s Charter, the NAP has been implemented at the direction of Australian education ministers and is a major component of the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* (the Measurement Framework).

The Measurement Framework currently includes annual full cohort literacy and numeracy assessment (NAPLAN), national sample assessments in science, information and communications technology, and civics and citizenship, and international sample assessments in Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study. Separate to this, the Department is responsible for implementing international sample assessments in consultation with states and territories.



The NAP, particularly the full cohort assessment of NAPLAN, is an important complement to teachers' ongoing classroom assessment. It provides teachers, school leaders and parents with the means to periodically assess students against previous performance, national benchmarks and their peers using an objective measure. NAPLAN is used in combination with other forms of assessment to diagnose learning and inform priorities for students, cohorts and schools. For this reason the usefulness of NAPLAN is maximised by ensuring teachers receive results as early as possible.

The national sample assessment – which predate ACARA's establishment – are intended to support measurement and reporting on progress towards agreed national objectives at the jurisdiction and national levels.

### **Delivery**

The Department is satisfied that ACARA has effectively managed the NAP. ACARA has delivered NAPLAN as a full cohort national assessment and made a valuable contribution to continuously improving the design of the NAPLAN assessment. This view has also been substantiated through stakeholder feedback. Stakeholders also commented positively about how ACARA achieved significantly faster turnaround of results in 2014 and it is expected to reduce timeframes again in 2015. Sample assessments were successfully conducted online in 2013 and 2014 with stakeholders recording improved student engagement and smooth delivery.

There is enthusiasm from stakeholders about the major immediate reform to the NAP which is the transition to online delivery of NAPLAN as agreed to by all education ministers. This reform will deliver enhanced diagnostic capabilities and speedier turnaround of results. Online delivery is in the national interest and contributes to the achievement of economies and efficiencies through joint effort.

ACARA is integral to successful delivery of NAPLAN online and is working with all Australian governments and Education Services Australia to ensure the smooth transition to world class online assessments.

ACARA has effectively taken over delivery of the national sample assessments. It has been directed to propose alternative models for the sample assessment program, including changing or expanding the learning areas assessed. ACARA has developed two proposals for consideration but is yet to achieve consensus on a preferred model beyond 2017.

### **Future role and priorities**

The Department is of the view that ACARA must have a continuing role in managing the delivery of the NAP, including NAPLAN, and that any future reforms to the NAP should be progressed through the appropriate national governance forum. It is only through a national body operating with the support of all jurisdictions, including the Commonwealth, and school sectors that this function can be carried out efficiently and effectively in the national interest. Stakeholders have expressed similar positions to this view.

The Department considers that the online delivery of NAPLAN should be the major focus of ACARA's work for the immediate future. ACARA will need to focus closely on the delivery of this reform in collaboration with Education Services Australia and all Australian governments and, as such, will

need to shift the balance of its resources and attention to its assessment function to ensure its internal resources and capabilities are directed at these goals for the successful implementation of NAPLAN online.

The Department also supports the recommendation in the stakeholder consultation report that ACARA reassess its resources, capabilities and organisational structures to support a more strategic and innovative approach to its work more generally. This will support the transition to NAPLAN online and ensure ACARA is positioned to play a leading role in further reform of the NAP in the future.

The Department notes that ACARA is already exploring enhancements to the NAP through better linkages between national and international assessments. ACARA is well placed to lead this work in partnership with the Australian Government and has already scheduled this in its 2015-2016 forward work plan, pending Education Council agreement.

Stakeholders identified a possible future role for ACARA in providing expert advice on the benefits of full cohort versus sample testing and managing the development of tests for other learning areas. It is the Department's position that the sample assessments (including curriculum coverage and how they are implemented) should be reviewed to identify options to broaden the practical use of these tests for more stakeholders. The potential benefits of a revised approach to science assessment to complement related efforts to improve student outcomes in STEM subjects should also be considered. It will be important that issues of the assessment burden on schools be considered in this context.

ACARA will be developing national proficiency standards for NAPLAN in the context of the transition to online delivery. This work has the potential to also explore advanced standards to drive high end performance. This will reduce the focus on reporting against minimum standards and focus attention on the importance of high expectations, rigorous academic standards and valuing excellence. This will also support better alignment of NAPLAN, and international and NAP sample assessment, which use proficiency levels. It is important that ACARA prioritises the work to establish proficiency standards for implementation from 2017, with the introduction of NAPLAN online, and is strategic in collaborating with key stakeholders. Early attention will reduce the risk of standards not being in place for the 2017 implementation of NAPLAN online.

ACARA has a significant role to play in continuing to educate the public on the benefits of NAPLAN in particular and addressing any misrepresentations to ensure its ongoing value is maximised. The Department recognises the transition to online delivery as providing an opportunity to pursue this and shares the view expressed in the stakeholder consultation report that the potentially transformative nature of NAPLAN online should be leveraged to explore future applications of online adaptive testing.

Online delivery of NAPLAN and the existence of a national platform allow for ACARA to make a wider range of assessments available to teachers and schools. The feasibility of additional assessments would need to carefully consider costs and potential benefits and ensure any new assessment is

appropriately designed for the target cohort and is fit for purpose (including the suitability of full cohort, sample population or opt-in assessments).

ACARA is undertaking an ambitious research program to support the transition to online delivery of national assessments and should continue to develop its national thought leadership around assessment. This work aligns closely to the priorities for assessment as set out in the current Charter and should continue to be a priority in the Charter for the next quadrennium.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations may assist in informing discussion around finalisation of ACARA's next quadrennial work plan for 2016-2017 to 2019-2020:

- A1: Acknowledge, as part of the new Charter, that ACARA's highest priority is to shift the balance of the available resources and attention to its assessment function and collaboration with Education Services Australia and all Australian governments to ensure successful implementation of NAPLAN online.
- A2: ACARA provides a more comprehensive and cohesive suite of online assessments that reflect the curriculum to improve the understanding of educational outcomes of Australian students.

## **6.3 Data collection and reporting**

### **Context**

ACARA's collection and reporting of school education data and information encompasses a range of activities including the development and management of the *My School* website and the annual development of the National Report on Schooling. This role flows from the agreement of First Ministers at the 29 November 2008 COAG meeting where all Australian governments agreed to a new performance reporting framework. This included pursuing policy and reform directions for greater transparency and accountability for school performance.

### **Delivery**

ACARA developed and manages a unique national public reporting system on all Australian schools including comparisons across a range of data elements through the *My School* website. The Department considers that the *My School* website represents a sound instrument for providing nationally consistent data on schools across all jurisdictions and sectors to parents and the community and at the same time meets the important objective of public transparency and accountability at the individual school level.

The Department understands there are general reservations held by some stakeholders, particularly around performance reporting, that *My School* relies heavily on the outcomes of the testing of basic skills. However, the Department is also of the understanding that stakeholders see the value of the publication by ACARA of such results (at the school and national level) in helping to promote accountability and engagement in school education.

The National Report on Schooling reports on progress at state and national levels towards the *Melbourne Declaration* goals agreed by all Australian governments in 2008. This also contributes to accountability for educational outcomes. The main concerns are that the National Report on Schooling takes far too much time to produce and does not adequately allow for comparability across states and territories. In addition the development of the National Report on Schooling consumes resources and executive attention within and beyond ACARA that outweigh the usefulness of the current report.

The Department recognises the need for and value of a national report on schooling outcomes and the availability of national school performance data. However, the National Report on Schooling as it currently stands needs substantial investment to improve its effectiveness and usefulness in supporting accountability and transparency. Stakeholders support the need for, and see value in, producing a national report on schooling outcomes, with a timeline for changes to be agreed by all governments. The key purpose of a national report is the availability of national performance data to inform public discourse, research and public policy.

### **Future role and priorities**

#### ***Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australian schools***

The Department believes that the revision of the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* (the Framework) currently being progressed by ACARA is limited in scope and that there is room for ACARA to demonstrate greater leadership in this area and take a more forward-looking and strategic view of its data collection, analysis and reporting function. For example, consideration should be given to the potential for national measure/s of student engagement and national teacher workforce information. It is noteworthy that there is minimal reference by stakeholders in the stakeholder consultation report about the Framework.

The next full review of the Framework will be undertaken by ACARA within the next three years (by end 2018) and should address these points.

While the stakeholder consultation report does not canvas specific proposals for the Framework, the Department is very clear that the Framework needs to be relevant and cover data collections that underpin future directions of the sector. As such, the Framework should include a forward work plan that identifies broader areas for future data collection. This could include, for example, enabling the development of teacher workforce data, student engagement measures and post school attainment indicators.

#### ***My School***

Any outcomes arising from the review of the *My School* website and the Australian Government response, *Making My School better*, agreed by the Education Council will have an impact on ACARA's next quadrennial work plan.

#### ***National Report on Schooling in Australia***

The Department concurs with the recommendation in the stakeholder consultation report that ACARA should revitalise its approach to the National Report on Schooling. The National Report on

Schooling could play an enhanced role if performance information was more comprehensive and reliable along with improved timeliness and more appropriate presentation.

The Department supports the National Report on Schooling being reviewed overall, including going beyond the current proposal by ACARA to present the National Report on Schooling in an online format. This Review should involve identifying other aspects that might be included in the report.

The online format is an innovative approach that would allow newly available data to be published almost immediately with more technical information and value-added commentary both presented separately. Observations on trends and patterns in these data should still be provided as well as further analysis to support the understanding of trends in outcomes for all aspects of schooling.

In partnership with all jurisdictions and sectors it is recommended that ACARA continue to pursue future improvements to current national reporting arrangements to improve comparability of data and reduce duplication in data collection and/or reporting.

#### ***ACARA's data capability and analysis***

The Department supports the view expressed in the stakeholder consultation report that ACARA should be challenged to extend its national role of data collection and reporting beyond *My School* and the National Report on Schooling. ACARA is in a unique position as a national repository of schools data and its future role could include ACARA using data for analysis and reporting to help build the evidence base for prospective policy development in the school education sector. Importantly it will also need to build on existing co-operation with the jurisdictions and non-government sector.

The stakeholder consultation report raises the issue of ACARA needing to have the capacity and capability to analyse data to support both management and policy development. ACARA particularly needs to also build its capabilities to enable it to use data and reporting to help develop the evidence base for future policy development.

Recently, ACARA has played a key role in coordinating development of the new attendance measures as directed by COAG, though this work has also relied heavily on practical expertise from jurisdictions and the non-government sector. ACARA could strengthen its leadership role in progressing improvements to data analysis and reporting in the next quadrennium.

It is important that ACARA has both the technical expertise as well as a strong and thorough awareness of the policy environment. As such ACARA faces the key challenge of balancing the resourcing shifts to effectively manage its future curriculum, assessment and reporting functions.

#### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations may assist in informing discussion around finalisation of ACARA's next quadrennial work plan for 2016/17 to 2019/20:

- R1: ACARA investigates ways it can take a stronger leadership role in relation to national performance reporting particularly in making the National Report on Schooling in Australia more useful and timely.

R2: ACARA assesses data needs to enable introduction of new performance indicators in the measurement framework including for senior secondary attainment.

Section 6.4 focuses on ACARA's data collection and reporting priorities. As per the Terms of Reference, Section 3.5 examines the co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities, including the advantages and disadvantages. Section 3.6 examines the impact of ACARA's organisational structures and governance on the impact of the delivery.

## **6.4 Co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities**

### **Context**

The Australian Government's *Students First* education policy commits the Government to refocus ACARA and absorb its data and research functions into the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. This recognises the important and increasing links between the Australian Curriculum and the NAP. It would also allow ACARA to focus its full attention and energy on ensuring an Australian Curriculum that is rigorous, balanced, suitable for the twenty-first century, and flexible. It will also free the Authority to direct its resources into developing rigorous benchmarking processes to enable the Australian Curriculum to be comparable to the world's best curricula.

The Review of the National architecture to support SCSEEC reforms - Final Report considered a number of scenarios for rearrangement of the roles fulfilled by the three organisations in the national education architecture. It is noteworthy that in each scenario, curriculum, assessment and reporting were co-located within ACARA. This Review also proposed that ACARA take on a new role in national research in education.

### **Delivery**

Stakeholders affirmed the considerable educational synergy in co-locating curriculum, assessment and reporting and that it is in the national interest to work together through ACARA on these areas. Assessment should be based closely on, and be informed by, both curriculum and reporting as these have strong links to assessment.

One of the key messages from the stakeholder consultation report was that the underlying policy rationale to enhance national education quality, accountability, transparency and consistency, remains relevant. As such stakeholders commented that there is a strong rationale for having these functions undertaken by a single national body given the linkages between them.

It is noteworthy that states and territories typically co-locate curriculum, assessment and reporting functions, including in curriculum, assessment and certification authorities. The Review of the Australian Curriculum proposed that ACARA focus more closely on its work on curriculum development and continue to manage the NAP.

The Department notes that stakeholders were of the view that these data collection and reporting functions should remain with ACARA, whose independence is seen as being crucial to this role. The Department sees merit in enabling ACARA to be more strategic in the data analysis area, which implies that this capability should be further enhanced. ACARA can build on its involvement in recent strategic policy initiatives, for example, its recent work on COAG attendance measures, and

strengthen and integrate its data analysis both within and outside the (schools) sector to improve student outcomes.

### **Future role and priorities**

As part of the Review of ACARA, stakeholders were consulted about what ACARA's key areas of future focus should be and whether ACARA should continue to have responsibility for the three functions of curriculum, assessment and data collection and reporting. Their views coincide with the Department's view that the current arrangements have delivered significant outcomes and, while improvements can be made, there is no evidence to indicate that significant changes to ACARA are required in the near future.

The Department notes that stakeholders were unsupportive of the transfer of data and reporting functions to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training. ACARA's independence from any one government was seen as a particular strength, essentially permitting it to play the role of 'honest broker' in data and reporting. It is also worth considering at what level of government reporting would sit if guided by the federalist principle of subsidiarity.

The Department agrees with the views expressed in the stakeholder consultation report that the relative merits of co-location of curriculum, assessment and reporting functions in ACARA can inform the Australian Government's consideration of its election commitment to refocus ACARA.

## **6.5 Organisational and governance structures**

### **Context**

#### ***Role and Function***

The delivery of education is a state responsibility under the Australian Constitution. Given that education is a significant input to human capital and thus to the productivity, innovation and competitiveness of our economy, the Commonwealth has a significant, valid and legitimate interest in education matters.

In a federated system there are also some areas in which the Commonwealth can exercise national leadership in education including when it may be difficult for one jurisdiction to advocate for a change in schools' policy. Good governance plays a vital role in ensuring effective national collaboration across levels of government and means more than merely co-funding the operations of ACARA.

On the basis of the continuing support by stakeholders for ACARA as expressed through this review, and the breadth of the recommendations provided in this report, the Department's view is that any reforms of the governance of ACARA envisaged in this Review can be accomplished without changes to the ACARA Act. This position is predicated on the assumption that the high level of national collaborative action in areas in ACARA's remit has served ACARA reasonably well to date and will continue to do so. If this assumption were not to hold then the Australian Government, and Education Council, may need to revisit this position. It is noteworthy that stakeholders did not advocate for amendments to ACARA's governing legislation.

### ***Oversight of ACARA's work***

ACARA's governing Commonwealth legislation requires it to perform functions in accordance with directions from Ministerial Council and in accordance with a Charter that took effect from August 2012. The Charter provides ACARA with its overarching policy directions and priorities, and requires ACARA to report annually to the Ministerial Council on progress against its current year's work plan and on its future year's work plan.

At the Ministerial Council meeting of 8 July 2011, Ministers approved *Governance Protocols for Ministerial Authorities and Companies* which established consistent planning and reporting arrangements for ACARA, AITSL, ESA and ACECQA. AITSL, ESA and ACECQA are provided with a Letter of Expectation on a two yearly basis. Section five of the protocols states that "ACARA's strategic directions are provided through their Charter, with more specific advice on work priorities through a Letter of Expectation every two years." ACARA's previous letter of expectation covered the period July 2012 to June 2014 and has not been renewed.

Based on the strategic guidance provided through the Charter and Letter of Expectation, ACARA develops four year and detailed annual work plans for consideration and approval by Council following endorsement by the ACARA Board. ACARA's four year work plan is submitted to Council with an associated budget which is funded half by the Australian Government and half by the states and territories. In addition to these requirements each year ACARA develops its budget portfolio statement.

ACARA is also currently operating within its first quadrennium work plan and budget approved by Education Council in October 2011. Education Council is due to discuss and approve a second quadrennial work plan and budget in September 2015.

### ***ACARA Board***

The ACARA Act provides for a Board of 13 members, with a chair, deputy chair and one member nominated by each of the co-funding Ministers of Education (Commonwealth, states and territories), and one nominated each by the National Catholic Education Commission and the Independent Schools Council of Australia. All nominations are agreed by Education Council before they are appointed by the Australian Government Minister for Education. It should be noted that thus far nominations of the chair and deputy chair have also been made by the Australian Government Minister.

### ***Delivery***

#### ***Role and Function***

The achievements to date by ACARA are viewed by the Department as representing successful national collaboration across Australia's federation. Stakeholders concur and see the operation of ACARA as consistent with the key federalist principles of: national interest, transparency and accountability, efficiency, equity, and effectiveness. Some stakeholders were concerned that the principle of subsidiarity has not applied as well as they would wish, particularly in relation to curriculum, in that any national education endeavour should take full account of state and territory constitutional responsibilities for schools.



While some stakeholders expressed concern with ACARA's establishment as a Commonwealth statutory authority, the Department's view is that no compelling argument was provided for challenging this *status quo*. This reaffirms the findings of the Review of the National architecture to support SCSEEC reforms - Final Report which reviewed the national education architecture of ACARA, ESA and AITSL, including whether ACARA had the most appropriate institutional form in light of its respective functions and whether alternative forms of delivery could enable efficiency improvements.

It should be acknowledged that while this national collaboration has allowed for better practice to be shared across different jurisdictions this does not mean that the process has been easy as co-funders' positions on key deliverables like senior secondary curriculum or the National Report on Schooling in Australia have not always aligned with each other and have evolved over time.

States and territories have also come to discussions, particularly of curriculum and assessment, from very different historical bases. The differing needs and views of stakeholders often reflect localised differences in approaches across the three areas of curriculum, assessment and reporting. The Department recognises that ACARA has endeavoured to acknowledge and harness these differences for the benefit of national reform. Along the way decisions have had to be made about the best way forward in the form of a 'settlement' and compromise, drawing upon the array of perspectives about what matters most in the education of young Australians. This is also acknowledged in the stakeholder consultation report.

Six years on from its inception ACARA has gone through the various teething problems that any organisation of this nature would experience in establishing itself on the national educational landscape. It has also gone through significant change since its formation. As it moves into its next phase, the Department, along with a number of stakeholders, consider it is timely to refresh elements of ACARA's organisational structure and governance.

A number of stakeholders identified that ACARA has matured as an organisation with a greater clarity of purpose. However, some stakeholders were critical of ACARA for not taking a more strategic role in performing its functions although they acknowledged the constraints imposed by the structures, processes and instruments that currently govern ACARA's operations. The Department's view is that the first step to ACARA being a more strategic organisation is for its governance to be made less constrictive.

It would be timely to consider whether ACARA's role should shift from being almost completely focused on delivering important national reform initiatives to include a more strategic or future-facing one. This would necessarily include discussion of what level of national collaboration is needed across the curriculum, assessment and reporting systems in Australia. This could be an important inclusion in discussions on ACARA's future role in the next funding quadrennium for 2016-2020.

### ***Oversight of ACARA’s work***

The Review of the National architecture to support SCSEEC reforms - Final Report<sup>11</sup> examined the institutional and governance arrangements across ACARA, ESA and AITSL. This Review noted that ACARA’s institutional form and current board arrangements were ‘fit for purpose’. However, several stakeholders commented that ACARA’s Board could strengthen its corporate governance role and take a more active role to drive the organisation’s strategic, rather than operational, directions as projects mature.

ACARA’s current reporting and accountability arrangements are also complex. ACARA provides a written report to Education Council against its Charter and annual work plan on a yearly basis as well as providing written progress reports at each Council meeting. ACARA also provides an annual report for submission to the Australian Parliament and participates in Parliamentary estimates processes. In accordance with the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* ACARA also provides a monthly report to the Commonwealth Minister. Hence, ACARA participates in two streams of reporting reflecting different forms of accountability to the Education Council and to the Australian Parliament.

The stakeholder consultation report acknowledges that the Charter, currently four pages in length, is the key instrument through which Education Council exercises its responsibility for determining policy directions for ACARA and providing advice on its ongoing work program. It also outlines how ACARA will report on its policy directions and work priorities. In this way, the Charter provides a level of accountability – it ensures that Education Council continues to support ACARA’s work in relation to any emerging issues as well as helping ACARA to ensure it continues to meet the strategic needs of the Education Council.

Since ACARA’s Charter was originally drafted prior to ACARA becoming operational, there has been substantial discussion at Council with regard to ACARA’s future work plans and priorities. The work with which ACARA was tasked covered a range of strategic directions and developments related to curriculum, assessment and reporting, which were expected to span over several years. Given that the initial Charter was issued prior to ACARA becoming operational and only included its initial activities, education ministers decided to change revision of the Charter from an annual revision to revision any time by decision of Ministers, or through any other process that the Education Council determined.<sup>12</sup>

While oversight and control of funding through Education Council was viewed by stakeholders as important there was a view that the current authorising instruments - Charter, Letter of Expectation and one year and four year work plans - should be pared back or streamlined. Acknowledging the current multiple layers of governance documents, the stakeholder consultation report recommended that the Letter of Expectation element should be entirely removed.

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<sup>11</sup> Refer to: <http://www.nousgroup.com/au/work/advice-on-the-national-architecture-to-deliver-education-reform-priorities>. The report is not publicly available.

<sup>12</sup> The current wording of the Charter issued to take effect from 3 August 2012 states that the Charter is able to be amended at any time by resolution at a Standing Council meeting, resolution through an out of session process conducted by the Standing Council Secretariat, or through any other process that the Standing Council determines.

### **ACARA Board**

The stakeholder consultation report canvassed the issue of whether the current Board arrangements are ‘fit for purpose’ and leverage the best delivery arrangements. Maintaining representation on the Board of all Australian governments and schooling sectors was identified as a threshold issue.

It is noteworthy that the Review of the Australian Curriculum recommended that the Board of ACARA move away from a representational model to one where nomination to the Board is more explicitly based on expertise aligned with the major priorities identified in the quadrennial work plan. The Review of the Australian Curriculum also made a case that there is the potential for a conflict of interest particularly in senior officers responsible for curriculum, assessment and certification in states and territories also being on the ACARA Board. It is the Department’s view that it has been beneficial to have deep curriculum expertise in particular on the Board to ensure that the products delivered by ACARA gave adequate consideration of the practicabilities of implementation in the federalist Australian context. The challenge for Board members with deep expertise is collectively to ensure that the Board discussion is held at a sufficiently strategic level.

### **Future role and priorities**

#### ***Role and function***

The Department’s view is that it is appropriate for members of Education Council to recommit to an agreed purpose of ACARA as a key body in the national education architecture and to the educational principles that guide its work once ACARA’s next quadrennial budget is approved. This purpose could be drafted by the Schools Policy Group for consideration by Education Council, and should give consideration to ACARA’s own description of its work:

*The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is an independent statutory authority that will improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment and reporting.*

The educational principles that would guide ACARA’s future work should also be drafted and agreed through Education Council processes. These may include principles focused on national educational quality and improvement, accountability, national interest considerations, transparency, consistency, sustainability, efficiency and equity as well as effectiveness of delivery.

The Department shares the views of stakeholders that it is timely to change some of the governance arrangements for ACARA. The current arrangements are complex and some simplification particularly of the authorising instruments, would better position ACARA for the future. This largely reflects the maturation of ACARA from a start-up organisation to one that has delivered a number of key outcomes across its three primary business lines.

With the achievement of a number of key outcomes of national interest in curriculum, assessment and reporting, one possibility is that there is no longer a role for the Commonwealth’s involvement in ACARA. The policy momentum and funding for ACARA’s work in curriculum, assessment and reporting could be provided entirely by the states and territories. This would mean that the Commonwealth would no longer contribute to education policy or funding in curriculum, assessment and reporting through ACARA.

On the other hand, a case could be made for closer Commonwealth involvement to ensure adequate attention to matters of national interest in education. For example, ACARA could be restructured to be a smaller national entity focused on curriculum and assessment expertise and the Commonwealth could take on the role of sustaining the delivery of key national priorities and objectives such as ACARA's data collection, analysis and management functions, noting that the Commonwealth has an existing data collection role with the non-government sector. This would be consistent with the Australian Government's election commitment to refocus ACARA and also recommendation 24 of the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

The Department notes that there was no particular push from stakeholders for any change to the level of Commonwealth involvement in ACARA's policy or funding. There was also no particular support expressed either for a more limited role for ACARA, such as that envisaged by the Review of the Australian Curriculum. Further, there was considerable opposition expressed to the Department taking on data and reporting functions from ACARA, as is envisaged in the Government's election commitment to refocus ACARA. The Department also notes that fulfilling this election commitment would require changes to the ACARA Act.

In terms of options for possible governance reform for ACARA, the stakeholder consultation report made a case that a deputy chief executive officer position be created within ACARA to help navigate and work effectively through issues of substance in ACARA's complex operating environment. The Department's view is that the Board of ACARA is best placed to consider this idea and decide whether to bring it forward for consideration by the appropriate national governance body.

It has been timely to review the role, function and governance of ACARA six years after the ACARA Act received royal assent. The Department recommends that a review of ACARA on similar terms to this one be conducted in a further six years.

### ***Oversight of ACARA's work***

There is consensus among stakeholders that with the maturation of ACARA's work program it is timely that ACARA be given some latitude to adopt a more strategic stance. This will be most effective if it cascades from a revised and more strategic Charter aligned with other changes in governance.

The stakeholder consultation report heard support for the responsibility and endorsement of these documents to be devolved within broad parameters set by the Education Council, for example, to AEEYSOC. The Department is of the view that this is a highly desirable change that should be discussed as a priority at Education Council.

The stakeholder consultation report recommends that the development of a new Charter in the form of a framework that focuses on higher level strategic directions be based on ACARA's expected contribution to national educational policy. The Department concurs with this suggestion and sees it as having significant merit as a first step in simplifying the multiple layers of oversight under which ACARA currently operates.

The Department strongly supports this proposal in the stakeholder consultation report of simplifying ACARA's authorising instruments and is of the view that these are important matters and warrant

timely consideration and action. Education Council could consider revising the Charter to be a more strategic document and formally removing from consideration the (expired) Letter of Expectation. ACARA's work plans should be re-drafted to have a stronger emphasis on the key outcomes that need to be achieved to deliver on Education Council's expectations and ACARA's agreed mission rather than the current practice of reflecting a long list of tasks.

Relaxing the very tight strictures of ACARA's oversight and governance is a necessary early step for ACARA to become the more strategic organisation to which some stakeholders felt it should aspire. It will also help free up executive 'bandwidth' to focus on delivering online assessment and contribute to ACARA's future focus on research to inform development of the second generation of national approaches to curriculum, assessment and reporting.

Any changes to the existing governance arrangements will need to be considered holistically and reflected in an updated Charter. The Department sees that the Charter will require updating once Education Council has endorsed the next four year work plan (2016/2017 to 2019/2020) and associated budget.

While Education Council should continue to have close oversight of ACARA's work and progress the Department believes there is merit in focusing Ministers' time on having oversight of a smaller number of more strategic elements of ACARA's work. In the current context this would include the delivery of NAPLAN online, in light of its importance, complexity (and thus risk) and size.

In addition, consistent with the stakeholder consultation report's recommendations, the Department strongly supports AEEYSOC being delegated authority to provide general oversight of ACARA's work. As noted earlier ACARA's annual work plan could be approved by AEEYSOC. AEEYSOC could also monitor progress by ACARA against its four year work plan with the option of annual reporting of progress to Education Council. Approval of ACARA's four year budget and work plan could continue to be carried out by Education Council on a quadrennial basis.

### **ACARA Board**

While the Department accepts the argument for, and endorses the desirability of, a more skills-based board for ACARA, the Australian Government acknowledges the sovereignty of nominating authorities. These authorities put forward representatives they consider to be best able to contribute to the functioning of the ACARA Board while exercising their duties on the Board in accordance with the obligations of directors under the *Corporations Act 2001* and the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*.

Good corporate governance requires that Board members are obliged to act in the best interests of the organisation. This does not preclude a representative Board where the representatives collectively have the skills and attributes of a skills-based Board. Issues of a representative nature can sometimes be resolved through Education Council processes, including the Data Strategy Group, Schools Policy Group and AEEYSOC. Consistent with its view that no change of the ACARA Act is required at this time, the Department does not advocate for any change in the process of appointment of members to the ACARA Board.

The Department asserts that the challenge before all nominating authorities is to ensure an appropriate balance of expertise within the current system of Board nominations. This will require nominating authorities to assess explicitly the expertise required by ACARA and how they can each best contribute to the Board having an appropriate balance of skills.

As curriculum enters a period of stability while ACARA focuses increasingly on online assessment, a Board heavily weighted towards curriculum expertise may not best serve ACARA and thus indirectly Education Council. The renewal of the Board, as members' 3-year terms come up and longer serving members reach their maximum 6-year terms, ensures opportunities for progressive Board renewal. The Department is of the view that this is consistent with better practice in corporate governance.

The Department believes that all nominating authorities should be encouraged to consider carefully the changing strategic environment in which ACARA finds itself particularly as it moves its focus from curriculum development to the implementation of online assessment. It would be beneficial if the skills reflected on the ACARA Board can, through normal turnover of staggered appointments, accommodate the need for a significant change in expertise on the Board in particular, and ensure that representatives collectively possess the necessary expertise.

Members of the ACARA Board are nominated by each Australian government as well as the National Catholic Education Commission and the Independent Schools Council of Australia. These latter nominations reflect the significant role of the non-government sector in the provision of school education in Australia. The Department notes the anomaly that the National Catholic Education Commission and the Independent Schools Council of Australia nominate board members but do not make any financial contribution to ACARA's operations.

### ***Advisory Structures***

The stakeholder consultation report noted that ACARA has made good use of advisory groups to facilitate an inclusive approach and to inform its consideration of issues by key stakeholders and experts. The Department concurs with the point made in the stakeholder consultation report that these structures should be reviewed and streamlined, in some cases significantly, to align with ACARA's future role. ACARA should also be encouraged to ensure it debriefs stakeholders on the resolution of issues, including the extent to which their inputs were used and why.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations may assist in informing discussion around finalisation of ACARA's next quadrennial work plan for 2016/17 to 2019/20:

- G1: Education Council revises the current Charter based on the next endorsed quadrennial work plan and budget.
- G2: Education Council removes the Letter of Expectation from the suite of authorising instruments under which ACARA operates.
- G3: Education Council delegates authority to AEEYSOC to monitor the progress of ACARA's work against the Charter including progress against the one and four year work plan and budget within the agreed parameters set by Education Council.

- G4: AEEYSOC maximises alignment between ACARA’s planning documents – the annual work plan, the four-year plan and related budget as well as the *Commonwealth Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* requirement for a four year corporate plan.
- G5: Education Council reviews ACARA’s role, function and governance every six years against the aims and objectives of ACARA’s Charter.
- G6: Education Council considers moving towards an ACARA Board appointment process that retains the current representational nominations and includes a more collaborative assessment of the skills of board members.
- G7: ACARA reviews and simplifies its advisory and consultative mechanisms to make them more efficient, effective and strategically aligned with future priorities.

## 7. Attachment A – Terms of Reference

### *Terms of Reference*

The Review of ACARA is guided by the following terms of reference:

- The ACARA review will be conducted by the Department of Education and will assess the appropriateness of ACARA’s ongoing role and functions against the aims and objectives of ACARA’s charter.
- In doing this, the Department will consider:
  - ACARA’s assigned functions as set out in the ACARA Act, the ACARA charter, previous letters of expectation, and Ministerial Council directives
  - ACARA’s delivery against its charter, previous letters of expectation and Ministerial Council directives, including a qualitative assessment of the quality and impact of ACARA’s work
  - ACARA’s organisational structures and governance and their impact on the delivery of ACARA’s functions
  - any advantages or disadvantages associated with the co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities
  - the level of satisfaction with ACARA’s role, functions, processes and the connection to ACARA’s annual and quadrennial work plans
  - the outcome of any reviews, evaluations or other relevant projects/documents relating to the role and functions of ACARA, including the Review of the Australian Curriculum.
- The Department will provide a written report to the Commonwealth Minister for Education by 8 June 2015.



## **8. Attachment B – Stakeholder Consultations - Final Report**



# **Review of ACARA - Stakeholder Consultations**

## **Final Report to the Australian Government Department of Education and Training**

**17 July 2015**

**Grahame Cook PSM**

**Director**

## Disclaimer

While Grahame Cook Consulting Pty Ltd endeavours to provide reliable analysis and believes the material it presents is accurate, it will not be liable for any claim by any party acting on such information.

This document takes into account the formal Terms of Reference for the Review of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority and the requirements of the Australian Government Department of Education and Training.

## Acknowledgments

Grahame Cook Consulting would like to thank all the stakeholders who were interviewed for the purpose of contributing to the review of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority. Without exception stakeholders shared their views frankly and provided valuable insights and information. The goodwill demonstrated by all stakeholders is very much appreciated.

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While acknowledging the generous assistance received, the views expressed in this report and any errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the author.

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## List of Acronyms

ACACA	Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
ACARA Act	<i>Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 (as amended)</i>
ACECQA	Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority
AEYSOC	Australian Education, Employment and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ANR	National Report on Schooling in Australia
BCG	Boston Consulting Group
BEMU	Benchmarking of Educational Measurements Unit
BOSTES	Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW
CAC Act	<i>Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997 (replaced by Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013)</i>
CCAFL	Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages
CDC	Curriculum Development Centre (1973 – 1989)
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
ESA	Education Services Australia
F-10	Foundation to Year 10 (curriculum)
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
Melbourne Declaration	<i>Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians</i>
NADC	National Schools Assessment and Data Centre (never operational)
NAP	National Assessment Program
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCB	National Curriculum Board (2008)
NQF	National Quality Framework
PGPA Act	<i>Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013 (as amended)</i>

PISA	Programme of International Student Assessment
PMRT	Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce
RAC	Review of the Australian Curriculum
RoGS	Report on Government Services (Productivity Commission)
SCSEEC	Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (a COAG ministerial council, since 2014 called the Education Council)
TEMAG	Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group

## Executive summary

This report on stakeholder consultations was commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (the Department) as part of a review of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) required by Section 44 of the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008* as amended (the ACARA Act). The terms of reference for the review being undertaken by the Australian Government Department are included in Appendix A, along with an outline of the methodology used in preparing this report.

### Key issues relating to ACARA

A key message from the stakeholder consultations was that ACARA is now seen as a valued part of Australia's national educational architecture, which for schools comprises three entities – ACARA, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and Education Services Australia (ESA). ACARA, AITSL and ESA each has a distinct contribution to make to quality schooling across the nation. Stakeholders consider that since its establishment, ACARA has made some significant achievements in challenging circumstances, often against tight deadlines. Operating in the difficult sphere of Commonwealth-State and Territory education policy and politics, ACARA has established a place for itself and has delivered significant results.

One major achievement is the development of the Australian Curriculum. In reflecting on this achievement, many stakeholders recalled the long history of national curriculum development initiatives, which had failed to have much impact on the work of schools across Australia. The Australian Curriculum is well supported by stakeholders consulted and meets a major commitment of Commonwealth, state and territory governments, set out in the *Melbourne Declaration on the National Goals of Schooling*, to promote a world-class curriculum.

Stakeholders pointed also to ACARA's successful management of a rigorous and effective National Assessment Program (NAP), including the annual testing of literacy and numeracy skills in the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and a three-year cycle of sample tests in science literacy, civics and citizenship and ICT literacy. There is great interest from all stakeholders in the development by ACARA, working with ESA, of adaptive online NAPLAN testing, due to be implemented from 2017. This is seen as having the potential to deliver substantial educational benefits for students and teachers and to make a major contribution to education improvement.

The development and management of the *My School* website is also seen as a significant achievement for ACARA. While improvements to the site are expected to follow two recent reviews, stakeholders see *My School* as a sound mechanism for providing nationally consistent data on schools across all jurisdictions and sectors to parents and the community, enhancing the transparency and accountability of schools.



These are the major ‘deliverables’ expected of ACARA in the detailed directions given to the organisation by Commonwealth, state and territory ministers of education through the Education Council and its predecessors (ministerial council). Most stakeholders consider that ACARA has met the expectations set out for it. There are, however, some critics and criticisms of ACARA in terms of what it has done or failed to do, how it has gone about its work and the quality of its work. There are also major sensitivities about the perceived influence of certain jurisdictions (especially the Commonwealth) over ACARA, its role and functions vis-à-vis the responsibilities of the states and territories, and its governance structure.

It is also apparent that there are significant differences of view between various stakeholder groups in relation to particular issues, reflecting different roles, responsibilities and experiences. Similarly there are differences within broad stakeholder groups such as the states and territories, which reflect amongst other things differences in legislation, scale and capability and education traditions. These differences are reflected in general terms throughout the report.

The main findings from the stakeholder consultations on the purpose, functions and governance of ACARA are discussed below.

### **Purpose of ACARA (Chapter 1)**

ACARA was established as one element of an intergovernmental commitment by the Commonwealth, states and territories to work together to promote high quality schooling, in the interests of students, national productivity and wellbeing. ACARA’s particular role is to raise curriculum quality and foster greater accountability and transparency across the nation and to bring about greater consistency in Australian schooling. Reflecting the ACARA Act, the organisation’s mission is described in its website as “improving the learning of all young Australians, through world class school curriculum, assessment and reporting”.

The rationale for a national endeavour in these areas of school education, which are primarily a state and territory responsibility, is to pursue the national interest in having a high quality, high equity education system, to gain efficiencies which can come when jurisdictions work together, to reduce duplication and to learn from other jurisdictions. Stakeholders agreed that it is in the national interest to work together through ACARA on curriculum, assessment and reporting. They acknowledge the benefits of transparency and accountability and the need to build a nationally consistent evidence base for assessing progress and measuring performance. They see the operation of ACARA as being consistent with the key federalist principles of national interest, transparency and accountability, and efficiency, equity and effectiveness, even though some stakeholders have concerns that the principle of subsidiarity is not applied as well as they would wish.

ACARA has the continuing support of stakeholders as a shared national commitment to improving education outcomes for all Australian students.

## **Role and functions of ACARA (Chapter 2)**

The scope of ACARA’s functions in relation to curriculum, assessment, data collection and reporting are set out in Section 6 of the ACARA Act. In brief, they are to:

- develop and administer a national school curriculum;
- develop and administer national assessments; and
- collect, analyse and report on student and schools data.

This Section of the Act is permissive, specifying a frame for action. The Act also, however, stipulates that ACARA must perform its functions in accordance with directions given to it by ministerial council in writing, and in accordance with a Charter (reproduced in Appendix B)

ACARA’s Charter makes provision for a further layer of guidance and control, a Letter of Expectation (reproduced in Appendix C) issued by ministerial council. In addition, in accordance with procedures determined by ministerial council, ACARA is required to provide a written progress report to each ministerial council meeting and for ACARA’s annual and quadrennial work plans to be presented to ministers. Major pieces of work, including curriculum documents, also need to be approved by ministers.

Together, these instruments governing ACARA’s operations leave the organisation with little capacity for adding or shifting priorities, taking on new activities or acting on its own initiative without first obtaining the prior approval of ministerial council.

There is an interest among many stakeholders in enabling ACARA to operate more strategically and flexibly, take a stronger leadership role in relation to its main functions and use its expertise in a more proactive way. This is reflective of a more established, mature organisation. Stakeholders acknowledge, however, that at present ACARA is constrained by the extent of detailed oversight and prescription in the present arrangements.

The decision to co-locate the three functions of curriculum, assessment and reporting in ACARA was taken because of the need for careful alignment between them. High performing education systems are known to link curriculum content, clear standards and accountability. Stakeholder consultations on the design of the national education architecture undertaken in 2008 and 2013 agreed on the benefits of keeping the three functions in the one body. This position was confirmed during the consultations for this report, with most stakeholders seeing merit in having these functions within ACARA.

## **Curriculum (Chapter 3)**

Curriculum is the most contentious of ACARA’s three functions and has absorbed most of the organisation’s resources and attention to date. ACARA has completed the development of the learning content and achievement standards for the Foundation to Year 10 (F-10) national curriculum in a range of agreed subjects and has also developed senior secondary curriculum for 15 subjects across English, mathematics, science, history and geography. Overall, across Foundation to Year 12, over 30 subjects have been developed and published on the Australian Curriculum website.

The Review of the Australian Curriculum (RAC) in 2014 made a number of recommendations for strengthening the curriculum, addressing issues such as overcrowding, balance, parental engagement and improving accessibility for students with disability. The RAC also recorded some reservations about patchy implementation and flaws in conceptualisation and design. Governments have now responded to these recommendations, with the objective of ensuring that the national curriculum is ‘robust, balanced and relevant.’ Stakeholders consider that the Australian Curriculum, developed through extensive consultation and collaboration by ACARA, is a major achievement which has benefited those who participated in its development and represents a valuable resource for schools.

They see the value of having a common national core curriculum, which sets common standards and ‘recognises the entitlement of students to a core of knowledge, skills, understandings and values that will provide a foundation for their future contribution to Australia’s society’. Where concern arises is in implementation. While some jurisdictions are ready to adopt the curriculum as written, most argue for a flexible approach to implementation, consistent with states’ constitutional responsibilities for schools. They consider that allowing adoption and adaptation of the curriculum in varying ways by jurisdictions and schools is consistent with the principles of federalism, takes account of the diverse needs of schools in different locations, and allows innovation without diminishing the value of the national curriculum. They generally see no role for ACARA in monitoring the actual implementation of the Australian Curriculum in schools.

The development of the senior secondary curriculum by ACARA under its Charter has been problematic for most stakeholders because it has come up against the strong commitment of states and territories to their own end-of-school assessment and reporting regimes and in many cases conflicted with the roles and responsibilities of jurisdictions’ own curriculum, assessment and certification authorities. The general view from the consultations was that further work on the senior secondary curriculum should only be undertaken by ACARA following further discussion or at the request of jurisdictions.

Looking forward, all stakeholders saw value in ACARA retaining a curriculum function but of a different kind, requiring fewer resources. The thrust of the revised function would be to maintain a curriculum leadership role, including research on good curriculum practice in high performing school systems, information-sharing on experience with the Australian Curriculum, facilitation of cooperative curriculum work between jurisdictions, innovative work on curriculum content, especially in areas of national importance such as science and mathematics, and curriculum delivery, and international benchmarking. While not ruling out ACARA working collaboratively to refresh the national curriculum at some point in the future, most stakeholders did not envisage this being done in the course of the next four year work plan.

## Assessment (Chapter 4)

ACARA is seen to have successfully managed a rigorous and effective national assessment program through the annual NAPLAN tests, sample testing and the publication of NAP reports. While there are some concerns about aspects of the NAP, including concerns in several jurisdictions about the level of the minimum standard, all stakeholders accept the need for a national approach to assessment, setting common standards, ensuring a rigorous system of assessment and providing an objective and sound evidence base for measuring individual student achievement against national standards and for comparing various cohorts both against national standards and each other. Assessment results help identify areas requiring attention and inform decisions on education policy, practices and resourcing. A national body is needed to carry out this function efficiently and effectively.

A fundamental purpose of assessment however is diagnostic. For this reason, stakeholders are universally enthusiastic about the potential of online adaptive testing. They see this as being transformational in its potential education benefits, enhancing the diagnostic function of the tests and so providing more support for teaching and learning in the classroom. It will also align the NAP more closely with practice in schools, as students increasingly work on keyboards and in an online, digital environment. It will improve the testing experience for students, deliver more timely results and provide teachers and schools with more targeted and detailed information on their students' performance.

ACARA shares responsibility for delivering NAPLAN online with ESA, with ESA constructing the online assessment platform while ACARA has overall management responsibility for the process. Stakeholders see the implementation of online testing as a high risk activity for ACARA and are concerned about resources, capabilities and coordination. They believe the introduction of online testing should be the major focus of ACARA's work for the near future.

Looking to the future, beyond the implementation of online testing, many stakeholders see a role for ACARA as a centre of expertise in assessment, involved in research, information-sharing, benchmarking and communication. Some of the important issues on which expert advice is needed are the balance between sample versus whole cohort testing, standard-setting and further sample test development.

## Reporting (Chapter 5)

Under its reporting function, ACARA is responsible for a range of data collection and reporting activities, including the *My School* website and producing the National Report on Schooling in Australia (ANR). The reporting activities of ACARA are intended to serve the objectives of greater accountability and transparency, which are important dimensions of education policy in countries that perform well in international tests.

*My School* is designed particularly with the purpose of bringing greater transparency to the performance of schools, providing the community with information on each school in Australia, including students' literacy and numeracy performance, and comparisons with

schools serving a similar student population. The comparisons are meant to provide information to support improvements in schools and school choice.

Stakeholders are satisfied with ACARA's role in relation to *My School*. They see the website as a sound mechanism for providing nationally consistent data on schools across all jurisdictions and sectors to parents and the community and as having an established place in Australian education, publishing information that is used in public discussion of schooling. They believe it meets well the important objective of public transparency and accountability at the individual school level, although are less convinced of its value in contributing to improved school performance. Those directly responsible for school improvement, school authorities and schools, are not major users of the site as they have access to other more timely data, which is more useful to them in driving school improvement.

Stakeholders commended ACARA for its management of the website and for overcoming to a large extent early difficulties associated with sensitivity about the misuse or misinterpretation of data and for improving the reliability and validity of particular data sets, particularly the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) and school financial data, although residual reservations about these data sets remain. There is little appetite, however, for further large scale investment in *My School*, other than to assure the integrity of data and improve the usability of the site for its main audience. Two recent reviews of *My School*, released after the consultations for this report, suggest ways in which the complexity of the site can be reduced and information made more accessible.

Stakeholders universally accept the need for and value of a national report on schooling outcomes. They believe that reporting transparently on school effectiveness is an appropriate function to be carried out at the national level, essential for accountability and helpful in providing a national backdrop of consistent data against which jurisdictions can evaluate their own performance. The ANR, however, is not highly regarded. Stakeholders are frustrated by the long time it takes to get the report published and the unimaginative style of presentation. They believe that with its other commitments and priorities, ACARA has not been able to give the reporting function, other than *My School*, due attention. They see considerable scope for ACARA to transform the ANR into a meaningful and usable performance report.

Almost all stakeholders strongly oppose recent proposals to transfer ACARA's data collection and reporting functions to the Department or move them to a separate body. This reflects mainly issues around ownership and use of data as well as the splitting of related functions and costs of a separate body.

For the future, stakeholders believe ACARA's reporting function merits greater attention than has been possible to date, and that ACARA should develop its data capability so as to become the authoritative source of school performance data, maximising the value of the data available to it (recognising that ACARA only holds de-identified data) and providing insights into trends and achievements.

## **National architecture (Chapter 6)**

ACARA is required by its Charter to give priority to working closely with AITSL and ESA. ACARA's Letter of Expectation asks it to continue to build on the current productive relationships with AITSL and ESA 'in order to maintain the cohesion and effectiveness of the national educational architecture'. Similarly, the Letters of Expectation for AITSL and ESA emphasise the relationship between the mandates of the three bodies.

Each of these bodies has a different formal relationship with ministerial council although each is answerable to education ministers as a collective. The structure and shape of the national education architecture was closely examined when ACARA was established in 2008, and again in 2013. These reviews, based also on stakeholder consultation, supported maintaining the present structures. The advantages of doing so are to provide stability and continuity, with the least disruption; to provide for clear specialisation by a dedicated entity; and to maximise the value of previous investment as the current system architecture is still maturing.

These arguments remain persuasive. Stakeholders generally consider that the three national bodies work well together and also generally work well with their state and territory counterpart bodies. They would expect further synergies to develop as each organisation matures.

Stakeholders consider that a close relationship between ACARA and ESA in particular is critical, especially with their shared role in the development of NAPLAN online. This will require careful oversight and close coordination. Once NAPLAN online is established, stakeholders foresee a closer relationship between ACARA and AITSL as momentum builds around enhancing the skills of teachers and principals.

## **Governance and structure (Chapter 7)**

There is general recognition by stakeholders that ACARA's governance arrangements are complex with some inherent tensions (a diagram of ACARA's governance and advisory structure is at Appendix D). In addition to the legal and administrative framework discussed above, as a Commonwealth authority, ACARA is subject to the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* as amended (PGPA Act).

The composition of the ACARA Board is designed to be representative of the Commonwealth, each of the states and territories, and the Catholic and independent school sectors. Stakeholders saw the representative composition of the Board as being crucial to ACARA's role as a national body and in retaining a sense of ownership by all jurisdictions and all sectors.

At the same time many stakeholders indicated that membership of the Board, together with the prescriptive nature of the ministerial council's instruments of control, created some frustrations and on occasion impacted on the workings of the Board. In addition the large turnover of members (35 by the time the consultations were conducted) of ministerial council since ACARA was established has created issues around lack of ownership of decisions,

willingness to settle issues, and agreement on strategic directions. Nevertheless most stakeholders supported continued oversight by ministerial council.

Stakeholders noted that ministerial council procedures require all issues on its agenda to be first considered by the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC), which has in turn a number of sub-groups.

Consequently, ACARA ministerial council papers are scrutinised through the AEEYSOC process. As many members of the ACARA Board work closely with AEEYSOC and are involved in briefing their respective Ministers, there can be an inherent conflict in their various roles.

In order to inform its consideration of key issues and to engage and learn from stakeholders, ACARA has established a significant number of advisory groups. Many stakeholders considered that while the consultative processes had usually worked well, there was scope for rationalisation. Some stakeholders also expressed concern that the recommendations of the advisory groups were not always taken on board and the subsequent decision making processes were often opaque.

Stakeholders consider that the joint funding of ACARA by all jurisdictions, with the Commonwealth contributing half, is appropriate for a national body. The non-government sector does not contribute funding to ACARA's budget.

Considering the maturity of ACARA as an organisation and the completion of much of its work on the national curriculum, a number of stakeholders considered that the time is right to make changes in its governance arrangements, which could provide a more permissive authorising environment, and streamline some processes. However it was considered that change could be difficult and would require political leadership, and that all jurisdictions, including the Commonwealth, would need to compromise to achieve a good outcome. In most cases an incremental approach was favoured. There was little support among stakeholders for ACARA to be reconstituted in another institutional form, largely on pragmatic grounds.

Stakeholders felt that issues relating to ACARA's organisational structure and skills base were matters for ACARA, consulting with jurisdictions about changes needed as appropriate.

Changes which would assist the transition of ACARA toward being a more independent, dynamic and innovative organisation could include ministerial council agreement to focus on strategic directions rather than detailed instruction; reconceptualization of ACARA's Charter, Letter of Expectation and four year work plan and budget to allow more discretion; greater delegation of authority to AEEYSOC to oversee ACARA's operations; and a collaborative nomination process for Directors that would result in a skills-based but still representative Board.

## **Conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 8)**

The following high level recommendations are based on the major findings from stakeholder consultations and are also informed by the review of key documents and the consultant's professional judgement. The recommendations as formulated below have not been discussed with stakeholders.

It is recommended that:

1. All jurisdictions through the ministerial council renew their commitment to the objectives and purpose of ACARA as a key body in the national education architecture.
2. ACARA retain the three core functions of curriculum, assessment, data collection and reporting because of the linkages between them.
3. ACARA's future role in relation to the national curriculum be focused on national leadership, involving monitoring curriculum developments, research, information-sharing, facilitation of cooperation, innovation and benchmarking now that the key task of developing a national curriculum has been largely completed.
4. ACARA give high priority to the development and implementation of NAPLAN online because of the potential benefits of adaptive testing and more timely availability of results.
5. ACARA shift the balance of its resources and attention to its assessment function, to ensure appropriate expertise is available and all risks are addressed for the successful implementation of NAPLAN online.
6. That ACARA retain responsibility for national performance reporting and enhance its capability and capacity to take a leadership role, including to inform public discussion and policy development.
7. That the key reporting mechanisms of the *My School* website and the National Report on Schooling in Australia be made more user-friendly, timely and supported by more sophisticated data and analyses.
8. The Chairs and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of ACARA, AITSL and ESA be encouraged to continue to meet on a regular basis to facilitate coordination across the national education architecture.
9. The governance structures, authorising instruments and processes under which ACARA operates be revised with the objective of enhancing the strategic role of the Board, creating a more permissive authorising environment, and allowing ACARA to operate more independently within the strategic directions and priorities set out in its Charter. More specifically:

(a) establish through ministerial council agreement a collaborative nomination process that would result in a skills-based but representative Board; together with maintenance of maximum and staggered terms of appointment.

(b) develop a new ACARA Charter in the form of a framework that focuses on higher level strategic directions and contributions to national educational improvements.

(c) abolish the Letter of Expectation or, as a second best option, a revised approach which would focus on higher level priorities and be less prescriptive.

(d) delegate more authority to senior officials to oversee ACARA, including to approve the four year work plan and budget within broad parameters set by ministerial council.



(e) maintain the requirement for a four year work plan but provide for it to be prepared on a rolling basis consistent with Australian Government budget processes.

(f) devolve responsibility for the one year work plans to the Board and management of ACARA to be used as an organisation management mechanism.

10. The Commonwealth work with the states and territories and non-government sector, and through AEEYSOC and the ministerial council to achieve the above changes.
11. ACARA utilise the PGPA Act requirement to develop a four year corporate plan to refine the key strategies and plans that are needed to achieve the overall priorities and needs of the future.
12. ACARA reassess the resources and capabilities required to adopt a more strategic and innovative approach to undertaking its functions and develop an organisational structure that can effectively support such changes.
13. ACARA review and simplify its advisory and consultative mechanisms to make them more strategic, efficient and effective.
14. While being respectful of the roles and responsibilities of the states, territories and non-government sector, the Commonwealth continue to play a national leadership, catalytic and collaborative role with a view to improving future educational outcomes for Australian students.
15. A further review of ACARA be undertaken as part of a more holistic examination of the national educational architecture by 2020 in light of recent reforms and the importance of Australia having a high performing education system in a rapidly changing world.

# Chapter 1 - Purpose

This report on stakeholders' views on the performance, role, functions and governance of ACARA begins by considering the purpose behind the establishment of ACARA. Keeping the original purpose in mind has been an important anchor to the consultations with stakeholders and is a necessary base for examining the wide range of views on the performance of ACARA and its continuing role.

The review has also been undertaken with a sense of history – during the consultations, stakeholders drew attention to earlier attempts to initiate national action in the area of school curriculum, assessment and reporting which pre-dated the establishment of ACARA in 2008 by several decades. ACARA has been able to build on and learn from this legacy. These past attempts, which are considered in more detail later in the report, are a useful reminder to take account of what has worked and not worked in the past, and to be alert to the volatility of school education politics in the Australian federation.

## **A national role**

Inevitably a multi-functional body like ACARA has multiple purposes, and for a national body like ACARA, there are many different understandings and interpretations of those purposes from the perspective of governments, school authorities and the body itself. A school education body set up in the Australian federal system, in the dynamic environment of education policy, has a difficult path to navigate to satisfy all the expectations of it. The nine governments that signed up for the establishment of ACARA and its national functions in 2008 are not the same as the governments of 2015 in either political persuasion or personnel. At the time of the stakeholder consultations a total of 35 Commonwealth, state and territory ministers have had responsibility for ACARA at ministerial council meetings over the six years of its existence, with the maximum length of responsibility by any one minister (a state minister) being three years.

Discussion of the purpose of ACARA and the appropriate role for a national body in relation to school curriculum, assessment and reporting quickly became a centrepiece of conversation with stakeholders consulted for this report. Australian government officials looked to ACARA to advance a national agenda. State and territory representatives tended to have different positions on some key issues, depending on whether they were from large, middle-sized or small jurisdictions. Representatives of school authorities tended to focus on particular aspects of ACARA's work of special interest or concern to their schools, with non-government sector representatives also reflecting on their different relationship with the Commonwealth government. For state and territory curriculum and assessment bodies, the main focus of discussion was the future curriculum role of ACARA, which they approached from different perspectives, in the light of their varying starting points. Differences could also be discerned in the views of former and present Board members, reflecting the different experience of directing a start-up and a more mature organisation. Principals and parent groups valued a

national approach and the opportunity to engage with ACARA on a range of issues. An appreciation of these divergent positions is important to understanding the varying assessments of ACARA's performance to date and drawing conclusions about its future role.

Perhaps surprisingly, since ACARA is jointly owned and closely directed by all governments, there is no clear consensus among stakeholders on ACARA's purposes. This was particularly evident in discussions of the national role in school curriculum. Clearly the school curriculum is a much more contentious area of national activity than assessment and reporting.

### **National interest objectives**

National education initiatives are consistently presented and acknowledged by stakeholders as serving the national interest in having a high quality and equitable education system, both for collective economic and social reasons and for individual life chances. This is the overall policy objective Australian governments sought to meet through the establishment of ACARA and the range of other education initiatives agreed by heads of government and education ministers in 2008. As in other OECD countries, extensive investment in education by Australian governments over time has been driven by a human capital agenda, which connects the skills and knowledge of the population with national productivity and economic growth, as well as individual wellbeing. A strong evidence base exists to show that it is the quality of learning outcomes that makes the difference in both the private and public benefits of education. This drives the pursuit of policies directed at raising education performance across the board, not simply increasing education provision.

As the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) affirmed in November 2008, 'High-quality schooling supported by strong community engagement is central to Australia's future prosperity and social cohesion.' (COAG 29 November 2008:4). The national interest in improving school performance is served through investment in the dimensions of quality schooling that are known to make a difference. As a key element of the Rudd Government's education agenda, the ACARA legislation had the purpose of raising quality and introducing greater transparency to schools across Australia through a single national curriculum and 'a comprehensive and sophisticated approach to performance reporting.' (Second Reading Speech, 23 October 2008). A further objective was to bring about greater consistency in Australian schooling provision in the interests of families and students moving interstate.

The national education goals of quality, transparency and consistency have driven a succession of Commonwealth governments of all political persuasions over at least four decades to create new bodies or arrangements for curriculum development, assessment of student achievement and reporting on school performance. Together with teaching, these three dimensions – curriculum, assessment and reporting - are widely regarded as the fundamental activities of schooling, having a direct impact on education outcomes. The curriculum is important because it determines what is taught, when and to what standard. Assessment, linked to curriculum, is also essential as it is the means of identifying the progress and learning needs of individual

students, while accountability and transparency are both needed to create a learning environment that encourages innovation and excellence.

These elements of quality schooling are prioritised in the broad set of education objectives set out in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, agreed in December 2008. Promoting world class curriculum and assessment and strengthening transparency and accountability are two of the eight inter-related areas identified in the Melbourne Declaration for shared action by Australian governments in order to raise national education performance.

The relative importance of these different dimensions of the core business of schooling is not easily measurable. Research evidence on the prime importance of quality teaching is incontrovertible (e.g. Hattie 2003, OECD 2011, Schleicher 2013). Teacher quality, in all its dimensions - selection, training, development, remuneration, assessment and teacher professionalism - is paramount. It is what teachers do and how well they do it that matters most once students are in school.

After prioritising teacher quality, policies that have proven to work in improving educational performance for students involve setting high standards, providing a challenging curriculum based on the content knowledge and skills needed in modern society, pursuing rigorous assessment associated with high standards and the acquisition of complex, higher order thinking skills, supporting school autonomy coupled with appropriate accountability, and providing social and academic support to meet individual learning needs.

In addition to improved education outcomes, the national interest has a good governance dimension, which is served by the assessment and reporting functions of ACARA. Public accountability and transparency are essential to show whether public money (some \$37.8 billion in 2012 – Australian Government, December 2014:19) is well invested and to show where additional funding allocations and/or attention might be needed.

### **Benefits of a national approach**

While school authorities individually determine their own education policies, all have recognised from time to time the benefits of collective action with Commonwealth engagement. Without responsibility for running schools, the Commonwealth's role has been to identify national needs and to act as a catalyst and support for action in schools and school systems.

The first Shape of the Australian Curriculum paper explained the benefit of working nationally on the curriculum in the following terms (National Curriculum Board Shape Paper, May 2009:6):

*The commitment to develop a national curriculum . . . involves national acceptance of responsibility for high-quality, high-equity education across the country. Working nationally offers the prospect of harnessing expertise and effort in pursuit of common national goals. This national effort offers economies of scale and a substantial*

*reduction in duplication of curriculum development and support, for the benefit of students in our schools.*

In addition to the efficiencies that can be gained by working together and learning from other jurisdictions, joint effort makes it possible to agree on high standards, to set clear expectations about transparency and to develop a nationally consistent evidence base for assessing progress and measuring performance in order to compare outcomes across the nation and make comparisons with other nations.

At this level of principle, jurisdictional and other stakeholders were in firm agreement on the national interest to be served through working together on curriculum, assessment and reporting, the benefits of transparency and accountability and the efficiencies to be gained through national endeavour in these areas of schooling.

Where the agreement dissolved somewhat was generally in relation to the principle of subsidiarity – the point in practice at which a national role in these areas, particularly in relation to curriculum, might impinge on the clear, often statutory responsibilities of the jurisdiction itself.

### **Changing school policy context**

The Commonwealth policy frame for the operation of ACARA has shifted since the legislation was enacted in 2008. At that time, the Rudd Government was embarked on an ‘education revolution’ premised on the belief that ‘a world-class education system is the foundation of a competitive economy, ... underpins a dynamic labour market and ... is central to building a stronger and fairer Australia.’ The establishment of ACARA aimed to introduce ‘a new era of transparency and quality in Australian schools’ with a world class curriculum, a comprehensive performance reporting system and ‘unprecedented rigour and openness in the collection and publication of schools data.’ (Second Reading Speech, 23 October 2008)

The present Commonwealth Government’s *Students First* policy is equally committed to improving schools and education outcomes for students. The policy commits the Commonwealth to working with the states and territories, teachers and parents to focus on four key areas that will make a difference to education outcomes:

- Teacher quality
- School autonomy
- Engaging parents in education
- Strengthening the curriculum

Specific policies and programs are framed by these four priorities. Of particular relevance to the operation of ACARA are the commitments to more autonomy and a greater say for school communities and a robust national curriculum, and the connection between them.

The Coalition’s *Students First* policy statement supports the move towards a nationally consistent curriculum, recognising that the curriculum is not ‘a static document, rather one

that gets improved over time.’ To this end, and to underpin a renewed focus on curriculum quality, the Coalition Government commissioned a Review of the Australian Curriculum (RAC), which was conducted in 2013 by Dr Kevin Donnelly and Professor Kenneth Wiltshire AO. The review was designed to evaluate the robustness, independence and balance of the Australian Curriculum developed by ACARA – its main focus was the substance of the curriculum.

At the time of this consultation with stakeholders, the recommendations of the RAC on the content and quality of the Australian Curriculum had been referred to ACARA for consideration. ACARA’s response has since been presented to ministerial council, in March 2015. While some issues of curriculum content were canvassed again by stakeholders, as discussed in chapter 3, the focus of this report is on the national curriculum function rather than the content of the curriculum, and on the appropriate processes and structures for achieving the policy objective of a high quality curriculum.

There is evidence that shows the advantages of school autonomy as part of a comprehensive strategy for school improvement. The research evidence shows that education systems where schools have greater discretion in managing their resources and in making decisions about student assessment policies, courses offered, detailed course content and textbooks tend to perform at higher levels. Research also links strong parental and community engagement with schools to educational success. In high performing systems, autonomy is coupled with accountability - both administrative accountability, in terms of broad content, performance standards and achievement data, and professional accountability, where teachers are responsible to their fellow teachers and principals, and to parents. International tests such as the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) confirm that when autonomy and accountability are combined, they are associated with better student outcomes. (OECD 2011, Schleicher 2013)

The *Students First* policy also commits the Commonwealth to working cooperatively and constructively with all states and territories, respecting ‘the reality that there is not one school system in Australia’.

### **The federal context**

The federal context is a key determinant of ACARA’s acceptance, effective operation and success. National initiatives in school education have often been fraught because of the division of responsibilities between the Commonwealth and states, no matter whether they are Commonwealth-only initiatives, as some earlier attempts at national curriculum development were, or national in design, with the engagement of all states and territories and the Commonwealth in a joint effort, as ACARA is.

When ACARA was set up in 2008, cooperative federalism was a framework for ‘ongoing collaborative reform’ in education. The Commonwealth and states and territories were negotiating a number of partnership arrangements and a national education agreement reflecting shared schooling goals, with considerable funding from the Commonwealth dependent on reaching agreement on expected outcomes and measures. The COAG meeting

of November 2008 signed off on new federal financial relations which underpinned a shared commitment to cooperative working arrangements and affirmed a particular commitment to improving education and training outcomes with a view to meeting the ‘longer term imperative for the nation of boosting productivity and workforce participation.’ The federal framework was also designed to provide ‘a clearer specification of roles and responsibilities of each level of government and an improved focus on accountability for better outcomes and better service delivery.’

In this respect, the establishment of ACARA was distinguished from previous Commonwealth-led initiatives in curriculum, assessment and reporting, which date back to the establishment of the Curriculum Development Centre as a Commonwealth statutory body in 1973. The conception of the national role of ACARA reflected in its legislation is a cooperative, collaborative one, with the clear expectation of improved outcomes for all Australian students and a strong emphasis on transparency and accountability.

It was of particular relevance to the consultations undertaken for this report that the Commonwealth Government had recently embarked on a review of federalism. The federalism review is being undertaken through a White Paper process, and has the object of strengthening the way the federal system works by being clear about who is responsible for what and enhancing the autonomy, flexibility and accountability of governments at all levels.

Stakeholders generally recognised this process as an opportunity to clarify aspects of the Commonwealth’s role in schooling. While the review of ACARA needs to be completed before the federalism White Paper is produced at the end of 2015, stakeholders found the principles adopted in the review of federalism for testing appropriate responsibilities and accountabilities a useful frame for considering the appropriateness of ACARA’s functions and role. The principles of particular relevance are:

1. National interest considerations
2. Accountability for the quality and efficiency of services delivered and outcomes achieved
3. Subsidiarity, where responsibility lies with the lowest level of government possible, allowing flexible approaches to improving outcomes
4. Equity, efficiency and effectiveness.

Along with health and housing, the initial Review of the Federation Issues Paper 1 (September 2014) highlights education as a policy area where roles and responsibilities could be more clearly articulated. The Issues Paper includes a single case study – school education - to illustrate the Commonwealth’s increasing involvement in areas of state responsibility. The case study makes specific reference to a growing Commonwealth focus on school performance, assessment and curriculum since the 1980s, culminating in the establishment of ACARA.

A subsequent Issues Paper 4, on school education (December 2014), raises questions about overlap, duplication, uncertainty about accountability for performance and the impact on

state priorities and policies as a result of Commonwealth education initiatives, including in the areas of curriculum, assessment and reporting.

### **Measuring ACARA's performance**

The provision in the ACARA legislation for a review of the organisation's ongoing role and functions after six years points to awareness of the need to revisit the original purpose once the work program of the new body was under way. It does not suggest that the body should have made a major measurable impact on education outcomes across the country in that time. This would be unrealistic after just six years of operation, especially in the complex world of education where initiatives take time to bear fruit and where outcomes are dependent on so many factors.

Student performance data cannot be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of individual policies aimed at improving the quality of schooling in Australia in recent years. NAPLAN results between 2008 and 2014 show some slight improvement in most testing domains for all year levels, although there has been a statistically significant decline in other domains, notably persuasive writing (since 2011). The latest PISA tests in reading and mathematical literacy, conducted in 2012, show that while Australian students continue to perform at a level above the OECD average, Australia's international ranking has declined from 3rd and 7th to equal 10th and 17th in reading and maths respectively over the past decade. Australian students' scores on reading, maths and scientific literacy have recorded statistically significant declines since 2000, while other countries have shown improvement. The decline, equivalent to more than half a year of schooling, has been driven mainly by a reduction in the percentage of Australian students classified as high performers.

While none of these outcomes can be attributed to ACARA, the results underline the ongoing need for national policies directed at raising school performance and the need for investment in approaches that are known to work in improving student outcomes.

Rather than using outcomes to measure the performance of ACARA, stakeholders focused their attention on the quality and value to them of the specific deliverables ACARA had been expected to produce, as set out in its authorising instruments. They also provided feedback on the operation of ACARA, on the basis of their own interactions and historical experience. After six years, a new organisation could be expected to have matured, to have established workable processes and productive relationships, to have gained public recognition and to be able to point to some major achievements with the potential to raise the quality of schooling in Australia.

On the whole, stakeholders assessed that on this basis, ACARA has been successful. In a short time, it can point to some substantial achievements – the Australian Curriculum, *My School*, and the National Assessment Program - that contribute to quality schooling across the nation, and work in train – notably NAPLAN online – has tremendous potential. These achievements have been made in a short time in a difficult environment against tight deadlines. Stakeholders agree that as a more mature organisation and with some clarification of its national purpose



and mandate, ACARA has a continuing and important role to play in the achievement of shared national education policy objectives.

Another basis on which to assess the performance of ACARA is how well it has fulfilled its Charter, which sets out the strategic direction for the organisation and provides guidance about the nature of the activities it is expected to undertake in fulfilling its functions. The Charter is elaborated by a Letter of Expectation that provides more specific guidance on the work expected over a two-year period. Further detailed requirements are contained in four yearly and annual work plans. These authorising instruments are discussed in the following chapter. Suffice it to say here that stakeholder feedback and a quick qualitative analysis both indicate that while not every activity has been completed on time or in full, ACARA has worked assiduously to deliver its major outputs and to meet the key expectations of stakeholders.

### **Findings**

The development of the Australian Curriculum, management of *My School* website and delivery of the national assessment program are significant achievements by ACARA, made in a challenging political and policy environment.

ACARA has continuing support from stakeholders as the embodiment of a shared national commitment to improving education outcomes for all Australian students.

The operation of ACARA as a national body in the area of curriculum, assessment and reporting is consistent with the key federalist principles of national interest, transparency and accountability, and efficiency, equity and effectiveness.

### **Recommendation**

That all jurisdictions through the ministerial council renew their commitment to the objectives and purpose of ACARA as a key body in the national education architecture.

## Chapter 2 - Role and functions

Governments expect ACARA to make a contribution to the national education effort to raise education outcomes through work on the curriculum, assessment and reporting. Their more detailed expectations of ACARA's role and functions are set out in a cascade of instruments - the ACARA Act, Charter, Letter of Expectations and Work Plans - all authorised at ministerial level. This chapter examines the effectiveness of this process of setting objectives and a program of work for ACARA across its three functions. The following chapters consider each functional area more closely.

### The legislation

The implementation of a national curriculum was a key element of the Rudd Labor Government's 2007 election policies for schools. Two bodies were consequently funded in the Rudd Government's first Budget: a National Curriculum Board (NCB), which had a remit to develop K to 12 courses in mathematics, science, history and English, for national implementation in 2011; and a National Schools Assessment and Data Centre (NADC). The NCB operated on an interim basis and began scoping the curriculum for English, mathematics, science and history, while the NADC did not become operational.

In October 2008, COAG agreed to the establishment of 'a statutory authority under Commonwealth legislation accountable to all Australian governments and welcomed the expansion of its role, which, for the first time, brings together the functions of national curriculum, assessment and data management, analysis and reporting at a national level'. (COAG 2 October 2008:7) While the body incorporating these three functions was referred to in the COAG communiqué as the NCB, it was ACARA that was formally established in October 2008 and became operational in May 2009 on the appointment of its governing body.

ACARA immediately took over the work of the NCB and from 2010, took on responsibility for management of NAPLAN, administration of the national school data compilation, publication of the ANR and hosting of the *My School* website.

The ACARA Act, which received royal assent in December 2008, specifies at a broad level (Section 6) the scope of ACARA's work in relation to curriculum, assessment and reporting. In summary, ACARA's statutory functions are:

- to develop and administer a **national school curriculum**, which includes:
  - developing content
  - setting standards
  - providing curriculum resource services and supporting the teaching profession
- to develop and administer **national assessments**, which includes:
  - setting and delivering tests
  - collecting and managing student assessment data
- to collect and analyse and **report on student and schools data**, which includes:

- collecting data on schools and comparative school performance
- information-sharing with Australian Government bodies on school data
- publishing data, including on the *My School* website

While Section 6 of the Act is permissive, setting a frame of statutory functions without specifying the action expected, Section 7 stipulates that ACARA must perform these functions in accordance with any directions of the Ministerial Council, which must be given in writing, and in accordance with a Charter. Under the Act the Charter is to be determined from time to time by ministerial council.

The Charter itself makes provision for a further layer of specific guidance and control, a Letter of Expectation. Neither the Charter nor the Letter of Expectation has the authority of a legislative instrument, although ACARA is obliged to perform its functions in accordance with both these documents.

### **Charter, Letter of Expectation and work plans**

As the Charter itself states, it is intended to set the strategic direction of ACARA, and to be supported by a further layer of ministerial direction set out in a Letter of Expectation, which is to provide ‘more specific guidance on the work expected’ of ACARA. A Letter of Expectation is a form of directive adopted by ministers for shaping the work of independent Commonwealth statutory agencies, clarifying their purpose and setting out clear expectations ‘of the meaning of success’, although desirably without impinging ‘on the level of independence or objectivity provided to an authority under legislation’ (Australian Government (Uhrig) 2003:7). The instrument is intended to balance the need for independent agencies to operate professionally, outside traditional departmental structures and at a distance from political influence and government, but to remain accountable to government for their actions and operation.

The Charter is the overarching document intended to determine policy directions and specify work priorities for ACARA for a period and sets a clear accountability framework for the organisation. ACARA’s first Charter, covering the period 1 April 2009 to 30 June 2010, outlined ACARA’s initial activities and priorities as setting up the structures and processes for the development and introduction of the national curriculum, delivering NAP tests, and reporting on educational outcomes according to data protocols to be decided by ministers.

A revised Charter, applying from July 2010, expanded ACARA’s work program, confirmed reporting protocols and adjusted strategic directions, reflecting considerable discussion in the ministerial council and senior officials’ meetings in 2009. The 2010 revision added specific references to the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, agreed in December 2008, and included more detailed directives on curriculum, testing and reporting.

ACARA’s current Charter (Appendix B) took effect on 3 August 2012. It confirms ACARA’s strategic directions to be the development of a national curriculum from Foundation to Year 12 in specified learning areas, the delivery of a national assessment program aligned to the

curriculum that measures students' progress, and management of a national data collection and reporting program that supports analysis, resource allocation and accountability. The Charter specifies priority activities within each of these three functional areas. In addition, the Charter confirms three general priorities which were also in previous Charters, which can be seen to broaden the expected functions of ACARA and influence its way of operating. The three general priorities are to:

- establish and maintain structures and processes so that its advice is based on the best evidence available
- establish and maintain a position as an authoritative and accessible national resource for stakeholders
- work closely with ESA and AITSL

In addition to the Charter, the Letter of Expectation, signed by the Chair of ministerial council, is designed to spell out the particular deliverables expected of ACARA for a two year period in relation to curriculum, assessment and reporting. Stakeholders noted that the Letter of Expectation can be retrospective, capturing decisions taken at council meetings on ACARA's program of work, consistent with the legislative provision for ministerial directions to ACARA to be given in writing. It should be noted, however, that a Letter of Expectation has only been issued once.

ACARA's current Letter of Expectation (Appendix C), covering the period July 2012 to June 2014, was published following ministerial council agreement to its release on 14 November 2013. The Letter has not been updated pending the outcomes of the Review of the Australian Curriculum and the legislatively required review of ACARA. In addition to activities and time frames specified for ACARA's three functions and governance, the Letter includes some additional activities ACARA is required to undertake, such as the development of curriculum content for the Year 9-10 National Trade Cadetships and responsibility for developing better measures for Year 12 completion/attainment and post-school destinations.

This detailed oversight and prescription of ACARA's activities by ministerial council is underlined by the requirement in the Charter for ACARA to provide a written progress report to each ministerial council meeting and for ACARA's annual and quadrennial work plans to be presented to ministers. These work plans provide for major pieces of work, including curriculum documents, to be approved by ministers. The four year and annual work plans produced by ACARA are, appropriately, more detailed working documents which commit ACARA to a large number of specific pieces of work for each functional area. Apart from the functional headings, the links that might be expected between the various authorising instruments, connecting high level objectives, strategies and priorities with detailed activities, are not clear on a reading of the documents.

## **Achievements**

The general view of stakeholders is that ACARA has achieved a great deal in a very demanding and extremely complex operating environment. They agree that a fair measure of ACARA's

success is whether it has delivered the outputs specified in these documents. Among the many completed activities are several significant achievements:

- the completion of the Australian Curriculum, ready for implementation by states and territories;
- the effective delivery of a national assessment program and progress towards on line NAPLAN assessments; and
- operation of *My School* as a public resource of data on individual schools.

Measured against its statutory objectives and acknowledging the background of a long history of stalled national initiatives in these areas and the federal context of contestable responsibilities for school education, these achievements of ACARA are recognised by stakeholders as remarkable. Most stakeholders referred to expected early difficulties of a start-up organisation, especially when tight deadlines were imposed externally, and believed that as a more mature organisation with greater clarity of purpose, ACARA has a continuing role to play on the national education stage.

The various stakeholders who were critical of ACARA for not taking a more strategic role in relation to its three functions acknowledged the constraints imposed by the structures, processes and instruments that govern its operations. In performing its functions, ACARA has been required to operate under detailed ministerial direction, not at arm's length as would generally be expected of an independent statutory authority. The authorising instruments - the Charter, Letter of Expectation and work plans - which spell out ministers' interpretation of ACARA's statutory functions and how they will be performed, down to the level of activities, time frames and budgets, are both comprehensive and prescriptive. They impose a heavy weight of expectation on ACARA and appear to leave the organisation with little capacity for adding or shifting priorities, taking on new activities or acting on its own initiative without prior ministerial council approval.

The extent of detailed direction from ministers also raises questions about the powers of the Board to exercise its governance responsibilities effectively, an issue that is examined in Chapter 7 on Governance and structure.

### **Co-location of functions**

The decision announced by COAG in October 2008 to 'bundle together' the three functions of curriculum, assessment and reporting into the one entity was taken by ministerial council following a report from the Boston Consulting Group (BCG). The BCG report, commissioned by Council to provide advice on 'the appropriate national architecture for national school curriculum, assessment and reporting', to carry forward the mandates of the National Curriculum Board and the National Schools Assessment and Data Centre, was based on extensive stakeholder consultation.

BCG considered alternate positions, including separating the reporting function in order to underscore its independence from assessment and to ensure impartial analysis of results and

objective cross-state comparisons, and also setting up separate entities for all three functions, so that each would have a sharp focus, especially in the start-up phase.

BCG recommended in favour of keeping the three functions in one body, on the basis of structural and process simplification, in order to reduce demands on the time of senior officials, and so as to promote coordination. The Commonwealth Government's rationale for co-locating the three functions (Second Reading Speech, 23 October 2008) was that curriculum, assessment and performance reporting all play a crucial role in ensuring that teaching and learning are of the highest quality and they must therefore be carefully aligned with each other. This is consistent with OECD research on high performing education systems which link accountability with curriculum content and clear standards:

*To achieve this [i.e. more supportive and productive learning environments], many education systems try to develop assessment and accountability systems that include progressive learning targets that explicitly describe the steps that learners follow as they become more proficient, and define what a student should know and be able to do at each level of advancement. The trend among OECD countries here is leading towards multi-layered, coherent assessment systems, from classrooms to schools to regional to national to international levels, that: support improvement of learning at all levels of the system; are increasingly performance based; add value for teaching and learning by providing information that can be acted on by students, teachers, and administrators; and are part of a comprehensive and well-aligned learning system that includes syllabi, associated instructional materials, matching exams, professional scoring and teacher training. (OECD 2011: 51-52)*

A later review of the institutional arrangements for national education functions, with a particular focus on efficiency, was undertaken in July 2013 by Nous Group. Again after extensive stakeholder consultation and assessment of the respective functions of ACARA, AITSL and ESA, the review recommended that no changes be made to ACARA's institutional form, ownership or governance arrangements and proposed that ACARA assume a new responsibility, for a national research, analysis and evaluation plan.

It is therefore not surprising that the consultations undertaken for this report also established continuing support for keeping the three functions together in ACARA. Stakeholders were aware of three discrete proposals for separating ACARA's functions:

1. In the lead up to the 2013 election, the ALP committed to establishing a separate Australian School Performance entity, the responsibilities of which would include collecting data about school performance and developing a new National Data Program.
2. The Abbott Government presented a proposal to ministerial council on 29 November 2013 that the statutory responsibilities of ACARA refocus on curriculum and national assessment, and some reporting functions be transferred to the Commonwealth education department.

3. The Review of the Australian Curriculum (Recommendation 28) recommended that a small educationally focused National School Performance Authority be established, reporting directly to ministerial council, to maintain the *My School* website and evaluate and review the Australian Curriculum.

When consulted on these proposals, stakeholders generally argued in favour of keeping the three core functions of ACARA in the one body, drawing on the natural connections between them and recognising efficiencies and the need to align curriculum, assessment and reporting. Stakeholders observed that the curriculum function had inevitably dominated ACARA's work to date, but expected the balance to shift, to give priority to on line assessment and more attention to the reporting function. There was strong opposition to the proposal to transfer reporting functions to the Commonwealth department, for reasons which will be explored in Chapter 5, and no particular support for establishing a separate performance authority.

## **Findings**

The structures, processes and instruments that govern ACARA's operations leave the organisation with little capacity for adding or shifting priorities, taking on new activities or acting on its own initiative, yet there is an interest among stakeholders for ACARA to operate more strategically and flexibly and use its expertise in a more proactive way.

The continuing need for ACARA, as a mature organisation, to have a Letter of Expectation in addition to a Charter and for ministers to approve the detail of work programs, is questioned. It would be appropriate for the ACARA Board to have responsibility for developing and approving work plans that are clearly linked to ministerially-determined objectives, strategies and priorities for the organisation.

There is continuing support for the three activities of curriculum, assessment and reporting to be co-located in ACARA and an expectation that the balance of ACARA's work will shift away from curriculum towards assessment, to focus in particular on the introduction of NAPLAN online, and reporting.

There is generally strong opposition to a proposal to move some reporting functions to the Department. This position reflects mainly firmly held stakeholder views on ownership and use of data as well as issues with the splitting of related functions and the costs of a separate body.

## **Recommendation**

That ACARA retain the three core functions of curriculum, assessment and reporting because of the linkages between them.

## Chapter 3 - Curriculum

The Review of the Australian Curriculum (RAC), which reported in August 2014, had as its main focus the development process and content of the Australian Curriculum. The RAC noted the critical momentum achieved in the development of a national curriculum with the establishment of ACARA, after many years of curriculum effort. The Review recognised this as a ‘great step forward’ in achieving national consistency and noted the ‘considerable success’ of developing a documented national curriculum.

At the same time, the RAC recorded some reservations about patchy implementation and flaws in conceptualisation and design. The recommendations of the Review for strengthening the curriculum, addressing issues such as overcrowding, balance, parental engagement and accessibility for students with disability, were referred to ACARA in December 2014 for advice. Ministerial council considered ACARA’s response in March 2015. In announcing Council’s endorsement of ACARA’s response, the Commonwealth Minister restated the objective that ‘every student . . . have a quality education with access to the best teachers and with a national curriculum that is robust, balanced and relevant.’

The relevant RAC findings and stakeholder views on the appropriateness of ACARA’s national curriculum function and the most useful role for a national curriculum body from this point forward, are the subject of this chapter.

### Importance of the curriculum

Promoting a quality curriculum has been a major focus of education reform in most OECD countries, as evidenced by analysis of the features of education systems which perform well in the PISA testing program. In Finland, for example, until recently the highest performing nation in PISA, the development of a national curriculum framework was a centrepiece of the comprehensive school reform, which began in the 1970s (Sahlberg 2010). Similarly, the highest performing Canadian province in PISA tests, Alberta, attributes its success in large part to the quality of its curriculum. Deep reforms to curriculum and assessment, which involve ‘broadening students’ learning experiences, enhancing the relevance of subjects ... and concentrating on the development of “capability” rather than accumulation of information and knowledge’, are a major part of the recent success of Shanghai and Hong Kong (OECD 2011: 69, 93).

As noted earlier (Chapter 1), commitment to the development of a high quality curriculum has been a centrepiece of the education policies of successive Commonwealth governments, a commitment shared with all jurisdictions as a central goal in the Melbourne Declaration. A quality curriculum, as a statement of the essential learnings that everyone is entitled to and that provide the skill base for social participation and economic growth, has both an excellence and an equity dimension. As ACARA has consistently put it, the curriculum ‘recognises the entitlement of students to a core of knowledge, skills, understandings and values



that will provide a foundation for their future contribution to Australia’s society.’ (ACARA October 2012:10)

## Achievements

### A national curriculum

At ministerial direction, ACARA completed the development of learning area content and achievement standards for the Foundation to Year 10 (F-10) curriculum in three phases:

Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
English	Geography	Health & physical education
Mathematics	Languages	Technologies
Science	Arts	Economics & business
History		Civics & citizenship

Curriculum documents in these areas, comprising curriculum content, achievement standards, elaborations and work samples, have been published, agreed by ministers and made available for use in schools across Australia. The Phase 1 subjects plus geography and the arts (subject to further consultation with Western Australia, which is now completed) from Phase 2 have been endorsed by ministers; other curriculum documents (including the arts) have been made available for state and territory use.

Almost without exception, stakeholders commended ACARA’s achievement in developing the Australian Curriculum to date. The RAC assessment that this is ‘great step forward’ and a ‘considerable success’ was readily endorsed. A number of the stakeholders had been involved in or had experience with earlier *National Statements and Profiles* and *Statements of Learning* approaches to curriculum and regarded those endeavours unfavourably compared with development of the national curriculum.

A sense of the forty year history of national curriculum development initiatives underlines how outstanding an achievement this is. The Commonwealth’s first foray into this area was the establishment of the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) as a Commonwealth statutory agency, fully funded by the Commonwealth, in 1973. The Core Curriculum for Australian Schools, produced by the CDC and published in 1980 had ‘little, if any, impact on state and territory curriculum development and the work of schools.’ (Australian Government 2014: 53)

Following the 1981 Review of Commonwealth Functions, the work of the CDC was absorbed into the Commonwealth Department of Education and the Schools Commission, until it was abolished in 1989. At that time, ministerial council agreed to the establishment of the Curriculum Corporation of Australia as a ministerially owned company to promote cooperative curriculum development. The Curriculum Corporation developed a set of National Statements and Profiles in key learning areas but these failed to receive endorsement from the states.

There followed a period of piecemeal collaboration on curriculum and a series of curriculum mapping exercises undertaken by the Curriculum Corporation, until 2003, when education ministers agreed to a Commonwealth proposal for the development of Statements of Learning in four domains – mathematics, science, civics and English. The states and territories were expected to embed these statements into their own curriculum documents. Adopting the statements of learning was made a condition of funding in the *Schools Assistance Act 2004*.

The RAC (Australian Government 2014:55) drew the following distinctions between the Statements of Learning and the Australian Curriculum:

- The statements were expected to be embedded in states' own locally produced curriculum documents.
- The statements only related to Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, not the entire F-10 curriculum.
- The intention of the statements was to encapsulate essential skills and knowledge, not describe the whole learning content.
- The statements were limited in detail and scope, leaving systems, sectors and schools flexibility as to how they were integrated into existing curricula.

The Statements of Learning approach was described by one curriculum observer (Reid 2005:20) as signalling that 'the States/Territories have once again been able to stave off the spectre of a national curriculum, this time by constructing the concept of "national curriculum consistency" – a lowest common denominator approach that makes an official curriculum out of only those content elements that already exist!'

In contrast to these earlier attempts, all jurisdictions have participated in the development of the F-10 Australian Curriculum and through ministerial council, have endorsed or agreed to the release for use of the published documents. The most important factor in ACARA's success where earlier ventures failed appears to be the buy-in of all school authorities in the decision-making and governance arrangements of ACARA. This shared commitment and equal engagement has facilitated a truly national process of curriculum writing and development which stakeholders acknowledge, notwithstanding their views on implementation, has brought benefits to all participants.

Some aspects of the curriculum discussed in the RAC report, particularly the lack of an overarching statement and the overcrowded primary school curriculum, were raised again by stakeholders in the present consultations which took place before the March 2015 ministerial council meeting. Only a few of the concerns about the quality of the written curriculum canvassed by the RAC were reiterated in discussions with stakeholders in January/February/March 2015. As a whole, stakeholders all see value in having a common national core curriculum and regard the national curriculum developed by ACARA as a valuable resource.

While acknowledging the significant achievement of a first 'rudimentary' national curriculum, the RAC took the position that because of the variable approaches of states and territories to implementation, any claim to having achieved a national curriculum was unsound. The Review

concluded that ‘if the definition of a national curriculum includes that it must be implemented comprehensively, with certainty and consistently, then Australia does not currently have a national school curriculum.’ (Australian Government 2014:105)

This conclusion reflects some differences in interpretation of the original intent of governments in supporting the work of ACARA and also fails to take into account the strong views of school authorities and sectors on their role and responsibilities for schools in the Australian federation. Where concern continues to exist is in relation to the role rather than the content of a national curriculum, particularly how detailed it should be; how it connects with jurisdictional and autonomous school responsibilities; and the scope of ACARA’s curriculum role in the future, in the light of the different approaches to implementation of the Australian Curriculum taken by the states, territories, systems and schools.

One jurisdiction put the view that the problem in interpreting ACARA’s role once the curriculum was developed lies in ambiguity over the meaning of ‘administer’ in the legislation, which defines ACARA’s function as to ‘develop and administer a national school curriculum’. Ambiguity may also attach to the agreement of states and territories to ‘implement’ the curriculum they were involved in developing. The issue is whether the Australian Curriculum content was intended to be adopted and implemented with no augmentation or contextualisation by all jurisdictions, or if it was to be core or common content that could or should be complemented with additional materials. While some jurisdictions are ready to adopt the curriculum as written, most see ACARA’s role in curriculum as complementing the role of the relevant state authority. They would choose to ‘adopt and adapt’ the Australian curriculum to fit their own frameworks, systems, policies and local context.

A flexible approach to implementation appears quite consistent with the principles of federalism. The national interest is served in having a quality agreed curriculum document which sets out the ‘core of knowledge, skills, understandings and values’ that all students need, drawing on best practices across the federation. The Australian Curriculum delivered by ACARA goes further than the earlier Statements of Learning, both in its coverage of Years F-10, and the extent of written curriculum content. The principles of accountability for services and outcomes and subsidiarity however point to the need in any national education endeavour to take full account of states’ constitutional responsibilities for schools. Most jurisdictions see a contradiction not only between a centrally mandated curriculum and their own responsibility for education content and outcomes but also between a single uniform national curriculum and education policies supporting local and school autonomy and teacher professionalism.

#### **Alternative curriculum**

Stakeholders were also positive about ACARA’s performance of its function to evaluate alternative curriculum frameworks, as outlined in the Charter. In this context, several stakeholders referred in particular to a growing interest in the International Baccalaureate as an alternative curriculum, from primary through to senior secondary, as a recognised rigorous and challenging curriculum with global acceptance.

## Issues

Some key issues related to the national curriculum are discussed below.

### Implementation

For the most part, stakeholders expressed the view that ACARA's work on the national curriculum is largely done and that no further work on the published written curriculum by ACARA is warranted in the immediate future. They believe that ACARA has produced a valuable resource for school authorities, but the process of implementation – the challenge of translating the curriculum into the classroom – is the responsibility of education authorities and schools. ACARA should not have a role in monitoring implementation as such but focus on the 'teachability' and effectiveness of the curriculum.

Putting aside overarching issues identified by the RAC, most stakeholders did not believe that ACARA should be involved in revision or review of the published curriculum, since this goes beyond ACARA's current remit and constant change is both unhelpful to teachers and costly. While a curriculum is necessarily dynamic, it takes time for the curriculum to be embedded and for experience in its delivery to build up. Stakeholders noted that each jurisdiction has its own curriculum review cycle. Some thought that in due course – though not within the scope of the next four-year work plan – ACARA may have a role in refreshing the curriculum.

ACARA is generally seen as having fulfilled (and for some jurisdictions, perhaps gone beyond) the curriculum development function that jurisdictions committed to through their joint ownership of ACARA, and should now be looking to a different and more visionary role.

The prevailing view of stakeholders is that the written national curriculum has now been agreed, it is a valuable resource, and how it will be adopted and adapted by school authorities and translated into the classroom is not the concern of ACARA. The reality is that it will be adopted and adapted in varying ways by jurisdictions and schools. Many stakeholders pointed to the difference between the written and delivered curriculum – the Australian Curriculum has been endorsed and appropriately, it is being implemented by adaptation. This in no way diminishes the value of the national investment so far in the Australian Curriculum and is consistent with federalism.

This is also seen by states and territories as consistent with the requirement of the *Australian Education Act 2013*, which sets implementation of the Australian Curriculum as a condition of Commonwealth recurrent funding for schools.

### Level of detail

A further concern of stakeholders affecting the implementation of the Australian Curriculum is the level of detail and specificity of the curriculum as developed by ACARA. Some stakeholders questioned whether ACARA had gone beyond its remit by developing the common curriculum content in such detail and in such a large range of subject areas. Against this view, others point to the clear intent from the first, with the establishment of the National Curriculum Board, to

have a national curriculum written in such a way as to ensure the curriculum documents were useful to practising teachers.

The legislation sets out a clear and comprehensive mandate for ACARA, to ‘develop and administer a national school curriculum, including content of the curriculum and achievement standards, for school subjects specified in the Charter’. The Charter as amended has progressively added subjects for curriculum development, with the 2012-2014 Charter referring to the eight learning areas mentioned in the Melbourne Declaration (English, mathematics, sciences, humanities and social sciences, arts, languages, health and physical education, and ICT), including ‘content descriptions, content elaborations, achievement standards and annotated work samples for each subject’.

The Shape papers produced by ACARA to guide the writing of the national curriculum in each learning area reinforced this view, that the ‘national curriculum will ‘set the level of expectation of ... learning ‘(‘High performing countries set high expectations’) (NCB May 2009:6) and ‘make clear to teachers what is to be taught, and to students what they should learn and what achievement standards are expected of them. This means that curriculum documents will be explicit about knowledge, understanding and skills, and that they will provide a clear foundation for the development of a teaching program.’ (NCB May 2009:9).

Although each phase of ACARA’s curriculum work was approved or noted by ministerial council, including the form of words used in the Shape papers as they have been revised, some stakeholders question the need to have anything more than a common national curriculum framework, similar to the national curriculum of Finland. Finland developed a National Curriculum Framework as a major component of its long-term reforms of education beginning in the 1970s, a series of reforms with teacher quality at their heart that led to Finland rising to the top of international education rankings in recent years. The Finnish framework provided guidance for teachers while leaving curriculum planning as the responsibility of teachers, schools and municipalities, although the school’s role was reduced somewhat in the 2004 National Curriculum Framework. This approach relies for its effectiveness on the high level of teacher quality and teacher professionalism for which the Finnish schooling system is renowned. A new National Curriculum Framework to be implemented in 2016 continues to embody this decentralised approach, acting as a guiding framework for what schools should teach and how, and also includes the concept of ‘phenomenon-based’ teaching, requiring some periods of integrated, multi-disciplinary teaching within the curriculum.

Views of the states and territories on the appropriate level of detail in a national curriculum tend to divide between large and small states, and to depend on their respective starting points. The two largest states with strong existing state curricula do not question the value of having a national curriculum, but conceive it as a high level framework, setting standards and identifying the common core of essential learnings that everyone is entitled to, thus providing a degree of national consistency while leaving the detail to be determined at the state level. This is regarded as appropriate to the states’ constitutional role and accountability for

schooling outcomes. In order to fulfil their responsibility for education outcomes, school authorities need to have appropriate control of the main policy levers for improving outcomes, which include curriculum content and standards.

The more detailed content of the Australian Curriculum had particular value for smaller states and those states and territories which had ‘experienced past failed attempts with outcomes based education inspired approaches’ or had no jurisdiction-wide curriculum. According to the RAC, these jurisdictions ‘welcomed the opportunity to acquire a more structured and rigorous one.’ (Australian Government 2014: 93)

This message was reinforced by stakeholders in the present consultations. While some small jurisdictions would still welcome the development of additional content for the published curriculum and the extension of the curriculum into senior secondary levels, most stakeholders oppose this role for ACARA into the future.

### **The senior secondary curriculum**

The scope of ACARA’s curriculum development mandate is set by the Charter rather than the Act. The Charter specifies that ACARA’s curriculum development work will cover the school years from Foundation to Year 12. The Charter and Letter of Expectation instruct ACARA to develop the senior secondary curriculum in a range of subject areas and advise ministerial council on its implementation.

To date, Ministers have agreed to the development of content and achievement standards for English, mathematics, science, history and geography. The strategy and processes for the development of further senior secondary Australian curriculum subjects are currently under review.

This is probably the most contentious area of ACARA’s work, coming up against states’ strong commitment to their own end of school assessment and reporting regimes, particularly where external assessment is involved. Victoria set out this position clearly in its response to ACARA’s 2012 consultation paper on the senior secondary curriculum:

*We note in particular the following statement made by ACARA in the preamble to the consultation drafts:*

*States and territories, through their respective curriculum, assessment and certification authorities, will continue to be responsible for implementation of the senior secondary curriculum, including assessment, certification and the attendant quality assurance mechanisms. Each of these authorities acts in accordance with its respective legislation and the policy framework of its state government and Board. They will determine the assessment and certification specifications for their courses that use the Australian Curriculum content and achievement standards and any additional information, guidelines and rules to satisfy local requirements.*

*We welcome this clear agreement about current arrangements, that is, that senior secondary certification will remain the responsibility of individual states and territories.*  
(VCAA September 2012:5)

As ACARA notes on its website, 'State and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities are responsible for the structure and organisation of their senior secondary courses and determine how they integrate the Australian Curriculum content and achievement standards into their courses.'

A number of stakeholders mentioned that for over 20 years, states and territories have worked together as the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) on senior secondary content, achievement standards and certification. ACACA is an association of the chief executives of the statutory bodies in the Australian states and territories and New Zealand responsible for certificates of senior secondary education. It exists to 'promote curriculum, assessment and certification in schooling functions within the framework of the Australian federation and provide a national means for monitoring and enhancing developments in senior secondary curriculum and certification.' ACACA has sponsored the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages (CCAFL), which has focussed on curriculum and assessment development for small candidature community languages.

At its meeting in September 2014, ACACA discussed a range of issues affecting the 'implementation' of the Australian senior secondary curriculum, noting the constitutional responsibility of states to take decisions about senior secondary courses, assessment and certification, the large number of accredited senior secondary courses in each jurisdictions (nearly ten times the 15 subjects in the Australian senior secondary curriculum), and the substantial resource costs of preparing course documents for implementing new senior secondary subjects and otherwise managing change.

ACARA's limited attempts, following ministerial discussion, to monitor and support where requested the integration and implementation of the senior secondary curriculum, and its further development, are regarded as unnecessary and unproductive. Apart from one or two jurisdictions, which are keen to continue working with ACARA on the detail of the senior secondary curriculum, the general view is that ACARA should regard its work on the senior secondary curriculum as done and leave it for jurisdictions to determine how the content will be integrated into their courses.

### **Students with disability**

While the stakeholder consultations were not designed to explore issues of curriculum content, some stakeholders, especially principal and parent organisations, raised the issue of the inclusiveness of the Australian curriculum in meeting the needs of students with disability. There appears to be a split of opinion between those who consider that a satisfactory approach is being taken and those who do not, including among members of the ACARA Students with Disability Advisory Group.

## **ACARA’s future role**

While no stakeholders suggested that ACARA does not have a continuing role to play in relation to the national curriculum, it was expected that ACARA’s curriculum function in the future will be reduced or limited in scope, allowing greater focus on assessment and reporting. This of course would have implications for ACARA’s staffing and resources, necessitating a review of the balance of staffing resources, including the balance struck between in-house and contracted expertise.

There is a general interest in ACARA having a national curriculum leadership role, which would include the key functions of research, innovation and benchmarking. Stakeholders accept that the national interest would be well served by a body with curriculum expertise that had as core functions:

- research on good curriculum practice in high performing school systems
- information-sharing on experience with the Australian Curriculum
- facilitation of cooperative curriculum work between jurisdictions
- innovative work on curriculum content, especially in areas of national importance such as science and mathematics, and curriculum delivery
- international benchmarking

In this way ACARA would be feeding into the continuous improvement of the Australian Curriculum as delivered in schools. In the longer term, drawing on its own expertise and school authorities’ experience in the delivery of the Australian Curriculum, ACARA could have a role in reviewing and revising the written curriculum.

In addition to these core curriculum functions, it was suggested that ACARA could undertake curriculum development work on request for a consortium of two or more jurisdictions, on a user-pays arrangement. This would take account of the different curriculum needs of jurisdictions, including allowing for further work on the senior secondary curriculum for those jurisdictions interested, perhaps in a partnership arrangement with ACACA.

## **Findings**

The Australian Curriculum developed by ACARA to date is a major achievement. The development of the curriculum has benefited participants and the completed curriculum represents a valuable resource for all schools across Australia.

A flexible approach to implementation of the Australian Curriculum is consistent with the principles of federalism and the diverse needs of schools in different locations, and takes full account of state and territory constitutional and statutory responsibilities. It is expected that states and territories and schools will adopt and adapt the curriculum as it fits their own curriculum frameworks. This does not diminish the value of the Australian Curriculum.



There is no role for ACARA in monitoring the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in schools, although a curriculum leadership role would involve research and information sharing on its implementation.

The development of the senior secondary curriculum by ACARA under its Charter has been problematic because it has conflicted with the roles and responsibilities of state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities. Any further work on the senior secondary curriculum by ACARA should be based on clarification of scope with jurisdictions or at the request of jurisdictions, respecting the role and responsibility of state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification authorities.

The somewhat differing views on key issues relating to ACARA's future role in curriculum would best be resolved in the collaborative development of a new Charter.

### **Recommendation**

That ACARA's future role in relation to the national curriculum be focused on leadership, involving monitoring curriculum developments, research, information sharing, facilitation of cooperation, innovation and benchmarking now that the key task of developing a national curriculum has been largely completed.

## Chapter 4 - Assessment

Under its assessment function, ACARA's main responsibility is to manage the NAP, which includes the annual NAPLAN tests for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 and a three-year cycle of sample tests in science literacy, civics and citizenship and ICT literacy. The results of the NAP tests are published each year in a comprehensive NAPLAN National report, a summary report and a separate NAP Sample Assessment Report.

In addition to managing this program of national testing, ACARA is required by its Charter and Letter of Expectation to align national assessments with the Australian Curriculum, including providing advice to ministers on further areas for sample testing, and to work towards the delivery of online NAPLAN testing.

This chapter canvasses stakeholders' views on ACARA's performance of its assessment function.

### **Purpose of national assessment**

The purpose of assessment of individual students is basically diagnostic, to enable teachers to assess individual student learning needs and adapt their teaching to meet these needs. As ACARA informed parents in preparation for the administration of NAPLAN testing in 2014 (Information for Parents of Year 9 students):

*The NAPLAN tests provide information to you and the school about your child's learning progress in the areas of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. They also help you place your child's performance in a school and national context. This information is useful in identifying opportunities to develop students' skills further and provides further direction for your child's learning.*

*The tests also help government and education authorities better understand how schools, school systems and the nation are going in these important areas of the curriculum.*

The purpose of a national approach to assessment is to set common standards, ensure a rigorous system of assessment, and provide an objective and sound evidence base for measuring individual student achievement against national standards and for comparing various cohorts both against national standards and each other. Assessment results, which are provided at an individual, school, state and national level, are one measure of the effectiveness of publicly funded programs. They help identify areas requiring attention and inform decisions on education policy, practices and resourcing. The OECD notes that where 'school performance is systematically assessed, the primary purpose is often not to support contestability of public services or market mechanisms in the allocation of resources; rather it is to reveal best practices and identify common problems in order to encourage teachers and schools to develop.' (OECD 2011: 52)

This was the thinking behind the introduction of a regime of national testing in Australia in the 1990s. Some states had been conducting their own basic skills tests for over two decades and when from the mid-1990s, Commonwealth and state officials collaborated on the development of a National Literacy and Numeracy Plan under the auspices of ministerial council, they were able to build on this previous experience. In 1998, ministerial council approved national literacy standards for Year 3 and 5 students and in 1999, the first annual literacy tests for Year 3 and 5 students were conducted and assessed against national benchmarks. Sample assessments began in 2003, on a three-year cycle of science literacy, civics and citizenship and ICT literacy for selected groups of students in Years 6 and 10.

By the time of ACARA's establishment in 2008, annual literacy and numeracy testing for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 was in place. Until 2008, students in each state sat different literacy and numeracy tests which were then measured against national benchmarks through a process of equating. In 2008, for the first time, students sat the same tests. Managed initially by the Curriculum Corporation and from 2010 by ACARA, the tests are administered in states and territories by Test Administration Authorities.

### **ACARA's performance**

When ACARA took over management of the NAP from the Curriculum Corporation and the Benchmarking and Educational Measurement Unit (BEMU), a basic skills testing regime was well entrenched in the Australian education system. The national collaboration on literacy and numeracy testing had developed over time into a standardised national approach, which enabled the achievement of full cohorts of students to be measured and reported against national standards.

Stakeholders restated their full commitment to the continuation of the NAP. They fully accept the national interest in having national assessment of schooling outcomes against agreed outcomes, recognising that this provides for accountability for public investment in education and the achievement of economies and efficiencies through joint effort. Stakeholders see ACARA as having made a valuable contribution in maintaining the stability and integrity of the assessment program and in the continuous improvement of the design and quality of assessments.

All stakeholders see this as an important continuing role for ACARA. School authorities have welcomed the faster return of NAPLAN results that ACARA has achieved in 2014 and the effective feedback on performance through the various reports, including the publication of results each August and December on the ACARA website. At the same time, stakeholders recognise that there are areas for further research and development in relation to national assessment, investigating issues such as the continuing need for full cohort testing in literacy and numeracy, best practice internationally in skills testing, alignment between the Australian Curriculum and national and international assessments, the standard setting process, and the scope for broadening the range of sample testing.

For the immediate future, stakeholders are universally enthusiastic about the potential of online adaptive testing which they see as being transformational in its potential education benefits, bringing significant advantages to governments, schools, parents, teachers and students. As ACARA points out, online testing will align the NAP more closely with practice in schools, as students increasingly work on keyboards and in an online, digital environment. It will also improve the testing experience for students, with tailored tests providing teachers and schools with more targeted and detailed information on their students' performance. Stakeholders see the benefits of online testing as giving more flexibility to schools, shifting the emphasis from testing to analysis and bringing real benefits for teachers with its adaptive test design (where the test difficulty is adjusted to students' needs) and timely results. This will enhance the diagnostic function of the tests and so provide more support for teaching and learning in the classroom.

In 2015, sample testing on science literacy will for the first time be delivered online, and will assess the Australian Curriculum. The online NAPLAN testing which is scheduled for introduction from 2017, on an opt-in basis over two to three years, is much anticipated, for its potential educational value and expected efficiencies.

## **Issues**

### **Impact of testing**

In 2013, the Senate Education and Employment Committee undertook an inquiry into the effectiveness of NAPLAN testing, responding to criticisms of over-reliance on testing and unintended consequences. In its 2014 report the Committee discussed concerns raised in submissions about the adverse consequences of over-emphasis on standardised testing, which have been canvassed in the research literature – concerns that testing is a source of unnecessary stress to students and about perverse effects on classroom teaching, such as 'teaching to the test', narrowing of the curriculum, privileging literacy and numeracy over other areas of learning, over-emphasising minimum competencies at the expense of creative and analytical skills and devaluing high academic achievement. The Committee found that at a macro level - measuring student, school and system performance – NAPLAN was effective in achieving its objectives, but at the diagnostic level, it was less effective than it could be. This was largely due to delays in returning test results to teachers. The Committee's recommendations addressed the issue of delay, a situation that had been gradually improving and had the potential to greatly improve with the introduction of NAPLAN online, and the need to design adaptive testing for students with disability and students from a non-English speaking background.

The issue of unintended consequences was not a significant one for stakeholders consulted for this report.

### **Risks associated with online testing**

ACARA shares responsibility for delivering NAPLAN online with ESA and AEEYSOC (Online Assessment Working Group). Reflecting their different roles and mandate, ESA will support the

delivery of NAPLAN online by constructing the online assessment platform while ACARA has responsibility for undertaking the necessary research and testing to enable the successful implementation of online testing. Stakeholders see the implementation of online testing as a high risk activity for ACARA. They see this as a leading edge development which could be derailed if there were political pressures to rush the process, if there is not clarity about where accountability lies between ACARA and ESA, and if either body lacks the organisational skills for such a large-scale complex process. Being clear about the respective responsibilities of ACARA and ESA in the development and delivery of NAPLAN online and ensuring that ACARA has overall accountability are considered critical to success.

Now that ACARA's main priority has shifted from curriculum development to online assessment, stakeholders believe the skills base and staffing and management profile of the organisation need to adapt.

Once online testing is in place, ACARA's role would change again. In this context, many stakeholders referred to the difficulty ACARA experiences in attracting and retaining skilled personnel, given its main location in Sydney and the shifting balance of work. Further decentralisation of staffing and flexible employment arrangements such as job sharing may go some way to addressing this difficulty.

### **Standards**

Some jurisdictions expressed concern that the national processes involved in agreeing to NAPLAN minimum standards have a lowest common denominator effect, with the result that the national standards are set too low. Several jurisdictions have considered setting their own, higher standards. They draw attention to the research evidence which shows that an emphasis on rigorous academic standards is a hallmark of high performing school systems. An over-emphasis on basic skills and test based accountability, with a focus on achieving measured minimum targets, can be at odds with a focus on quality and improved performance, which involves setting high expectations for all, academic rigour and valuing excellence. Setting minimum standards too low will give a false impression of the health of Australian schooling and lead to unpleasant shocks in international test results.

Stakeholders see a role for ACARA in monitoring the NAPLAN national minimum standards so that they represent an appropriate and acceptable measure of performance.

### **Communication**

One criticism stakeholders made of ACARA in relation to its assessment function is its failure to communicate well the value of assessment and accountability. The tenor of many of ACARA's communications on testing has been interpreted as defensive and reactive, thus missing the opportunity to show schools, parents and students the need for and value of assessment. Stakeholders see ACARA having a role in using the evidence to explain the value to schools and systems of their participation in the NAP program, countering the extensive public and academic criticism of over-reliance on basic skills testing. They welcomed more recent moves by ACARA to pursue a more positive and informative communications strategy.

The delivery of NAPLAN online, with its benefits for individual students and teachers, is seen as an ideal opportunity to revisit the communication strategy for assessment.

### **Future role**

ACARA's continuing role in managing the delivery of national testing is not questioned. Only a national body operating with the support of all jurisdictions and school sectors could carry out this function efficiently and effectively, in the national interest.

Managing the design and delivery of NAPLAN online testing will be a first priority for ACARA through to its implementation from 2017. This will be a considerable challenge for the organisation, requiring good governance and expert resources as well as political support. Effective implementation across the nation will be regarded as a significant achievement for ACARA.

Once online testing is established, one view stakeholders put is that state and territory Test Administration Authorities will have a bigger role to play in the annual NAPLAN testing, leaving scope for ACARA to develop a leadership role in assessment, encompassing research, innovation and benchmarking, parallel to the role it is expected to play in relation to the curriculum. Stakeholders see value in ACARA becoming a national centre of expertise in assessment and using assessment data. Making the most use of data from the NAPLAN testing over time would require a collaborative national approach whereby, with appropriate protections, data from all states and territories would be available for analysis at a national level.

Drawing on international experience and research and its own considerable data collection, ACARA could be expected to advise on future directions for assessment such as the benefits of full cohort vs sample testing, investigate the appropriate balance between basic skills testing and other assessment, manage the development of tests for other learning areas and capabilities and inform professional and public discussion about different approaches to assessment. This could include research and benchmarking of senior secondary assessment and certification systems.

### **Findings**

ACARA has successfully managed a rigorous and effective national assessment program, including NAPLAN.

The introduction of adaptive online testing is enthusiastically supported for its potential to deliver educational benefits for students and teachers and make a greater contribution to education improvement. This should be the major focus of ACARA's work for the immediate future.

In the longer term, ACARA should develop as a centre of expertise in assessment, involved in research, information-sharing, benchmarking and communication.

## **Recommendations**

That ACARA give high priority to the development and implementation of NAPLAN online because of the potential benefits of adaptive testing and more timely availability of results.

That ACARA shift the balance of its resources and attention to its assessment function, to ensure appropriate expertise is available and all risks are addressed for the successful implementation of NAPLAN online.

## Chapter 5 - Reporting

This chapter reviews ACARA’s data collection and reporting function, which encompasses a range of activities, including the management of the *My School* website and the production annually of the ANR. These activities are additional to the release of the NAP results discussed in the previous chapter.

The Act requires ACARA to collect and analyse data on student assessments and schools and share and publish that information, ‘including information relating to comparative school performance’. Under ACARA’s reporting function, the Charter prioritises the whole data collection and reporting responsibility of ACARA, that is to ‘collect, manage, analyse, evaluate and report statistical and related information about schools and the outcomes of schooling . . . for performance monitoring’, which includes monitoring and reviewing national key performance measures and production of ‘a comprehensive and authoritative national report on schooling in Australia.’ A second, separate priority is management of the *My School* website.

### Purpose of reporting

The reporting functions of ACARA are intended to serve the objectives of greater transparency, accountability and improved school performance. As noted by ministerial council (Cook 8/09/2014:9), the purposes served by reporting on school performance and educational outcomes are threefold:

1. To enable evaluation of school performance – to allow governments and researchers to analyse how well schools are performing by reference to nationally comparable data and to their own performance over time.
2. For public accountability (and transparency) purposes – to improve outcomes and equity for all students by using nationally comparable data to build a substantive evidence base to support future improvements.
3. For better resource allocation – to enable identification of where resources are most needed to lift attainment as an aid to policymakers and to build pressure for change by placing parents and the broader community in the same position as education officials.

The then Commonwealth minister explained the importance of reporting on school performance, and the gap ACARA was intended to fill, as follows in the Second Reading Speech (23 October 2008) on the ACARA legislation:

*Information about what happens in schools and what difference it is making has been seriously lacking.*

*In a world where education is central to prosperity and to social inclusion, being limited to such an opaque picture is not acceptable. . .*

*... to lift performance and direct new resources to where they will make the most difference, we need unprecedented rigour and openness in the collection and publication of schools data.*



*If we are to identify accurately where the greatest educational need across the Australian community is located and encourage excellence in every school, we need a basis for fair, consistent, and accurate analysis of how different schools are doing.*

*Accurate information on how students and schools are performing tells teachers, principals, parents and governments what needs to be done.*

*This means publishing the performance of individual schools, along with information that puts that data in its proper context. That context includes information about the range of student backgrounds served by a school and its performance when compared against other 'like schools' serving similar student populations.*

Transparency and accountability are recognised by stakeholders as central pillars of good governance, and critical to improving performance. These policy objectives rely on having authoritative information and statistics as the evidence base for informing policy directions and designing approaches to improve performance. For school education, at the system level this requires having data on student outcomes that is reliable, relevant, timely, consistent and comparable, and a capability for rigorous analysis of that data in order to reveal best practices, identify shared problems and guide interventions. Making school performance information more widely available, beyond school authorities to parents and the community is intended to be a further impetus to improvement.

The rationale for making comparative information across jurisdictions widely available is set out in a recent Productivity Commission Report on Government Services (RoGS) (Productivity Commission 2015):

1. To verify high performance and identify agencies and service areas that are successful
2. To enable agencies to learn from peers that are delivering higher quality and/or more cost effective services
3. To generate additional incentives for agencies and services to improve performance.

According to the RoGS, governments have been well vindicated in their ongoing commitment to the annual 'report card' on the performance of their administrations, with the comparative information reported contributing 'to the wellbeing of all Australians, by encouraging improvements in those services. Public reports such as RoGS improve government accountability and create incentives for better performance. In turn, improving government service provision can lead to major social and economic benefits.'

Over 18 years, the RoGS has become a valued and sought after repository of 'meaningful, balanced, credible and comparative information' on the effectiveness and efficiency of a wide range of services. RoGS is credited with making a further contribution to accountability by shifting the focus of attention from demands for increased resources to a focus on the efficient and effective use of existing resources.

The school education section of RoGS reports comparative information on attendance, participation and retention, to demonstrate equity performance; recurrent expenditure and capital cost per student and student-staff ratios, to demonstrate efficiency; and national and international test results, to demonstrate effectiveness. The reporting frame used is the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

Analyses of international student test results such as PISA, over time, show that accountability is an important dimension of education policy in high performing OECD countries. Countries' approach to education accountability varies. Formal test-based accountability systems, relying on basic skills testing of whole cohorts of students and transparent reporting of comparative results, are a feature of many countries' efforts to raise school performance, although their value is contested. The highest performing nations in the PISA tests tend to rely more on strong professional accountability at the school and teacher level, and less on basic skills testing and system-wide reporting.

Performance reporting that relies heavily on the outcomes of basic skills testing is criticised on several grounds:

- for being too narrow a basis for assessing a school's performance – schools have a much broader set of objectives against which they should be judged, and parents seek a much more holistic view of a school, its programs and culture when they are choosing a school for their children;
- for being open to misinterpretation, since the reporting does not include data on relevant student characteristics which affect literacy and numeracy results such as special needs and language background;
- for encouraging teaching to the test and coaching, thus taking valuable teaching time away from the broader curriculum; and
- for opening the way to construction of league tables, which are held to be detrimental to schools and teachers.

These general reservations about reporting are shared by some stakeholders and provide a backdrop to assessments of how well they consider ACARA has carried out the reporting functions specified in the various authorising instruments.

## **Achievements**

### **My School**

The *My School* website provides data on the performance of all Australian schools in NAPLAN tests and the resources available to them. It is intended as a tool for 'school leaders, school staff and members of the school community as well as policy-makers', allowing them to examine a school's performance and progress as well as its profile and make comparisons with statistically similar schools. The main audience is parents and school communities.

The website includes, for each of the nearly 10,000 schools in Australia, a basic school profile, attendance data, staff information, and data on school finances, student characteristics and

NAPLAN results. In 2014, information about the parent opinion survey were added to the website. Since the March 2015 release of data on *My School*, the website now houses a full set of data on the student cohort which sat the NAPLAN Year 3 tests in 2008 and the Year 9 tests in 2014.

*My School* was an initiative of the Commonwealth Government, a centrepiece of the Rudd Government’s school education agenda, with a particular focus on transparency. Until *My School* was launched in January 2010, Australia did not have a reliable nationally comparable data set on schools that could be used for policy analysis or resource allocation.

Initial development of the site followed agreement at the November 2008 COAG meeting that ‘greater transparency and high quality accountability and reporting on the performance of our schools is essential to ensure that every Australian child receives the highest quality education and opportunity to achieve through participation in employment and society.’ At this meeting, all governments agreed to a performance reporting system which included ‘national reporting on the performance of individual schools to inform parents and carers and for evaluation by governments of school performance’. Since 2009, ministerial council has given approval for the detailed development of the site, which included an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), and the subsequent addition of school financial information. Ministerial council has approved all ACARA’s work plans, which outline in some detail the priorities for *My School*.

*My School* was designed with the dual purpose of:

1. Providing parents and students with information on each school – its view of itself and its mission, staffing, resources and students’ characteristics and their performance
2. Providing schools and their communities with comparisons of their students’ performances in literacy and numeracy with those of students in other schools, especially schools that serve similar students, in the sense of having similar socioeconomic characteristics. These comparisons are intended to provide information to support improvements in schools, and to support school choice.

ACARA’s Letter of Expectation requires it to revise the *My School* data annually, to undertake continuous improvement of the data and website, and to develop the online school opinion survey, which was first administered in 2013.

Stakeholders are satisfied with ACARA’s role in relation to the *My School* website. They see *My School* as a sound instrument for providing nationally consistent data on schools across all jurisdictions and sectors to parents and the community. They believe it meets well the important objective of public transparency and accountability at the individual school level, although stakeholders are less convinced of its value in contributing to improved school performance. Those directly responsible for school improvement, that is school authorities and schools, are not major users of the site as they have access to other more timely data, which is more useful to them in driving school improvement. They also rely on other forms of

reporting, such as school websites, school annual reports and regular reporting to parents for accountability and transparency.

Stakeholders commended ACARA for its management of the website and for overcoming to a large extent early difficulties associated with sensitivity about the misuse or misinterpretation of data and for improving the reliability and validity of particular data sets, particularly the ICSEA and school financial data, although some have remaining concerns about these data sets. There is little appetite, however, for further large scale investment in *My School*, other than to assure the integrity of data and improve the usability of the site for its main audience. Stakeholders accept that *My School* has an established place in Australian education, publishing information that is routinely used in public discussion of schooling. Media reports on the March 2015 release of NAPLAN data on *My School*, for example, highlighted the achievement of schools in all jurisdictions which recorded above average improvement in reading and numeracy, identifying approaches taken by these schools to improve their results.

#### **Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia**

The *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* (the measurement framework), including the *Schedule of Key Performance Measures*, is the basis for reporting on progress towards the *Melbourne Declaration*, underpins the ANR (discussed further below) and also the RoGS mentioned earlier. The measurement framework outlines the data collection and reporting responsibilities of school systems and sectors across the Australia. It also details the national key performance measures for schooling and outlines the annual assessment and forward reporting cycle. ACARA updated the framework in 2012 and is expected to undertake a full review every three years. A further review of the measurement framework is a priority on ACARA's Work Plan for 2014-15.

Only a small subset of stakeholders mentioned the measurement framework, presumably because other issues were of more significance in the context of the consultations.

#### **National Report on Schooling in Australia**

The main focus of the ANR is to report on progress towards the Melbourne Declaration goals agreed by all governments. A national report on schooling has been produced since 1989, initially as a pilot under the auspices of the Curriculum Corporation and ministerial council, as an 'authoritative source of information on various aspects of schooling and a sound basis for informed comment.' It also served at this time to meet the legal requirement for the Commonwealth Government to account for the expenditure of Commonwealth funds on schooling. Its main audience is governments.

ACARA's current Letter of Expectation requires ACARA to publish the ANR, investigate new ways of publishing and presenting information on schooling in Australia, and undertake a review of the measurement framework, the nationally agreed set of key performance measures which underpins the ANR and other major education statistical reports. The latest published ANR, for 2011, was published late in 2013 in a similar format to previous reports.

Stakeholders universally accept the need for and value of a national report on schooling outcomes and believe the national interest is well served by having national school performance data. Reporting transparently on school effectiveness is widely regarded as a most useful and appropriate function to be carried out at the national level. Jurisdictions recognise the value to them of having a national backdrop of consistent rigorous data against which to evaluate their own performance. Several school authorities affirmed that seeing their own NAPLAN results compared with other jurisdictions was a spur to action. As a primary school principal commented (Colmar Brunton 2015:24):

*Well I think NAPLAN was a wakeup call for Queensland state schools. We needed it. I think as a system we were looking inwardly at our own state. And I know people in the system were aware that results were going backwards. I think bringing it out as a public accountability for our system, we didn't really like it, but we all have done something about it... I think it was a wakeup call. Queensland needed to be public.*

Stakeholders also referred to their need to have confidence in the validity and reliability of nationally comparable data when performance and other data is used to underpin funding allocations as occurs under the *Australian Education Act 2013*.

## Issues

### My School

While commending ACARA's achievement in managing *My School*, stakeholders reinforced many of the comments and criticisms they had made in a 2014 review instigated by the Coalition Government (Cook, 8/09/2014). A similar assessment of the site was made following focus group research by Colmar Brunton, published in a report released by ACARA in March 2015. The key findings of these reports are:

- *My School* meets the objectives of transparency and accountability at the individual school level, in a limited way. It complements other school accountability mechanisms, such as annual reports and school websites.
- Parents are the primary users of the site; other stakeholders have alternative sources of information available to them.
- Parents may use the site as a starting point in choosing a school, or to monitor a school's performance over time, in full awareness of the narrowness of the performance measures reported.
- Some of the information on the site (ICSEA and financial data) is of little interest to parents and there are continuing reservations from some stakeholders about the reliability and usefulness of these data.
- There is potential to enhance the way information is presented and accessed on the site.

The main issue affecting the usability of the site is its complexity. While data on schooling and school performance has some inherent complexities, stakeholders suggested that the imperative of statistical purity has outweighed the objective of public usability. The evidence shows a downward trend in the use of *My School* generally and little use of the site by

principals and schools. Some redesigning of the site, so that simple straightforward information appears upfront would enhance its value for its main audience. Stakeholders have a continuing interest in assuring the quality of *My School* data, in ACARA itself putting the valuable schools data it holds to greater use, and in facilitating access to the data for research purposes, with appropriate safeguards for confidentiality and security. In this context, one stakeholder noted that for a range of reasons not all the indicators previously agreed by ministerial council had been delivered or have not been progressed as originally conceived.

Stakeholders are interested in seeing some redesign of *My School*, to reduce the website's complexity and make the information about schools more accessible to the primary audience of parents and school communities. They would expect that in responding to the findings in the two reviews of *My School*, ACARA would operate independently as a national body with expertise in the data it collects and analyses, not as an agency of the Commonwealth. There is a sense among many stakeholders that *My School* is driven more by Commonwealth interests than joint ministerial direction, probably reflecting that it was a Commonwealth initiative.

The 2015 update of *My School*, released on 5 March after most of the stakeholder consultations had been completed, included some design enhancements and new data, including student attendance data based on Indigenous status, which had been requested by COAG at its meeting on 13 December 2013.

#### **ANR**

The ANR is not highly regarded as an instrument for achieving the transparency and accountability objectives of national reporting on schooling. Stakeholders support its transformation into a report more appropriate to the times and more informative for users. They agree that while the publication of the ANR has become timelier since ACARA took over responsibility for it, their expectations about publishing and presenting school performance information in a useful, accessible and interesting way have not been met. With its other commitments and priorities, it appears that ACARA has not been able to give the reporting function, other than *My School*, due attention.

The substance of the ANR is seen to be limited by the need to reach full national agreement on all the content. The production process is seen as laborious for all sides, with the result that different elements of the report are published at different times rather than waiting for all jurisdictions to provide agreed data. The ANR was variously described as 'dreary', 'looks appalling', 'dull to a remarkable degree, even for a bureaucratic report', 'impenetrable' and 'a monster'. The contrast was made with other presentations of national performance data, both on education in the RoGS, for example, and in other fields, such as the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's publication of data and analysis on health and welfare issues.

Stakeholders see that the ANR could play a role for school education as valuable as RoGS for the range of government services it covers, if the performance information it reported was comprehensive, well presented, reliable and timely. Clearly ACARA will need to give more

attention to the ANR in order to meet the expectations of stakeholders and the Letter of Expectation.

### **Related issues**

One stakeholder pointed to ACARA’s broader data collection and reporting role beyond the issues discussed above. These included matters articulated in its Charter, such as analysing data to support system management and policy, and in the Letter of Expectation, such as assuming responsibility for work undertaken by the Schools Data Subgroup. The latter includes developing better measures of Year 12 completion/attainment.

Some stakeholders referred to a lack of confidence in ACARA’s broader data management capability, and raised questions about the organisation’s capacity to take a strategic national view of its data collection, analysis and reporting function, independent of Commonwealth Government demands. They acknowledge that the specificity of ACARA’s authorising instruments constrain the development of a strong independent reporting function.

### **Future directions**

Stakeholders would support a more strategic, autonomous and creative role for ACARA in relation to its data collection, analysis and reporting function, with greater attention given to the quality and usability of data, and to the potential uses of the extensive data available to the organisation. This would be quite consistent with the objective in an earlier ACARA Strategic Plan (2010-2013), to ‘undertake a national data collection and reporting program that supports:

- analysis, evaluation, research and resource allocation; and
- accountability and reporting on schools and broader national achievement.’

National transparency and accountability objectives are paramount from the perspective of jurisdictions. They expect ACARA to develop its data capability so as to become the authoritative source of school performance data, and to maximise the value of the data that is available to it. This role could be seen as analogous to the role of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, which describes its mission in the following way:

*The AIHW is committed to providing high-quality national data and analysis across the health, housing and community services sectors, presented in meaningful and relevant ways and delivered in a timely manner. Accurate statistical information, comprehensive data development and high-quality analyses support an increased understanding of health and welfare issues. This evidence base is critical to good policy-making and effective service delivery, which have a direct impact on the lives of Australians.*

Becoming the authoritative source of statistics and information on schooling, analysing the data and making the evidence on schooling accessible to stakeholders will require ACARA to build up its data management and analysis expertise and increase its attention to communications and relationship-building. It would also require buy-in from all states and territories to trust their student data to ACARA for national analysis, ensuring that proper

protocols are in place to protect privacy and confidentiality. At present some jurisdictions are reluctant to provide access to their individual student NAPLAN data, preventing longitudinal analysis of NAPLAN results, although this situation may improve with the implementation of NAPLAN online.

On ACARA's part, a more effective reporting function would involve a commitment to finding ways to report data in meaningful and relevant ways, developing new reporting channels to support increased understanding of schooling in Australia to inform public discussion and policy development. This would be in addition to managing *My School*, primarily as a source of nationally consistent school performance data for parents and school communities, and producing the annual report on schooling, as a necessary accountability instrument for governments and school authorities.

The question of access to data, especially by independent researchers, is one that stakeholders believe needs to be explored further by ACARA in consultation with them, in order to balance the requirements of data security and confidentiality with the potential to inform education policy and school improvement. For this function to be carried out effectively, the organisation needs to be seen as a trusted source of accurate information, operating independently and at arm's length from political interference.

The critical importance of independence in relation to ACARA's reporting function was underlined in stakeholders' unanimous opposition to the proposal in the Commonwealth Coalition Government's pre-election commitment to transfer all ACARA's data, reporting and compliance functions that are not curriculum related back to the Commonwealth Department of Education, in order to free ACARA to direct its resources into developing rigorous benchmarking processes for the curriculum. To all stakeholders, independence and objectivity – and the perception of independence and objectivity - are essential dimensions of the national school performance reporting role. These attributes can only be achieved through an independent agency operating at arm's length from governments. Transfer of the function to the Commonwealth would be unacceptable to the states and territories.

## **Findings**

The reporting function of ACARA is important for accountability, transparency and school improvement and merits greater attention than has been possible to date. ACARA should develop its data capability so as to become the authoritative source of school performance data, maximising the value of the data that is available to it, undertaking more analysis and providing insights into trends and achievements.

Proposals to transfer performance reporting on schools from ACARA to a separate agency or to the Commonwealth Department are strongly opposed.

Although it is only one source of reporting, *My School* is recognised as a sound instrument for providing nationally consistent data on schools across all jurisdictions and sectors to parents and the community. It meets the important objective of public transparency and



accountability at the individual school level. Improvements to the site are needed to make it more accessible and user friendly.

A national report on schooling outcomes is a valuable instrument of accountability and transparency, serving the national interest by providing reliable comparable data as an evidence base to inform policy and encourage improvement. It benefits jurisdictions by providing a national backdrop of consistent rigorous data against which to evaluate their own performance. There is considerable scope for transforming the ANR into a more meaningful and usable performance report.

### **Recommendations**

That ACARA retain responsibility for national performance reporting and enhance its capability and capacity to take a leadership role, including to inform public discussion and policy development.

That the key reporting mechanisms of the *My School* website and the National Report on Schooling in Australia be made more user-friendly, timely and supported by more sophisticated data and analyses.

## Chapter 6 – National architecture

This chapter looks at the relationships and synergies between the three national school education entities that make up the national primary and secondary education architecture. Each body is only recently established in its present form, although each has a predecessor organisation from which it has grown. Each has a different formal relationship with ministerial council although each is answerable to education ministers as a collective.

AITSL was established in 2010 as an independent Commonwealth company, funded by the Commonwealth and responsible to the Commonwealth Minister, to provide national leadership for governments in promoting excellence in teaching and school leadership. AITSL grew out of an earlier initiative by the Commonwealth to set up a national body for the teaching profession, Teaching Australia. Unlike Teaching Australia, AITSL was set up following agreement of ministerial council to its governance, operating arrangements and mandate. AITSL is governed by an independent Board, a Constitution and a Letter of Expectation which is issued by the Commonwealth Minister, on behalf of all education ministers.

ESA was set up in its present form, as a ministerial company responsible to ministerial council, in 2010 as a consolidation of two bodies, the Curriculum Corporation and Education.au. ESA operates as a self-funded service delivery organisation, managing education projects in the areas of curriculum, assessment, professional learning, digital systems and careers education, mainly for governments and mainly in the school sector. It is governed also by an independent Board. All Australian ministers of education are members of the company, and set out their priorities for the company in a Letter of Expectation.

A fourth national body, Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) was also established in 2010, as a national authority to manage implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in relation to early childhood education. ACECQA operates within the area of ministerial council’s responsibility for early childhood development, including early childhood education and care, which is separate from the council’s responsibility for primary and secondary education. The relationship between ACARA’s functions and those of ACECQA is minimal. In the context of this report ACECQA is of interest mainly for its contrasting governance arrangements, which are considered in chapter 7.

### **Purpose of national coordination and action**

Ministerial council operates as a forum for coordinating strategic policy, sharing information and collaborating on work to meet the goals in the Melbourne Declaration.

ACARA and AITSL both have a role in serving the national interest in having a high quality and equitable education system and meeting important aspects of the Melbourne Declaration goals. Teacher quality, the focus of AITSL’s work, is widely acknowledged to be the central element of a quality education system. The evidence that effective policies for improving education outcomes give priority to teacher quality is uncontested. This is the starting point

for the Commonwealth Government’s recent review of teacher education, which complements the Review of the Australian Curriculum. The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEAM) found that ‘the evidence is clear: enhancing the capability of teachers is vital to raising the overall quality of Australia’s school system and lifting student outcomes. ... There is strong evidence that high-quality teaching is fundamental to student learning, and the biggest in-school factor determining student outcomes.’ (TEAM December 2014)

The Commonwealth’s response to the TEAM report affirmed this position: ‘The Australian Government knows that having well trained and knowledgeable teachers provides the foundation for a strong, high quality education system in Australia. Quality teaching is one of the keys to driving student outcomes.’ The Commonwealth and states and territories have a shared commitment to national cooperative action on teacher quality, to complement individual efforts where this can make a difference. This is reflected in AITSL’s Letter of Expectation which endorses a broad work program.

ACARA’s curriculum, assessment and reporting functions go hand in hand with policies to raise teacher quality. The TEMAG report consistently makes connections between teacher capacity and pedagogy, and curriculum and assessment - student outcomes rely heavily on teacher capacity, which relies in part on teachers having access to a rigorous curriculum, understanding curriculum content and being able to personalise learning and use assessment to inform their teaching.

In the Australian federation, all these elements of quality schooling are primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments. The role for a national body operating in these areas is captured by AITSL in its annual report:

*AITSL undertakes national work on the basis that:*

- *it matters: there is clear value in a national and longer term perspective*
- *AITSL can make a distinctive offer*
- *AITSL has the capacity to lead and execute*
- *work done on behalf of the nation can be contextualised and used widely across jurisdictions, sectors and the profession.*

These operating principles could be applied equally to ACARA’s activities.

Where AITSL and ACARA are expected to take national leadership roles in relation to teaching, the curriculum, assessment and reporting, ESA operates as a service delivery organisation, providing services to support national education initiatives and developing materials.

ACARA’s curriculum function in particular requires a close relationship with both AITSL, so that teachers are well prepared for delivering the Australian Curriculum within their jurisdiction, and ESA, for the development of materials, products and services to support the new curriculum. ACARA also works in close partnership with ESA in assessment and reporting activities, with ESA involved in the production of NAP assessment materials, the development

of online sample assessments and the design and delivery of the national school opinion survey. More critically, ACARA, ESA and all Australian governments share responsibility for the delivery of NAPLAN online.

### **Effectiveness of collaboration**

ACARA is required by its Charter to give priority to working closely with AITSL and ESA, ‘to provide innovative and cost effective educational services across all sectors of education.’ In the current Letter of Expectation, ministerial council asks that ACARA continue to build on the current productive relationships with AITSL and ESA ‘in order to maintain the cohesion and effectiveness of the national educational architecture’. Similarly, the Letters of Expectation for AITSL and ESA emphasise the relationship between the mandates of the three bodies. AITSL is specifically asked to work with ACARA and ESA ‘to define and lead development of the professional practice to support the successful delivery of the Australian Curriculum in an increasingly digital and globalised environment.’ In ESA’s Letter of Expectation, the link is made between ESA’s role as a leading provider and the distinct mandates of ACARA and AITSL, as well as ACECQA.

Stakeholders were engaged in discussion of the appropriate structure and shape of national bodies working in the area of school education preceding the establishment of ACARA in 2008, as well as more recently when the architecture was reviewed in 2013. In 2008, Ministerial Council considered a report from the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) which led to the establishment of ACARA in its present form. The overriding objectives for the new architecture, as agreed by council, were ‘simplicity, a clear and effective mandate, credible and effective decision-making processes, a cost-effective structure, and operational consistency with subsidiarity principles.’

The architecture was re-examined in 2013 by Nous Group which reviewed the three bodies, ACARA, ESA and AITSL, in the context of deciding where to locate two potential new national functions: research and evaluation, and dissemination of best practice. In its review, Nous Group observed that these functions could be seen as an evolution of the functions of existing bodies such as ACARA and AITSL rather than new functions. The review found no strong imperative to change the status quo and commented that in operational terms, the interplay between the three organisations was effective. It concluded that with growing maturity, ACARA and AITSL would naturally assume research, evaluation and leadership functions in relation to their own area of activity and that leveraging the existing entities was preferable to restructuring the different bodies or rationalising their functions. The advantages of continuing with the status quo were threefold:

- it provided stability and continuity, and was the least disruptive approach for the entities and stakeholders
- it provided for clear specialisation by a dedicated entity
- it maximised the value of previous investment, as ‘the current system architecture is still maturing’.

In the context of this current report, these arguments for maintaining the present structures remain persuasive.

Stakeholders approach questions about the appropriate structural arrangements at the national level for teacher quality, curriculum, assessment and reporting functions from different perspectives, based on their experience in their own jurisdiction as well as on their particular view of federalism. In New South Wales, for example, responsibility for the four functions is assigned to a single body, in recognition of the close relationship between them. This structural change is quite recent, dating from 2014 when the state brought the curriculum, teaching, assessment, registration and policy functions previously provided by the Board of Studies NSW, and the NSW Institute of Teachers into The Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW (BOSTES), to 'bring a new focus in New South Wales on how research, data and experience on standards setting can be used to make improvements across the whole education spectrum.'

Most states have separate bodies, independent of departments of education and set up as statutory authorities, responsible for curriculum and standards, and teacher quality, although one state – Tasmania – has recently brought the previously independent Tasmanian Qualifications Authority's functions back into the department, as a cost-saving measure. In South Australia, the ACT and Northern Territory, the department of education has responsibility for curriculum and assessment, although in South Australia and the ACT, a separate statutory authority has responsibility for the senior secondary curriculum and assessment.

Stakeholders generally consider that the three national bodies – ACARA, ESA and AITSL – work well together, especially at the level of their respective Boards, and that they work well also with the related state and territory bodies in their sphere of activity. They recognise that all three bodies are relatively new, and with greater maturity, synergies between the three will develop further. The fact that they are differently constituted does not impede their collaboration, which is effected through regular meetings of Chairs and Chief Executives as well as more informal arrangements on an ad hoc basis.

Aligned with the view that each body performs a necessary and distinct national function, stakeholders consider that a single entity with all these functions at the national level would be unwieldy and would lose focus. The view put by Nous Group in 2013 that bringing the three bodies together would be disruptive at this time was echoed in the present consultations.

Stakeholders consider a close relationship between ACARA and ESA especially to be critical, with ESA playing a key role in producing materials and resources to support the Australian Curriculum. ESA's management of *ScotLe*, a 'one stop shop' that provides teachers with access to more than 20,000 digital curriculum resources, is widely held to be one of the most successful national initiatives in school education, and to play an invaluable part in delivering the Australian Curriculum.

As previously mentioned (Chapter 5), the development of NAPLAN online is seen as challenging for both ESA and ACARA, their capability and their capacity to work together. Given the complexities and the significance of the undertaking and the risks involved, careful oversight is required by both organisations and close coordination.

Once NAPLAN online is established, stakeholders foresee that momentum will build up around the analytical skills of teachers and principals, underlining the important relationship between ACARA and AITSL as well as ACARA and ESA.

### **Findings**

Each of the three national school education entities - ACARA, ESA and AITSL – has a distinct contribution to make to quality schooling across the nation. They work well together at present and are expected to develop further synergies as they mature, taking a stronger national leadership role.

### **Recommendation**

That the Chairs and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of ACARA, AITSL and ESA be encouraged to continue to meet on a regular basis to facilitate coordination across the national education architecture.

## Chapter 7 - Governance and structure

This chapter examines the current governance arrangements under which ACARA operates, considers options for governance reform and proposes a way forward. A number of stakeholders raised issues that suggest a need to refresh aspects of the way ACARA is governed and operates reflecting that it is now a more mature organisation, significant components of its work program have been accomplished, and experience has highlighted undue complexities that it is now timely to address. More broadly, and as discussed in previous chapters, the envisaged changes in ACARA's future role and focus across its functions of curriculum, assessment and reporting suggest that its governance and structure should be revised to reflect better future needs. In organisational management terms this can be described as 'form follows function'.

In order to draw some themes together the chapter includes a discussion of context, which draws on relevant points discussed earlier in the report.

### Context

As discussed in Chapter 2, ACARA is established under Commonwealth legislation but designed to operate as a national body. It is funded jointly by the Commonwealth and all states and territories, governed by a Board largely comprising state and territory nominees and representatives of the non-government sector and is answerable to the ministerial council.

Almost all stakeholders considered that as a national body accountable to a council of ministers, ACARA's governance arrangements were complex and in some respects unique. Many stakeholders considered that there were opportunities to streamline and 'declutter' some processes. Nevertheless the arrangements had worked in a satisfactory manner due to the goodwill and commitment demonstrated across jurisdictions and sectors

### Relevant legislation

As discussed earlier, the ACARA Act specifies at a broad level the organisation's functions and powers. The legislation sets out a comprehensive mandate for ACARA, although some ambiguity exists over the meaning of 'administer' in relation to curriculum. Importantly the ACARA Act specifies that ACARA 'must perform its functions and exercise its powers in accordance with any directions given to it by the Ministerial Council'.

In common with other Commonwealth entities, ACARA is now subject to the relevant provisions of the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013* (PGPA Act) as operationalised through the *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act (Consequential and Transitional Provisions) Act 2014* and *Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Rule 2014*. Key provisions worth noting are those relating to the general duties of officials, including disclosure of material personal interests (sections 25 to 29), and requirements to develop a corporate plan (section 35), to prepare budget estimates (section

36), to measure and assess its performance in achieving its purposes (section 38), and to prepare an annual report for presentation to the Parliament (section 46).

### **Role of the Charter**

The Charter is the key instrument through which the ministerial council exercises its responsibility for determining policy directions for ACARA and providing guidance on its work program. Notably, section 4 of the current Charter states that ‘the primary function of the Authority is to execute the policy directions that are determined by the Standing Council and set out in this Charter and ACARA’s Letter of Expectation’.

The Charter outlines protocols for ACARA to report to the ministerial council. These include a written report on progress against an annual work plan, to be provided for each meeting, a new detailed forward work plan for endorsement, to be provided annually, and a four year work plan and budget, to be provided on a quadrennial basis.

ACARA’s current Charter (appendix B) took effect on 3 August 2012 and has not been revised pending the legislated review of ACARA.

### **Role of the Letter of Expectation**

The Letter of Expectation is a mechanism for ministers to provide greater clarity about government policies and objectives relevant to a statutory authority, including the policies and priorities it is expected to observe in conducting its operations. Statements of expectation, generally from the relevant Commonwealth minister rather than a ministerial council, with a responding statement of intent from the agency, have become common practice for statutory authorities. In ACARA’s case, the Letter of Expectation provides additional detail, beyond the Charter, on ministerial council’s priorities for and expectations of the organisation.

Interestingly, the RAC recommended that future Letters of Expectation for ACARA should include the educational justification for all directions, reflecting the reviewers’ view that governance needs to be at a distance and that curriculum decisions need to be based on educational expertise. This would bring greater transparency to the educational basis for directions and reduce any appearance of politicisation. The RAC concluded that ‘the downward flow of direction from ministerial direction to ACARA through Letters of Expectation seems a very clumsy mechanism to use to convey educational considerations’ and described the relationship between ministerial council and the ACARA Board as ‘shrouded in mystery . . . not very transparent and therefore not particularly accountable’ (Australian Government 2014: 230).

The specific issues raised by the RAC were rarely mentioned by stakeholders. A number of non-government stakeholders did, however, express interest in seeing ACARA’s work plans being made public to understand better its program of work. Parent groups noted that they had no formal interaction with the ACARA Board.



## **Core functions**

The first meeting of ministerial council after the election of the Abbott Government noted the Commonwealth's intention to refocus ACARA as a statutory authority responsible for curriculum and national assessment and to transfer some reporting functions to the department. The ministerial council also noted the Commonwealth's commitment to review the national curriculum development process and content.

While the main focus of the RAC report was on the development process and content of the Australian Curriculum, the reviewers also addressed a number of questions about the functions and governance of ACARA. In relation to co-location of the three functions, the RAC noted the arguments both in favour and against co-locating curriculum and assessment.

The RAC concluded that ACARA's functions of curriculum and assessment should continue, although its curriculum role should be limited to development and cyclical updates of the Australian Curriculum, curriculum research and international benchmarking of the curriculum.

As previously discussed, stakeholders support co-location of the three functions of curriculum, assessment and reporting in ACARA because of the need for alignment between them

## **ACARA Board**

A number of issues arose in relation to the ACARA Board, which are discussed below.

### **Representative versus expert**

The ACARA Board is expected to collectively possess a balance of professional expertise in ACARA's functions as well as financial and commercial matters and corporate governance. While membership could therefore be categorised as expert, the appointment process tends to make it representative. Ten of the 13 Board members are nominees of the 8 states and territories and the Catholic and independent school sectors. One Board member, the Chair and the deputy Chair, are nominated by the Commonwealth. The ministerial council needs to agree to each appointment.

While the expectation was that the appointment process would result in a skills-based Board, it has been the general practice that the state and territory nominees have been drawn from their curriculum, assessment and certification bodies or education departments. This is understandable given the early focus of ACARA on developing a national curriculum but raises the issue of how the perceived conflicts of interest such members may have are best managed.

There were mixed views among stakeholders able to comment on the workings of the Board. Some felt that inherent conflicts of interest had from time to time impacted adversely on Board discussions and ability to progress issues. Others took a more pragmatic approach and considered that the insights offered on jurisdictional positions were very valuable in informing the Board. Moreover the representative composition of the Board was seen as an important factor in maintaining ownership and commitment. The test for stakeholders is whether representative members ultimately act in the best interests of the organisation.

The RAC also discussed the perception that state government nominees act as representatives rather than as independent education experts. The RAC noted this as a conflict of interest and concluded that an overhaul of ACARA's governance is required to ensure that it is truly independent.

In this context the RAC noted, 'it also seems rather curious that it is the Ministerial Council which approves ACARA's work plan, advised by the very public servants who sit on the ACARA Board, when all the state and territory departments have a vested interest in this domain and could well attempt to shape the work plan to suit their own administrative convenience – another example of ACARA being bedevilled by compromise.' (Australian Government 2014: 230)

The RAC observed that (Australian Government 2014):

*A curriculum makes choices ...and must be done by experts – educators first then academics then politicians. (101)*

*The (blurred distinction between expert/representative) has bedevilled perceptions of ACARA ... (229)*

Guidelines for good governance in the public sector address the question of agency independence from political interference and the responsibility of directors: (Governance Institute of Australia 2014)

*As a matter of good governance, the board should be independent of management or political influence and resilient to changes in the machinery of government. It is also important that any directors appointed to the board by a sponsoring body have clarity that they must act in the best interest of the organisation rather than the constituency they represent.*

In its initial response to the RAC the Australian Government indicated that it was supportive of the Review's recommendation that ACARA's Board should not be representative of education authorities but comprise curriculum and assessment experts, independent of education authorities.' (Australian Government October 2014: 12). Nevertheless the Australian Government indicated that the legislated review of ACARA provided an appropriate opportunity to canvass issues around ACARA's role, functions and governance with the states and territories. That was the position subsequently agreed by the ministerial council in December 2014.

### **Board size**

The size of the ACARA Board is determined by the interests represented. While concluding that it was not appropriate to recommend a one size fits all approach to public sector boards, the Uhrig review suggested that 'a board of between six and nine members (including a managing director) represents a reasonable size' and that 'the optimal board size for an entity

may vary in line with changes in its functions and the needs of the board.’ (Australian Government (Uhrig) 2003: 96).

Recent guidance for good governance in the public sector indicates that ‘the larger the board, the greater the difficulty in achieving consensus when making decisions. Notwithstanding this, diversity of opinion is essential to the proper functioning of a board. In the private sector, the majority of companies permit a maximum of up to ten directors on the board.’ (Governance Institute of Australia 2014).

While some stakeholders noted that the ACARA Board was relatively large, most thought that maintaining broad representation was important.

### **Terms of appointment**

The ACARA Act places a limit of six years on Board member’s terms of appointment. Most stakeholders saw value in maximum fixed terms. Stakeholders also noted that opportunity had been taken as the initial terms of Board members had expired to appoint new members and adjust terms of appointment to achieve a better balance between retaining core knowledge and obtaining different skills and fresh perspectives in the governing body.

Many stakeholders commented that the workings of the Board had improved as members gained experience and the organisation matured.

### **Board processes**

The ACARA Act provides for Board decisions to be made by majority vote and for the appointment of committees to assist ACARA in performing its functions. The ACARA Board currently has an Audit and Risk Committee.

The ACARA Chief Executive Officer, responsible for the day-to-day management of ACARA, is appointed by the Board, after consultation with the Commonwealth Minister.

Perhaps reflecting its legal status as a Commonwealth entity, a senior official of the Department attends ACARA Board meetings as an observer as does the chair of AEEYSOC. It is also common for the ACARA CEO and senior executives to do likewise. However the Board does have an in camera session restricted to Board members. Stakeholders had mixed views about the presence of observers at Board meetings, as opposed to the Board being briefed or requesting advice on particular issues from relevant executives or senior staff.

Stakeholder feedback indicates that prescriptive nature of the ‘instruments of control’ discussed above, together with the requirement for clearance of ministerial council papers through AEEYSOC (see below), have created some frustrations and from time to time have generated additional work and impacted on the performance of the Board.

### **Ministerial Council**

The Board is responsible for the operational and financial management of ACARA, providing expert advice across the three main functions, and representing jurisdictional and sectoral interests, under the oversight of the ministerial council.

At its meeting on 13 December 2013, COAG agreed to streamline the number and functions of ministerial councils, reducing the total number of councils to eight, of which the Education Council is one. The guidelines for councils include that items of a practical or administrative nature should be delegated to officials to determine or dealt with out of session.

The Education Council has to date been operating under the same terms of reference as its predecessor, the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC). It is a forum through which strategic policy on school education and early childhood can be coordinated at the national level, information can be shared and resources used collaboratively to help achieve agreed objectives and priorities.

Ministerial council procedures require all issues on its agenda be first considered by AEEYSOC, which has in turn a number of sub-groups. Consequently all ACARA papers going forward to the ministerial council must first be scrutinised through the AEEYSOC process. As many of the state and territory representatives on the ACARA Board work closely with members of AEEYSOC, and are involved in briefing their respective Ministers, there can be an inherent conflict of interest in their various roles.

Since 2009, meetings of ministerial council, and particularly education officials, have committed considerable time to ACARA's activities, noting ACARA's progress in relation to its functions, approving work plans and budgets, endorsing curriculum materials and achievement standards, agreeing to processes, setting timelines, seeking additional information and discussing issues arising in different states and territories. It also appears that ACACA bodies have not changed their activities. This is in contrast to the expectations discussed earlier in this report that efficiencies could be gained through establishment of ACARA.

In addition, the large turnover of members of ministerial council since ACARA was established (a total of 35 as discussed in Chapter 1) has created issues around lack of ownership of previous decisions, willingness to settle issues, and capacity to provide clear strategic directions.

The RAC concluded that this arrangement for direction and reporting was a major defect in ACARA's operation, forcing ACARA to do two tasks – speak to the public and politicians and try to be accountable, as well as give practical advice to teachers. The RAC found that the right balance was not achieved, and that reporting for accountability purposes dominated the rest (Australian Government 2014:101).

## **Funding**

The ACARA Act provides for funding of ACARA to come from sources other than the Commonwealth in anticipation of joint funding of ACARA by all jurisdictions. Consistent with its role as a collaborative national body and the current SCSEEC formula, the Commonwealth contributes half of ACARA's budget and the states and territories together contribute the remaining half. State and territory financial contributions reflect their relative size.

The non-government school sector, while represented on the Board, goes not contribute funding to ACARA’s budget.

In October 2011 the ministerial council agreed to a total budget for ACARA of \$109.2 m over the four years from 2012-13 to 2015-16, of which the Commonwealth has allocated \$54.6m. Funding for the period 2016-17 to 2019-20 is dependent on ministerial council agreement to ACARA’s next four year work plan and proposed budget.

The figures in the table below have been taken from the 2013-14 and 2014-15 Portfolio Budget Statements. It should be noted that these figures include some specific project funding from the Commonwealth, which is additional to its contribution to funding ACARA’s agreed budget noted above.

ACARA budget	2012-13 \$’000 actual	2013-14 \$’000 estimated actual	2014-15 \$’000 estimate	2015-16 \$’000 estimate	2016-17 \$’000 estimate	2017-18 \$’000 estimate
Total expenses	39,847	38,498	27,520	25,520	-	-
ASL	115	116	95	-	-	-

It can be seen that the budget numbers anticipate some diminution of ACARA’s overall work effort as major elements of work are completed. The funding situation is another driver for a re-examination of ACARA’s future functions and an interest in finding efficiencies where possible.

### **Institutional form**

As discussed earlier the various bodies that make up the national education architecture have differing legal forms and governance arrangements. This raises the issue as to whether ACARA’s legal form is still fit for purpose. The RAC recommended that ACARA be reconstituted, possibly as a company that is at arm’s length from education ministers and the education departments that serve them. A number of options are discussed below.

#### **Commonwealth statutory authority**

At present, ACARA is established under its statute as a body corporate. It therefore falls within the purview of the PGPA Act, which regulates aspects of the corporate governance, financial management and reporting of Commonwealth authorities as discussed earlier.

As mentioned in Chapter 6, ACARA’s governance arrangements, and the relationship between ACARA and other national schooling entities, in particular AITSL and ESA, were reviewed in 2013 by Nous Group. This review, which had a particular focus on efficiency, took the existing functions of ACARA as given. After extensive stakeholder consultation, the review saw no need for changes to ACARA’s institutional form, ownership or governance arrangements and

proposed that ACARA assume a new responsibility, for a national research, analysis and evaluation plan.

The issue of ACARA's legal form was not a concern for most stakeholders. Some saw an advantage in ACARA being a statutory authority in terms of its status in the educational architecture and its' standing relative to state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification bodies, many of whom are statutory authorities under state legislation.

### **National statutory authority**

A quite different approach, suggested by one major stakeholder, would be to re-establish ACARA as a national statutory authority, which would require the passage of complementary legislation by the Commonwealth and each of the states and territories. This is the model under which ACECQA is established under the Education and Care Services National Law. ACECQA is governed by a 13 member board appointed by and responsible to the ministerial council. It is guided by a letter of expectation, issued by ministerial council, which outlines strategic priorities and expectations.

The basic rationale behind this suggested change is that it would make ACARA a truly national body. It would also reduce the direct influence of the Commonwealth vis-à-vis the states and territories.

### **Ministerially owned company**

There was little support among stakeholders for ACARA to be reconstituted as a ministerially owned company, largely because the benefits were not clear and because of the practical difficulties and time involved in negotiating and implementing such a substantive change.

The key advantages in moving to a joint ministerial owned company, similar to the ESA structure, would be to reduce the influence of the ministerial council and give the Board more authority while still maintaining formal Commonwealth and state and territory engagement. Against that, the functions of ACARA are quite different to those of a body such as ESA.

It is also relevant that shortly after the establishment of ACARA, the then ministerial council decided to consolidate a predecessor body, the Curriculum Corporation with Education.au Limited to form ESA. Both bodies had been ministerially owned companies.

### **Oversight by Directors-General**

A variation on the way ACARA currently operates would be for the ministerial council to agree to delegate responsibility for the oversight of ACARA to the heads of Commonwealth and state and territory education departments (effectively AEEYSOC). This could be done under the existing ACARA Act and would formalise much of what happens now but give Directors-General formal decision making authority. It would also recognise that the Directors-General are responsible for running school systems and are in a position to offer expert advice.

One stakeholder saw significant merit in changing the oversight of ACARA from the ministerial council to the heads of education departments and it was recognised by several stakeholders that this would simplify the accountability and process arrangements currently in place.

### **Organisational structure**

As a relatively small and focused organisation, ACARA has a flat senior executive structure with the general managers for curriculum and assessment and reporting, the chief operating officer and director communications and strategic relations reporting directly to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO). There is no designated deputy CEO. Each of the CEO's direct reports leads a specialist area of operations.

Stakeholders generally spoke favourably about their dealings with members of ACARA's executive team. Some stakeholders identified issues around the strategic capability and capacity of the organisation, including in meeting the needs and expectations of the Board and of ministerial council. This resulted in a deal of churn and extra effort in preparing papers for Board and ministerial council consideration, including discussion and clearance through the AEEYSOC process.

Some stakeholders were of the view that these difficulties explained in part why the Letter of Expectation was so detailed and why the four yearly and annual work plans and budgets were so closely scrutinised.

It is highly desirable on a number of grounds that action be taken to overcome these deficiencies. While the details should be a matter for the Board and CEO to resolve, one option would be to appoint a deputy CEO whose prime responsibility would be to identify, examine and propose responses to strategic and cross-cutting issues, prompt discussion within the executive team and with the CEO, and oversee the drafting, liaison and consultation processes required to develop appropriate Board and ministerial council papers. Appointment at this level would ensure the deputy would have the standing and authority to negotiate the substance of the issues and also work effectively within the complexities of ACARA's operating environment. The cost of such a role would be offset to the extent that the occupant could drive improved efficiency and effectiveness.

### **Advisory structures**

ACARA has established a significant number of advisory groups (see Appendix D) in order to inform its consideration of key issues and to engage and learn from key stakeholders and experts. Some are cross cutting in nature (e.g. Students with Disability Advisory Group), but most are clustered in functional groups (e.g. the Primary Perspectives Advisory Group within the curriculum stream). Many stakeholders considered that while the consultative processes had usually worked well, the recommendations of the advisory groups were not always taken on board and the subsequent decision-making processes within ACARA were often opaque.

A number of stakeholders also commented on the siloed nature of many of the advisory groups and noted that related issues were not always brought together. Stakeholders from smaller representative organisations observed that the demands made on their time and resources by the ACARA processes, including short deadlines, posed considerable challenges for them to overcome.

On the other hand the inclusive nature of ACARA's consultation and advisory processes were seen by stakeholders as essential components for ACARA's success.

It is highly desirable that the extensive advisory group structure be simplified and rationalised to better focus on ACARA's forward agenda. To meet the expectations of stakeholders the remaining groups should have clear terms of reference, including their composition and levels of authority, and their work treated in a transparent manner with clear feedback mechanisms in place.

## **Communications**

Stakeholders, including parent groups, acknowledged that ACARA has improved its external communications in recent years, with further development and refinement of its various websites and its social media presence on You Tube, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Some noted that ACARA had been successful in getting more positive media coverage of NAPLAN and *My School*, through identifying high performing and improving schools. However a number commented that ACARA had not been successful in selling its own story to the broader public, in terms of its role, the importance of its functions (including why), its achievements and the difference it was making - in short, undertaking an advocacy role. This would be consistent with findings in earlier chapters about ACARA taking a more proactive leadership role.

While there are always sensitivities and a need for balance around advocacy, there are mechanisms that ACARA could adopt that advance that objective while adding value to the public educational dialogue. These could, for example, include hosting workshops on broad topics of interest and holding a cost recovered annual conference around the themes of ACARA's work, which, given how central they are to educational outcomes, could be expected to attract both domestic and international speakers and audiences.

## **Change strategy**

A number of stakeholders considered that the time was now right to refresh ACARA and deal with some elements of its governance and processes that were judged to be inefficient or redundant. This was mainly because ACARA had now matured as an organisation, and the imminent retirement of a number of foundation Board members (including the Chair) and the completion of major components of its initial work program now provide an opportunity to



build on what ACARA has achieved. It is also the case that disempowerment through micro-management is detrimental to innovation.

Almost all stakeholders favoured a meaningful but incremental approach to change, recognising that the past history of ‘the politics of education’ and Commonwealth-state relations, together with recent changes of government and budget constraints meant that substantial change would be extremely difficult and there was no evidence that transformational change was required in the near term.

A number of stakeholders referred to the review of the federation as possibly having a bearing on the Commonwealth’s role in education but not necessarily for ACARA beyond the issues discussed earlier in this report.

Given the sensitivities around the approach of the Commonwealth in the past, and the constraints of the ACARA Act, a collaborative approach to any reform of ACARA is likely to yield the best results.

Taking into account the feedback from stakeholders and basic principles of good governance, changes which could assist ACARA make the transition toward being a more independent, internationally recognised, dynamic and innovative organisation could comprise:

- Ministerial council agreement to a collaborative nomination process that would result in a skills-based but still representative Board; together with maintenance of a maximum term to facilitate the introduction of new perspectives combined with staggered appointments to maintain a good level of corporate knowledge.
- The development of a new ACARA Charter in the form of a framework that focuses on higher level strategic directions based on ACARA’s expected contribution to national educational improvements.
- Abolition of the Letter of Expectation as an unnecessary additional layer of control; or, as a second best option, a revised approach to a Letter of Expectation which would focus on priorities and be less prescriptive, especially around the how and when of ACARA’s activities.
- Delegation by ministerial council of more authority to senior officials to oversee ACARA, including to approve the four year work plan and budget within broad parameters set by the council.
- Maintenance of a four year work plan but on a rolling basis, consistent with the Commonwealth budget cycle, to facilitate scrutiny of ACARA’s budget.
- Devolution of responsibility for the current one year work plans, so that they become a matter solely for the Board and management of ACARA.
- Review of ACARA’s organisational structure and allocation of resources to best meet proposed changes in the focus of its functions.

- Rationalisation of ACARA’s consultative and advisory committee structure to ensure a less siloed approach, to better link related issues, to achieve efficiencies and to reduce the opportunity costs of participation.
- Maintenance of productive working relationships with ESA and AITSL to ensure potential synergies are exploited and overlaps avoided.
- A further review of ACARA to be undertaken as part of a more holistic examination of the national educational architecture by 2020, in light of recent reforms and the importance of Australia having a world class education system in a rapidly changing world.

While a subset of the above reforms could be considered, most of them are strongly inter-related, and the cumulative impact would be much larger than taking a piecemeal approach to change.

## **Key findings**

There is general recognition that ACARA’s governance arrangements are complex, contain some inherent tensions and could be improved.

The requirements for ACARA to provide an annual portfolio budget statement as part of the Education portfolio, an annual report against its Charter and Letter of Expectation and work plan to the ministerial council, as well as meet its obligations under the PGPA Act together with the clearance and decision-making process under ministerial council protocols, represent a substantial compliance burden.

Almost all stakeholders considered that certain elements of the governance arrangements were crucial to ACARA’s role as a national body and in retaining a sense of ownership by all jurisdictions and all sectors. Strategic policy and funding control through ministerial council was seen as important in this regard. A representative Board is also seen as important, not just from a state and territory perspective, but also for the non-government sector as they are not represented on AEEYSOC.

The joint funding of ACARA by all jurisdictions, with the Commonwealth contributing half, was seen as appropriate for a national body.

There is little support for changing the legal form of ACARA from that of a statutory authority established under Commonwealth legislation.

There is need to build the strategic capability and capacity within ACARA as this has been identified as an area requiring improvement. Some changes in governance would facilitate this process.

The advisory structures utilised by ACARA appear to be no longer fit for purpose and need to be rationalised.

It was reported that ACARA has improved its external communications but could strengthen its advocacy and leadership role.

A number of factors provide an opportunity for change, especially the development of the next iteration of ACARA's Charter, Letter of Expectation (if retained), and the next four year work plan and budget. Reform of governance arrangements would best be approached in an incremental and collaborative way.

There is a case to further review ACARA and its place in the national educational architecture by 2020 in light of recent reforms, the changes proposed in this report, international developments and the importance of Australia maintaining a world class education system in a rapidly changing world.

## **Recommendations**

That the governance structures, authorising instruments and processes under which ACARA operates be revised with the objective of enhancing the strategic role of the Board, creating a more permissive authorising environment, and allowing ACARA to operate more independently within the strategic directions and priorities set out in its Charter. More specifically:

- (a) establish through ministerial council agreement a collaborative nomination process that would result in a skills-based but representative Board; together with maintenance of maximum and staggered terms of appointment.
- (b) develop a new ACARA Charter in the form of a framework that focuses on higher level strategic directions and contributions to national educational improvements.
- (c) abolish the Letter of Expectation or, as a second best option, a revised approach which would focus on higher level priorities and be less prescriptive.
- (d) delegate more authority to senior officials to oversee ACARA, including to approve the four year work plan and budget within broad parameters set by ministerial council.
- (e) maintain the requirement for a four year work plan but provide for it to be prepared on a rolling basis consistent with established government budget processes.
- (f) devolve responsibility for the one year work plans to the Board and management of ACARA to be used as an organisation management mechanism.

That the Commonwealth work with the states and territories and non-government sector, and through AEEYSOC and the ministerial council to achieve the above changes.

That ACARA utilise the PGPA Act requirement to develop a four year corporate plan to refine the key strategies and plans that are needed to achieve the overall priorities and needs of the future.

That ACARA reassess the resources and capabilities required to adopt a more strategic and innovative approach to undertaking its functions and develop an organisational structure that can effectively support such changes.

That ACARA review and simplify its advisory and consultative mechanisms to make them more strategic, efficient and effective.

That while being respectful of the roles and responsibilities of the states, territories and non-government sector, the Commonwealth continue to play a national leadership, catalytic and collaborative role with a view to improving future educational outcomes for Australian students.

That a further review of ACARA be undertaken as part of a more holistic examination of the national educational architecture by 2020 in light of recent reforms and the importance of Australia having a high performing education system in a rapidly changing world.

## Chapter 8 - Conclusions and recommendations

This chapter summarises the key conclusions of the stakeholder consultation process and provides a consolidated set of recommendations for consideration in the context of the Department’s review of ACARA.

### Key conclusions

It is clear from the stakeholder consultations that ACARA is now seen as a key part of Australia’s national educational architecture with a continuing role into the future. It is also clear that ACARA is considered to have done a good job and made some significant achievements in challenging circumstances and often against tight deadlines. Stakeholders pointed to the development of the Australian Curriculum as a major achievement; enhancement of the NAP as work well done, especially the move to NAPLAN testing online; and development of the *My School* website as enhancing the accountability and transparency of schools.

There are some criticisms of ACARA in terms of what it has done, how it has gone about its work and the quality of its work. There are also major sensitivities about the perceived influence of certain jurisdictions (especially the Commonwealth) over ACARA, its role and function vis-à-vis the responsibilities of the states and territories, and its governance structure.

### Purpose of ACARA

The ACARA website describes the organisation’s mission as “improving the learning of all young Australians, through world class school curriculum, assessment and reporting”.

ACARA was created to bring together for the first time on a national basis the functions of a curriculum, assessment, data collection and reporting. The underlying policy rationale, to enhance national educational quality, accountability, transparency and consistency, remains relevant.

### Functions of ACARA

The ACARA Act specifies at a broad level the scope of ACARA’s functions in relation to curriculum, assessment, data collection and reporting. The Act provides a mandate in these areas for ACARA, subject to oversight by the ministerial council.

There is a strong case for having these functions undertaken within a single national body.

## Curriculum

ACARA has completed to a high standard the development of the learning content and achievement standards for the F-10 national curriculum. All states and territories and the non-government sector are implementing the national curriculum, albeit in varying ways. A number of areas identified for improvement are currently being addressed by ACARA.

ACARA has also developed senior secondary curriculum for 15 subjects for English, mathematics, science and history (curriculum content and draft achievement standards) and these were endorsed by ministerial council on 7 December 2012 as a basis for the development of state and territory curriculums. It has also developed senior secondary curriculum for geography, which was endorsed by ministerial council in August 2013.

There is national value in ACARA retaining a curriculum function focused on a leadership role, including research and innovation.

## Assessment

ACARA has managed competently the NAP, including NAPLAN, and succeeded in reducing underlying concerns about the tests. NAPLAN online offers a significant step change from the past and further development and effective implementation of NAPLAN online should be ACARA's top priority.

ACARA can be a source of expert advice on assessment, including on issues such as sample versus whole cohort testing, standards and benchmarking, and sample testing beyond the current program.

## Reporting

ACARA, through its data collection and reporting function, has enhanced the transparency and accountability of the national education system. Most stakeholders oppose any suggestion that these functions be transferred to another body.

There is scope to enhance progressively the *My School* website and to modernise the ANR, and to focus more on data analysis to support policy development.

## National architecture

As one of three national school education entities that make up the national primary and secondary education architecture, ACARA has a distinctive role in relation to curriculum, assessment and reporting that complements the roles of AITSL and ESA. While each entity has a different legal form, they all have a formal relationship with ministerial council.

All three bodies are working to a common goal of improving educational outcomes and it is important that they continue to liaise closely and regularly with each other.

## **Governance and structure**

ACARA's governance arrangements are complex. However key elements are crucial to its role as a national body and for buy-in by all jurisdictions and all sectors. While there is little support for radical change, worthwhile enhancements can be made within the existing legislation and governance arrangements with ministerial council support.

Changes which would assist ACARA to move to being a more independent and innovative organisation, operating within a more permissive authorising environment, would include: ministerial council agreeing to focus on strategic directions; reconceptualization of ACARA's Charter, Letter of Expectation and four year work plan and budget to allow more discretion; greater delegation of authority to AEEYSOC to oversight ACARA's operations; and a collaborative nomination process that would result in a skilled based but still representative Board.

ACARA should also refine its organisational structure, enhance its skills set to meet better its future role and rationalise its advisory structures.

## **Legislation**

Stakeholders did not propose specific changes to the ACARA Act and the changes in direction and governance reforms discussed in this report do not require legislative amendments. However some options for changes in the institution form of ACARA would have legislative implications if they were to be pursued.

## **Recommendations**

The following consolidated list of high level recommendations is based on the key findings from stakeholder consultations and are also informed by the review of key documents undertaken for this report and the consultant's professional judgement. The recommendations in the form listed below have not been discussed with stakeholders.

It is recommended that:

1. All jurisdictions through the ministerial council renew their commitment to the objectives and purpose of ACARA as a key body in the national education architecture.
2. ACARA retain the three core functions of curriculum, assessment, data collection and reporting because of the linkages between them.
3. ACARA's future role in relation to the national curriculum be focused on national leadership, involving monitoring curriculum developments, research, information-sharing, facilitation of cooperation, innovation and benchmarking now that the key task of developing a national curriculum has been largely completed.

4. ACARA give high priority to the development and implementation of NAPLAN online because of the potential benefits of adaptive testing and more timely availability of results.
5. ACARA shift the balance of its resources and attention to its assessment function, to ensure appropriate expertise is available and all risks are addressed for the successful implementation of NAPLAN online.
6. That ACARA retain responsibility for national performance reporting and enhance its capability and capacity to take a leadership role, including to inform public discussion and policy development.
7. That the key reporting mechanisms of the *My School* website and the National Report on Schooling in Australia be made more user-friendly, timely and supported by more sophisticated data and analyses.
8. The Chairs and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of ACARA, AITSL and ESA be encouraged to continue to meet on a regular basis to facilitate coordination across the national education architecture.
9. The governance structures, authorising instruments and processes under which ACARA operates be revised with the objective of enhancing the strategic role of the Board, creating a more permissive authorising environment, and allowing ACARA to operate more independently within the strategic directions and priorities set out in its Charter. More specifically:
  - (a) establish through ministerial council agreement a collaborative nomination process that would result in a skills-based but representative Board; together with maintenance of maximum and staggered terms of appointment.
  - (b) develop a new ACARA Charter in the form of a framework that focuses on higher level strategic directions and contributions to national educational improvements.
  - (c) abolish the Letter of Expectation or, as a second best option, a revised approach which would focus on priorities and be less prescriptive.
  - (d) delegate more authority to senior officials to oversee ACARA, including to approve the four year work plan and budget within broad parameters set by ministerial council.
  - (e) maintain the requirement for a four year work plan but provide for it to be prepared on a rolling basis consistent with established government budget processes.
  - (f) devolve responsibility for the one year work plans to the Board and management of ACARA to be used as an organisation management mechanism.
10. The Commonwealth work with the states and territories and non-government sector, and through AEEYSOC and the ministerial council to achieve these objectives.



11. ACARA utilise the PGPA Act requirement to develop a four year corporate plan to refine the key strategies and plans that are needed to achieve the overall priorities and needs of the future.
12. ACARA reassess the resources and capabilities required to adopt a more strategic and innovative approach to undertaking its functions and develop an organisational structure that can effectively support such changes.
13. ACARA review and simplify its advisory and consultative mechanisms to make them more strategic, efficient and effective.
14. While being respectful of the roles and responsibilities of the states, territories and non-government sector, the Commonwealth continue to play a national leadership, catalytic and collaborative role with a view to improving future educational outcomes for Australian students.
15. A further review of ACARA be undertaken as part of a more holistic examination of the national educational architecture by 2020 in light of recent reforms and the importance of Australia having a high performing education system in a rapidly changing world.

# Appendix A – Background and methodology

## Background

The Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training asked his Department to undertake a review of the ongoing role and functions of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as required by Section 44 of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 as amended (the ACARA Act).

## ACARA Review - Terms of Reference

The ACARA review will be conducted by the Department of Education and Training and will assess the appropriateness of ACARA's ongoing role and functions against the aims and objectives of ACARA's charter.

In doing this, the Department will consider:

- ACARA's assigned functions as set out in the ACARA Act, the ACARA charter, previous letters of expectation, and Ministerial Council directives
- ACARA's delivery against its charter, previous letters of expectation and Ministerial Council directives, including a qualitative assessment of the quality and impact of ACARA's work
- ACARA's organisational structures and governance and their impact on the delivery of ACARA's functions
- any advantages or disadvantages associated with the co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities
- the level of satisfaction with ACARA's role, functions, processes and the connection to ACARA's annual and quadrennial work plans
- the outcome of any reviews, evaluations or other relevant projects/documents relating to the role and functions of ACARA, including the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

The Department will provide a written report to the Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training by 8 June 2015.

## Stakeholder Consultations

The stakeholder consultations were commissioned by the Australian Government Department of Education and Training as part of the above legislated review of ACARA. In summary the scope of the consultancy was to:

- Undertake a series of high level stakeholder consultations to inform the Department's review of ACARA
- Conduct the consultations in the form of in-depth interviews and focus on the issues identified for investigation in the Review Terms of Reference
- Undertake consultations with a range of stakeholders including past and present ACARA Board members; heads of commonwealth, state and territory education departments; non-government sector representatives at the national and state/territory level; state and territory curriculum, assessment and certification bodies, principals associations and parent groups
- Review a number of key documents to inform the consultations, including the ACARA Act, the ACARA charter and letter of expectation, work plans and directions provided by the Ministerial Council
- Prepare a high quality, written report detailing the findings of the stakeholder consultations using the Terms of Reference as a guide. Summarise stakeholder discussions relating to the Terms of Reference and other issues that arise during the consultations and include recommendations about ACARAs future role, functions, structure and governance.

## **Methodology**

As indicated above, the report is informed primarily by consultations with 45 stakeholders (individuals and organisations) identified by the Department, comprising all past and present ACARA board members; the ACARA CEO; departments of education and curriculum, assessment and certification authorities in each Australian jurisdiction (commonwealth, state and mainland territory); the catholic and independent education sectors; primary, secondary and special education principals associations; parent associations and Professor Kenneth Wiltshire AO, in his capacity as an author of the Review of the National Curriculum. Most of the consultations were undertaken through face to face interviews in each capital city from mid-January to end-February 2015. Due to issues of stakeholder availability, eight consultation and one follow up discussion were undertaken by telephone, the last being conducted in late-March 2015.

As an aid to preparation, prior to the consultations being undertaken each stakeholder was emailed a consultation guide. While it had no formal status the guide was designed to help provide a general but flexible framework for discussion. A copy of the consultation guide is provided below.

The information gathered through the consultation process was analysed in terms of the key issues which arose and the differences in perspectives and views between groups of stakeholders. The information was then assessed in terms of the weight of collaborative evidence collected and the balance of opinion, noting that clear differences emerged on some issues.

To inform the consultations and to flesh out aspects of this report, a number of publicly available and other documents were reviewed. These included the ACARA Act, charter, letter of expectations, four year and annual work plans and decisions taken by the ministerial council and its predecessors. A number of consultant's reports and other relevant documents were also considered. In addition, specific information on some issues was requested from the Department and ACARA, while in a number of cases organisations made information available on a confidential basis. However in accordance with the scope of the consultancy a comprehensive literature review, additional data gathering and quantitative analysis was not undertaken.

All the information and data provided has been analysed and synthesised into broad themes, around which this report is structured. These are the purpose of ACARA, its functions in relation to curriculum, assessment and reporting, relationships between ACARA, AITSL and ESA, and governance and structure. The key findings related to each theme were considered carefully in developing the recommendations of this report. The overall conclusions of the report and a consolidated list of recommendations are presented in the final chapter. Supplementary information is provided in the appendices.

## **Consultation Guide**

The following document was provided to stakeholders prior to consultation with them as a guide for discussion, noting that the guide had no formal status. The imperative in each consultation was to elicit the issues uppermost in the minds of the stakeholder and a flexible approach was taken to each interview while keeping the issues identified in the guide in mind.

## **Review of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) - Stakeholder Consultation Guide**

### **Key Issues for Discussion**

#### **1. Performance of ACARA**

1.1 What is your assessment of ACARA's performance against its charter and letters of expectation? How well has it performed its functions overall and in respect to:

A: curriculum development (noting the findings of the Review of the Australian Curriculum)?

B: assessment?

C: reporting?

1.2 What is your view about the specificity of ACARA's charter and letters of expectation? Could these documents have an impact on delivery and innovation?

1.3 Have there been challenges and/or opportunities missed or taken that might have impacted on ACARA's delivery? Are any such factors likely to be important in the future?

1.4 What is your assessment of the influence, quality and impact of ACARA's work? Has that changed over time and if so in what ways? What are the key areas you would point to?

1.5 How well are ACARA's work plans articulated, including in terms of directions and priorities? Do they provide a good basis for assessment of ACARA's performance? What, if any, changes might be made for forthcoming annual and quadrennial work plans?

1.6 How well has ACARA managed change as it has matured, completed its initial work program and moved into new phases of work? Could its current approach be enhanced?

1.7 Are ACARA's formal reporting and informal communication mechanisms effective?

#### **2. Structures used by ACA**

2.1 Are the structures and processes which ACARA uses to assist it to perform its functions working effectively and/or is there scope for improvement? What changes, if any, would most improve ACARA's efficiency and effectiveness?

2.2 Are there particular issues relating to the structures and processes used for each or any of ACARA's curriculum, assessment and reporting functions?

### **3. Functions of ACARA**

3.1 Looking forward, and in light of ACARA's achievements and experience since its establishment, what should be the key areas of future focus for the organisation?

3.2 What are the key issues in relation to the interests of the Commonwealth versus the States and Territories in relation to ACARA as a national body?

3.3 Should ACARA continue to be responsible for the three functions of curriculum development, the national assessment program and reporting on schooling (noting the recommendations of the Review of the Australian Curriculum)? Should these functions be split and if so which body might best take over the function or functions? What would be the key advantages and disadvantages of moving one or more functions?

3.4 What is the appropriate future role for ACARA in relation to curriculum? (Noting that the Review of the Australian Curriculum made a series of recommendations about the design, development and focus of the curriculum and that curriculum evaluation, and assistance with implementation, be undertaken by a separate independent body).

3.5 Is there a case for ACARA to take on any other functions?

3.6 In thinking about structure following function, do you have a view about the broad implications in terms of structure that would flow from any suggested changes to ACARA's functions? Would these have implications for the education ecosystem more broadly?

### **4. Governance of ACARA**

4.1 Are the current governance arrangements for ACARA effective? How do the current arrangements involving the education ministers' council, senior officials and the ACARA board and executive impact on performance?

4.2 Looking forward, what are the main issues in the governance of ACARA that are likely to affect its performance, transparency and accountability?

4.3 Given experience to date, is there a case for change in the future and if so what changes might lead to improved efficiency and effectiveness?

4.4 How might the perceptions of ownership of and influence over ACARA be best addressed?

4.5 The Review of the Australian Curriculum made a number of recommendations relating to the governance structure for ACARA, including that it be restructured, reconstituted, possibly as a company, and the board be comprised of experts, independent of education authorities. What governance structure do you consider would work best in the future?

4.6 What are your views about the balance of professional backgrounds, expertise and skills needed on the ACARA board given the functions and needs of the organisation? Does the balance need to change?

## **5. Other issues**

5.1 Are there other substantive issues that you think should be considered in the review of ACARA's role and functions that have not yet been discussed?

## **6 Priorities**

6.1 Is there a set of issues that you consider should be given the highest priority in the departmental review? Why are these the most important?

## **Background**

The Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training has asked his Department to undertake a review of the role and functions of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as required by its enabling legislation (the ACARA Act).

The ACARA review will assess the appropriateness of ACARA's ongoing role and functions against the aims and objectives of ACARA's charter. In doing this, the Department will consider:

- ACARA's assigned functions as set out in the ACARA Act, the ACARA charter, previous letters of expectation, and Ministerial Council directives;
- ACARA's delivery against its charter, previous letters of expectation and Ministerial Council directives, including a qualitative assessment of the quality and impact of ACARA's work;
- ACARA's organisational structures and governance and their impact on the delivery of ACARA's functions;
- any advantages or disadvantages associated with the co-location of national curriculum, assessment and reporting activities;
- the level of satisfaction with ACARA's role, functions, processes and the connection to ACARA's annual and quadrennial work plans; and
- the outcome of any reviews, evaluations or other relevant projects/documents relating to the role and functions of ACARA, including the Review of the Australian Curriculum.

The Department is expected to provide a written report to the Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training by 8 June 2015.

Grahame Cook Consulting Pty Ltd has been engaged to undertake a series of high level consultations to inform the Department's review. These consultations will be undertaken independently from the Department and a report provided, which will summarise stakeholder discussions relating to the review terms of reference and include recommendations about ACARA's future role, functions, structure and governance. The draft report is due to be completed by mid-March and the final by the end of April.

The consultation discussions will be treated as confidential and views will not be attributed to individuals or organisations in the report without the agreement of the person or organisation concerned.

Grahame Cook Consulting Pty Ltd

14 January 2015



## Appendix B – ACARA’s Charter

The text of ACARA’s current Charter is reproduced on the following pages. The text has been converted to Word format from a PDF file on the ACARA website.

See - [http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/ACARAs\\_Charter\\_\(3\\_August\\_2012\).pdf](http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/ACARAs_Charter_(3_August_2012).pdf)

This process may have resulted in some minor formatting errors.

# Charter for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

This Charter is issued by resolution of the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood to take effect from 3 August 2012.

## 1.0 Introduction

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is established under the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008* (ACARA Act) of the Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The ACARA Act prescribes the following permissive functions of the Authority as:

- to develop and administer a national school curriculum, including content of the curriculum and achievement standards, for school subjects specified in the Charter
- to develop and administer national assessments
- to collect, manage and analyse student assessment data and other data relating to schools and comparative school performance
- to facilitate information sharing arrangements between Australian government bodies in relation to the collection, management and analysis of school data
- to publish information relating to school education, including information relating to comparative school performance
- to provide school curriculum resource services, educational research services and other related services
- to provide information, resources, support and guidance to the teaching profession
- to perform such other functions that are conferred on it by, or under, the Act or any other Commonwealth Act, and
- to perform such other functions that are ancillary or incidental to the functions mentioned above.

Section 7 (3) of the ACARA Act states that the Authority must also perform its functions and exercise its powers in accordance with this Charter which is determined from time to time by the Ministerial Council of Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers for Education, currently known as the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood.

## 2.0 Purpose of the Charter

The Charter enables the Standing Council to set the strategic direction for the Authority. It provides guidance about the nature of the activities the Authority is expected to undertake in fulfilling its functions and executing the policy directions set by the Standing Council. The Charter is supported by a Letter of Expectation from the Standing Council that provides more specific guidance on the work expected of the Authority over a two-year period.

This Charter replaces the revised Charter approved by the former Ministerial Council which took effect from 1 July 2010.

The Charter is able to be amended at any time by resolution at a Standing Council meeting, resolution through an out of session process conducted by the Standing Council Secretariat, or through any other process that the Standing Council determines.

### 3.0 Strategic directions and work priorities

The strategic directions for the Authority relate to the following three key areas of curriculum, assessment and data collection and reporting at a national level:

1. A national curriculum from Foundation<sup>1</sup> to Year 12 in specified learning areas.
2. A national assessment program aligned to the national curriculum that measures students' progress.
3. A national data collection and reporting program that supports:
  - i. analysis, evaluation, research and resource allocation, and
  - ii. accountability and reporting on schools, and broader national achievement.

These strategic directions acknowledge the commitment to promoting world-class curriculum and assessment and to strengthening accountability and transparency as identified within the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (the *Melbourne Declaration*) as agreed by all Education Ministers in December 2008.

Having regard to its functions under the ACARA Act, the Authority, in addressing its strategic directions, will undertake the following work priorities:

#### *General priorities*

1. Establish and maintain the structures and processes that will ensure its advice to the Standing Council on national curriculum, assessment and data reporting is based on the best evidence available.
2. Establish and maintain ACARA's position as an authoritative and accessible national resource for all key stakeholders. This will involve the Authority in informing, strengthening and promoting general community understanding of the significance of national curriculum, assessment and reporting processes to achieve improved educational outcomes for all Australian students. Recognising that learning begins before the first year of formal schooling, ACARA will make appropriate links with developments in early childhood education to support a seamless continuum of learning.
3. Work closely with Education Services Australia and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership to provide innovative and cost effective educational services across all sectors of education.

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<sup>1</sup> Kindergarten in New South Wales, Tasmania, and the Australian Capital Territory; Preparatory in Victoria and Queensland; Reception in South Australia; Transition in the Northern Territory, Pre-primary in Western Australia.

*Curriculum priorities*

4. Develop a national curriculum from Foundation to Year 12, in the eight learning areas under the *Melbourne Declaration*, as directed by the Standing Council. This will include the:
  - a. development of content descriptions, content elaborations, achievement standards and annotated work samples for each subject or learning area
  - b. development of continua of learning for the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities, and
  - c. integration within appropriate content descriptions and content elaborations of general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities.
  
5. Support the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC) to advise the Standing Council on:
  - a. how the national curriculum addresses the diverse needs of students, including students with disability and students for whom English is another language or dialect
  - b. the most effective processes for implementing and sustaining the national curriculum within the states and territories
  - c. the most effective process for implementing the national curriculum into the senior secondary years of schooling
  - d. the most effective processes for ensuring the continuous improvement of Australia's national curriculum reflecting evidence and experience as the curriculum development work continues and the curriculum is implemented
  - e. the support required for states and territories to implement national curriculum as it is developed, including teaching resources and teacher professional development
  - f. how the achievement standards and annotated work samples provided as part of the national curriculum can support nationally consistent teacher professional judgement and A-E reporting to parents, and
  - g. whether alternative curriculum frameworks meet the requirements of the national curriculum.

*National Assessment priorities*

6. Manage the development, and oversee the delivery of assessments and reporting for the National Assessment Program (NAP) including the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and NAP sample assessments as directed by the Standing Council.
7. Facilitate alignment of national assessment practice with the national curriculum by supporting AEEYSOC to advise the Standing Council on options for the future of the NAP ensuring the program reflects the Australian Curriculum, links to international assessments and the objectives of the performance reporting agenda, and implement any changes to the NAP as determined by the Standing Council
8. Advise on how national assessments could be developed and delivered through on-screen delivery platforms, and how a transition from a paper-based to an online delivery model could be undertaken.

### *Data collection and reporting priorities*

9. In accordance with the *Principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia* (June 2009), collect, manage, analyse, evaluate and report statistical and related information about schools and the outcomes of schooling, as required by the Council of Australian Governments and under the National Education Agreement (or any successor agreement) for performance monitoring, including:
  - a. Monitoring, and where necessary reviewing, the existing national key performance measures for schools in light of the national goals outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration*, and the accountability requirements established in the National Education Agreement and *Schools Assistance Act 2008*;
  - b. producing a comprehensive and authoritative national report on schooling in Australia related to the *Melbourne Declaration* and national key performance measures;
  - c. developing, or supporting the development of, national definitions such as a definition on students with a disability and students with a language background other than English;
  - d. collecting national data (including on individual schools) for the purpose of accountability and reporting, research and analysis, and resource allocation as directed by the Standing Council; and
  - e. analysing data as required by Ministers and their departments to support system management and policy.
10. Manage the collection, quality assurance and reporting of school information through the *My School* website and support AEEYSOC to advise the Standing Council on improvements to the website.

#### **4.0 Reporting on strategic directions and work priorities**

The primary function of the Authority is to execute the policy directions that are determined by the Standing Council and set out in this Charter and ACARA's Letter of Expectation.

Matters relating to ACARA will be considered at each Standing Council meeting. At each meeting ACARA will provide a written report to Ministers which should include, but not be limited to, a report on ACARA's progress against its annual work plan (which is informed by the Letter of Expectation), an update on recent activities and any emerging issues.

On a quadrennial basis, ACARA will prepare for the Standing Council a four-year work plan and budget to assist in ensuring it continues to meet the strategic needs of the Standing Council.

On an annual basis, ACARA will, according to a financial year, prepare a detailed work plan for the Standing Council's endorsement that sets out the key deliverables, budget and timeframes for addressing the strategic directions and work priorities set out in this Charter and the Letter of Expectation. The forward work plan will include reasonable timelines to ensure the Standing Council can support ACARA's work. ACARA will also provide an annual report to the Council as required under section 43 of the ACARA Act.

From time to time, the Standing Council may choose, at its discretion, to seek policy advice from the Authority regarding issues related to curriculum, assessment, data collection and reporting at a national level. In undertaking its activities, the Authority may also formally identify or refer particular issues requiring policy direction or clarification to the Standing Council for its consideration.

# Appendix C – Letter of Expectation

The text of ACARA's current Letter of Expectation is reproduced on the following pages. The text has been converted to JPEG format from a PDF file on the ACARA website.

See - [http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/\\_resources/ACARAs\\_Letter\\_of\\_Expectation\\_12-14\\_July.pdf](http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/_resources/ACARAs_Letter_of_Expectation_12-14_July.pdf)

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# SCSEEC

Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood

The Board of Directors  
C/- Professor Barry McGaw AO PhD  
Chair  
Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority  
Level 10, 255 Pitt Street  
SYDNEY NSW 2000

**Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority**  
**LETTER OF EXPECTATION**  
July 2012–June 2014

Dear Professor McGaw

The Letter of Expectation sets out the priorities and expectations of the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC) for the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) for the 2012–13 and 2013–14 financial years.

At the October 2011 meeting of the former Ministerial Council, Ministers endorsed the budget and forward work plan for ACARA for the period 2012–13 to 2015–16. It is expected that ACARA will, according to its Charter, prepare a detailed work plan for 2012–13, and subsequently for 2013–14, for the Standing Council's endorsement that sets out the key actions and timeframes for addressing the strategic directions and work priorities set out in its Charter and this Letter of Expectation.

#### **Curriculum priorities**

##### ***Shape, design and development processes***

The *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* guides the development of the Australian Curriculum.

At the October 2011 meeting of the then Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, version 3.0 of the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* was endorsed, providing:

- a policy background for the implementation of the first phase of curriculum development
- information about the design of the whole curriculum and implementation of the Foundation to Year 10 (F-10) Australian Curriculum
- achievement standards and their relationship with curriculum content within the Australian Curriculum, and
- the provision of curriculum for students with disability.

During 2012–13, ACARA will publish a revised *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* that will include the shape of the senior secondary curriculum and additional advice on how the Australian Curriculum provides for students with disability.

##### ***Curriculum development – English, mathematics, science and history***

The endorsement of the F-10 Australian Curriculum in English, mathematics, science and history was a historic decision by Education Ministers. Now that the F-10 curriculum is being implemented in classrooms, during 2012–13, ACARA will work with education authorities to enhance its collection and publication of annotated work samples to aid teachers in exercising their professional judgement of student achievement. It is expected that, while this project is ongoing, additional materials will be published by December 2012.

It is important for those students already studying the Australian Curriculum that there are appropriate pathways for continuing their study after they complete Year 10. By December 2012, ACARA will finalise for Ministers' agreement the first 14 subjects of the senior secondary Australian Curriculum in English, mathematics, science and history. ACARA will also work closely with state and territory curriculum and certification authorities to develop advice by December 2012 for the Standing Council on the implementation of the senior secondary curriculum, and the breadth and scope of future senior secondary curriculum development.



### **Curriculum development – Geography, languages and the arts**

Following the successful endorsement of the first phase of the Australian Curriculum, educators and the broader community are expecting further Australian Curriculum to be developed and implemented. Shape Papers have already been released for languages, the arts and geography, and consultation held on a draft geography curriculum.

In 2012–13, ACARA will finalise for Ministerial endorsement an Australian Curriculum for:

- geography – to be presented to Standing Council in December 2012
- the arts – to be presented to Standing Council by mid-2013
- Chinese and Italian languages – to be presented to Standing Council by mid-2013 (with further languages curriculum to follow), and
- an Indigenous Languages Framework – to be presented to Standing Council by December 2013.

Following endorsement and publication of these, ACARA will undertake processes to collect and publish annotated work samples.

At the December 2012 Standing Council meeting, ACARA will provide advice on the process and timelines for developing further senior secondary curriculum beyond English, mathematics, science, history and geography.

### **Curriculum development – Health and physical education, civics and citizenship, economics and business studies, and technologies**

During 2012–13 and 2013–14, ACARA will finalise the development of shape papers for health and physical education, civics and citizenship, technologies and economics and business studies. It is expected that during 2012–13 curriculum development in these subjects will be substantially progressed and finalised for Ministerial endorsement during 2013–14 for:

- health and physical education and technologies – able to be presented to Standing Council by December 2013 and
- civics and citizenship and business and economics – able to be presented to Standing Council by December 2013.

### **General capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities**

The general capabilities are the essential knowledge, skills and dispositions which young people require in the 21st century. They have strong linkages to other policy areas, including employability skills and vocational learning.

During 2012–13, ACARA will enhance the current general capability sequences to include descriptions for the end of Foundation and Years 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 for each of:

- literacy
- numeracy
- information and communication technology (ICT) capability
- critical and creative thinking
- ethical behaviour
- personal and social capability, and
- intercultural understanding.

The cross-curriculum priorities equip young Australians with the skills, knowledge and understanding that will enable them to engage effectively with and prosper in a globalised world. During 2012–13 and 2013–14, ACARA will continue mapping the cross-curriculum priorities across the learning areas and will consider the development of sequences of learning.

### **Nationally agreed and consistent approaches for assessment and reporting in relation to the F-10 Australian Curriculum**

With the Australian Curriculum being progressively implemented across the country, parents and the broader community will have higher expectations that there is greater consistency in assessment and reporting of student learning and achievement.





During 2012–13 and 2013–14, ACARA will work with education authorities and the Australian Government to explore possibilities for achieving greater national consistency in reporting on student achievement, with the aim of bringing further advice to the Standing Council by the end of 2013.

***Inclusivity – Articulation of how the Australian Curriculum meets the diverse learning needs of students, including students with disability and students for whom English is another language or dialect (EAL/D)***

It is essential that the Australian Curriculum provide rigorous, relevant and engaging learning experiences for all students, including for students with disability and for EAL/D students. During 2012–13 and 2013–14, ACARA will finalise its advice on how the Australian Curriculum achieves this, including updating advice in a revised *Shape of the Australian Curriculum* paper, and developing and publishing appropriate curriculum materials by December 2012.

ACARA will also publish EAL/D specific annotations to content descriptions in the curriculum and collect and publish EAL/D specific annotated work samples by December 2013.

***Monitoring, evaluation and review of the Australian Curriculum***

ACARA's Charter requires the Authority to advise on the most effective processes for ensuring the continuous improvement of the Australian Curriculum and requires this improvement to reflect evidence and experience as the curriculum development work continues. In 2012–13, ACARA will finalise a monitoring, evaluation and review plan for consideration and endorsement by Ministers.

***Well-established curriculum as alternatives to the Australian Curriculum recognised***

In December 2011, ACARA published the outcomes of its first phase of activity to assess well established alternative curriculum frameworks as meeting the requirements of the Australian Curriculum. During 2012–13 and 2013–14, it is expected that ACARA will undertake further assessments of well-established national frameworks on an as-required basis and publish the results on its website.

**Assessment Priorities**

***National Assessment Program (NAP) delivered, reported and analysed***

The NAP is the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important education outcomes.

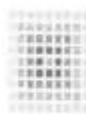
The *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)* tests skills that are essential for every child to progress through school life and move successfully into further education or employment.

During 2012–13 and 2013–14, it is expected that ACARA will:

- develop, trial and analyse test items, review and quality assure the tests and construct final test forms
- centrally manage and quality assure the marking of writing and the central analysis of test performance data
- provide data to education authorities for student and school reporting
- develop and publish the *NAPLAN Summary Report*, *NAPLAN National Report* and *Test Incidents Report*, and
- review the *National Protocols for Test Administration* and *Test Integrity Guidelines* and consider any significant issues relating to NAPLAN.

The *NAP Sample Assessments Program* has been finalised up to 2013. During 2012–13, ACARA will:

- provide the 2011 ICT Literacy Assessment public report for approval and publication and release all materials
- deliver and analyse the 2012 Science Literacy Assessment, and
- develop and trial the 2013 Civics and Citizenship Assessment.



### ***Alignment of national assessments with the Australian Curriculum***

The implementation of the Australian Curriculum provides the opportunity to review the NAP Sample Assessment Program to take into account not only the curriculum itself but to link the national program to international assessments and to the social and workforce skills expected of students of the coming decades.

During 2012–13, ACARA will review the NAP sample assessments and provide advice to the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC) and the Standing Council on options for improving the coverage of the program to provide performance information on key areas of student achievement for the 21<sup>st</sup> century in line with the *Melbourne Declaration* and the Australian Curriculum.

### ***Detailed plan to move to online adaptive assessment modes of delivery prepared***

The logistics, technical limitations and costs of printing, scanning and marking constrain a number of policy choices about what can be assessed, the year level at which assessments can occur, the length of tests, the nature of test items, when they are administered and the amount of time required to process them and provide results to students, teachers and parents. The use of digital onscreen technologies to deliver the National Assessment Program has the potential to remove many of these constraints.

During 2012–13, ACARA will finalise advice for Ministers on the potential for onscreen delivery of the National Assessment Program, including the design and development of an online delivery platform and alternative technologies for schools where online delivery is not an option under the Australian Government funded *Online Diagnostic Tools* initiative. Subject to Ministers' agreement, ACARA will commence work on the design and development of new NAPLAN tests, cooperate with Education Services Australia (ESA) on the development of a technical delivery system, and undertake bridging studies to inform the transition from paper-based to an online delivery model with a view to commencing trialling on-screen NAPLAN tests in 2013–14.

In April 2012, Ministers directed ACARA to deliver the 2013 NAP – Civics and Citizenship assessment program electronically using an online delivery platform. During 2012–13, ACARA will deliver this test.

### **Reporting Priorities**

#### ***My School 2012 evaluation and development of future releases***

The update of *My School* in February 2012 allowed parents and teachers to track the progress of students who sat NAPLAN tests over the past four years, and provided updated information for every school in the country. In 2012–13, ACARA will undertake an evaluation of the February 2012 update to determine what improvements can be made.

ACARA will also annually revise data for the 2013 and 2014 releases of *My School*. ACARA will work with the Standing Council to determine appropriate release dates.

#### ***Framework of key performance measures reviewed and updated***

The basis for reporting by ministers to the community on progress with achieving the national goals for schooling is the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* including the *Schedule of Key Performance Measures*. This framework underpins reporting through the *National Report on Schooling (ANR)* released by Education Ministers, the *Report on Government Services (ROGS)* released by the Productivity Commission, and the *National Education Agreement (NEA)* reports published on behalf of the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) by the COAG Reform Council.

ACARA will review the *Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia* including the *Schedule of Key Performance Measures*. This review should provide ministers with an updated and improved set of performance measure and include the proposed options for the NAP Sample Assessment Program beyond 2013–14.

#### ***School opinion surveys (student, staff and parents) developed and reported***

Information on the opinions of students, staff and parents provides schooling systems, schools and their communities with another source of information on the quality of education being delivered. During 2012–13, ACARA will develop an online survey delivery tool for use by schools, school systems and jurisdictions, commencing in 2013, and conduct a pilot survey for staff in 2013–14. ACARA will ensure survey results data are provided to schools, school systems and jurisdictions to support reporting findings within school annual reports.



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## ***National Report on Schooling (ANR) published***

The ANR provides a range of information on schooling in Australia and reports on progress made towards the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* and the Commitment to Action for achieving them.

In 2012–13, ACARA will plan and develop the framework for the 2011 ANR, obtain data and prepare a draft report, and undertake consultation with jurisdictions. ACARA will also submit the 2011 report to Ministers for approval and publish it. ACARA will undertake similar work for the delivery of the 2012 report in 2013–14.

During 2012–13, ACARA will investigate new ways of publishing and presenting information.

## **Other activities**

### ***National Trade Cadetships***

The *National Trade Cadetships* is an Australian Government commitment and its development is funded solely by the Australian Government. The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs agreed in July 2011 to refer to ACARA development of the *National Trade Cadetships* curriculum for Years 9 and 10, and asked ACARA to identify existing vocational learning curriculum being delivered in each state and territory that would form the basis of the Year 9–10 pathway.

In 2012–13, ACARA will undertake this mapping and develop appropriate curriculum content for the Year 9–10 *National Trade Cadetships* pathway.

## **Data**

In today's education policy environment, quality data is essential for developing a reliable evidence base upon which Governments can understand and measure progress. Accurate, consistent and accessible data are important for national transparency and accountability.

As agreed by AEEYSOC, key items from the work program being undertaken by the Schools Data Subgroup will transition to ACARA during 2012–13. During 2012–13 and 2013–14, ACARA will assume the responsibility to develop the key items of better measures for Year 12 completion/attainment and post-school destinations.

## **Governance**

### ***Reporting and work plans***

ACARA will continue to manage its financial affairs and reporting in accordance with its legislative requirements under the *Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008*, *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997*, and appropriate Finance Ministers' Orders. In addition, ACARA will be guided by the Standing Council's *Governance Protocols for SCSEEC Ministerial Authorities and Companies*.

### ***Stakeholder Engagement***

The Standing Council asks that ACARA continue to build on the current productive relationships with the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and ESA in order to maintain the cohesion and effectiveness of the national educational architecture.

The engagement of stakeholders is vital in ensuring that the work of ACARA is understood in the context of the COAG's education reform agenda. The Standing Council asks ACARA to continue to build networks with all stakeholders and work collaboratively to achieve education reforms at the national level. It is expected that ACARA will support education authorities across sectors in the implementation of these reforms.

ACARA is asked to continue to implement processes to maintain a high level of jurisdictional engagement, including through the membership of AEEYSOC, as well as the wider stakeholder engagement required to support and progress its work. ACARA must ensure appropriate engagement from all relevant stakeholders, including, but not limited to:

- government and non-government education sectors
- the teaching profession
- universities and higher education providers



# SCSEEC

Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood

- the education unions
- the Australian Government, and
- parents and the wider school community.

On behalf of the Standing Council, I look forward to continuing to work with ACARA on these national reforms to support world class curriculum, assessment and reporting practices in Australia.

Yours sincerely

**The Hon. Peter Collier MLC**

Chair

Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood

- 3 SEP 2012

# Appendix D – ACARA Governance

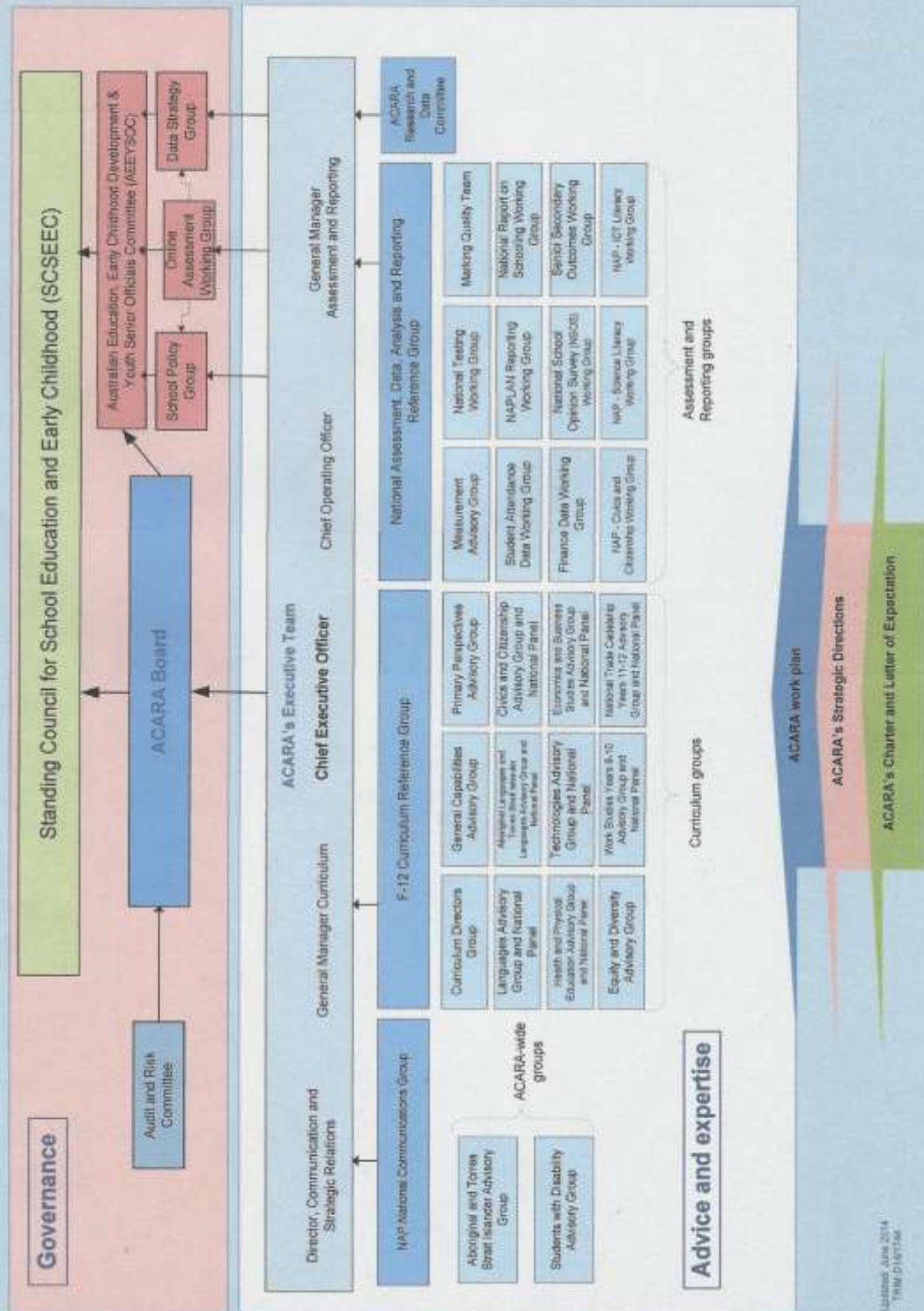
The following diagram of ACARA's governance and advisory structure has been converted to JPEG format from a PDF file on the ACARA website.

See -

[http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/20140627 ACARA Governance and Advisory Structure 2013-14.pdf](http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/20140627_ACARA_Governance_and_Advisory_Structure_2013-14.pdf)



# ACARA's GOVERNANCE AND ADVISORY STRUCTURE 2013-14



Updated June 2014  
TRM 01/01/14

# Appendix E – Organisations Consulted

ACT Education and Training Directorate

ACT Board of Secondary Studies

Association of Independent Schools of WA

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Board - Chair and members, past and present

Australian Council of State School Organisations

Australian Government Department of Education and Training

Australian Parents Council

Australian Primary Principals Association

Australian Secondary Principals Association

Australian Special Education Principals Association

Independent Schools Council of Australia

National Catholic Education Commission

Catholic Education Commission of NSW

Catholic Education South Australia

NSW Department of Education and Communities

NSW Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards

NT Department of Education

Qld Department of Education, Training and Employment

Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority

Review of the Australian Curriculum - member

SA Department of Education and Child Development

South Australia Certificate of Education Board

TAS Department of Education

TAS Qualifications Authority (since abolished)

Vic Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Vic Curriculum and Assessment Authority

WA Department of Education

WA School Curriculum and Standards Authority

In addition to the consultations, the WA Minister for Education provided a written submission.



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