Principles for the design of certification and assessment arrangements under national content and achievement standards

Adopted at ACACA meeting June 2011 as a basis for discussions

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion. The views represented are not necessarily those of state and territory Boards.

Rationale

Current arrangements for assessment and certification in the senior secondary sector in Australia are derived from historical antecedents and constitutional provisions:

- historically, senior secondary assessment and certification was linked with the requirements of the local university to set some standards for admission to undergraduate courses ('matriculation')
- at federation, education was one of the reserved powers of the states, which gradually took over responsibility for establishing and maintaining a state-based assessment and certification agency.

Historical and constitutional factors should not be lightly dismissed, of course, but they do not tell us what arrangements we should prefer if we were able to start from first principles, setting aside the complications of history, constitutions and federal-state relationships.

Starting 'with a clean slate' for Australia, in the design of assessment and certification arrangements under common, national, content and achievement standards, we would face choices along the following lines:

- each provider is the assessment and certification agency (with or without some external oversight)
- regionally based agencies
- multiple nationally based agencies
- a single national agency
- one or more agencies based outside Australia
- a supra-national agency.

Discussion of these options should take account that, currently,

- in the Australian VET sector, each RTO is the assessment and certification agency, with some external oversight
- in the Australian higher education sector, each university (established under legislation) is the assessment and certification agency for its degrees and diplomas
- in the USA, there are multiple nationally based agencies such as the College Board, state-agencies providing 'high school graduation examinations' and provider-based certification
- in England, there are multiple agencies, each with a national scope of operation
- in each of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there is a single agency
- in India there are both national and state-based agencies
- in France, there is a single national agency, administered through regionally based agencies
- in Finland there is single national board that controls examinations and re-marks each paper

- in Germany, there is a national university entrance examination but some universities set their own
- in Spain, universities set and mark individual entrance examinations
- there are agencies, such as the IB, IELTS and Cambridge International Examinations, that operate internationally
- some professional bodies conduct their own examinations and issue professional qualifications and licences to practise.

That is, all of the main choices we might make are in operation somewhere – there can be no valid argument that any single choice is the only one that is possible, rational or sensible, or that any single choice is invalid in all circumstances.

The choices we might make could be driven by

- arguments of continuity – current practices are what they are (and are successful) and should remain so
- arguments of political power – for example, arguments that control should be centralised, placing the levers directly in the hands of those best placed to decide what is right for the country
- arguments of comparisons with practice elsewhere
- arguments of effectiveness, efficacy and efficiency.

Arguments of effectiveness, efficacy and efficiency rest on assumptions about the central purposes of assessment and certification in the senior secondary sector. Efficiency is the measure of the resource cost of being effective.

This paper seeks to support the development of a set of principles to guide choices about our approach to assessment and certification under nationally consistent statements of content and achievement standards for achievement in senior secondary studies.

These principles are intended to reflect the idea that the effectiveness of an assessment and certification system lies primarily in its capacity to drive excellence in student learning. Such excellence is characterised by

- students learning the most important and central of the skills and knowledge required to achieve a socially and economically prosperous future for all
- high rates of student participation and achievement in worthwhile and coherent learning programs with clear outcomes providing a sound basis for lifelong learning, labour market entry and career progression[1]
- teacher practices that develop this learning, participation and achievement.

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[1] Historically, there have been some tensions between these two – increased participation has been associated with credential inflation and lower market value for a given level of credential, accompanied by a reduction in the knowledge and skills required for that credential.

The assumption in this paper that the most important purpose of assessment and certification is to drive excellence in the learning of all students is at odds with those who see its primary task as providing reliable measurement.

In the context of the principles of this paper, where there is a choice between a reliable measurement system that tells us students are not learning and an assessment system that drives excellence in student learning we should prefer the latter. Every time. As the Cambridge Primary Review has shown (http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/), this is not a theoretical point of little practical importance. Valid and reliable measurements are important, but they are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. The end we seek is excellence in student learning.

Of course, certification systems must strive to ensure that the results it certifies have the level of validity and reliability expected by those who use these results to make decisions.

It is generally accepted (and is probably obvious) that, of those factors that an education system might hope to influence directly, teacher practices are perhaps the most important determiner of student learning. While the attitudes and values students bring with them, their family and community support, their cultural background and their personal and social resources are critical elements in what they make of school, under current arrangements it is what happens in classrooms, the practices and enacted standards found there, that directly develops learning.   And managing the practices and enacted standards in the classroom is the teacher's role.

Principles for an effective (in the sense discussed above) assessment and certification system should therefore take account of the critical importance of what teachers do.

That is, in designing a senior secondary assessment and certification system for this country, our choice amongst various options listed above should be based on the capacity of these arrangements to drive excellence in student learning through their impact on teacher practices, on what teachers do in classrooms.

What teachers do in their classrooms is shaped by their participation in 'communities of practice', the networks through which ideas, understanding, knowledge, techniques and approaches to learning are introduced, spread, shaped and changed through experience. Such communities of practice have the capacity to shape the teacher practices that will develop the excellence in student learning we seek.

Increasingly, it may be possible to develop and maintain communities of practice through virtual rather than physical means. The key issue is effectiveness, not whether members are in the same geographic region.

Principles

1. The effectiveness of a country's senior secondary assessment and certification system lies primarily in its capacity to drive excellence in what its students learn.

2. A senior secondary assessment and certification system should develop and maintain effective teacher communities of practice, through which teachers develop, refine and enhance what they do and how they know what, how and how well their students are learning. An effective community of practice

    a. exhibits close connections amongst its members.

    b. has to be large enough to function as a network of exchange, but not so large, in numbers or in social distance (whether through physical or virtual means), that members feel that they have no influence on it and no sense of involvement.

    c.   in the senior secondary sector is linked with the assessment and certification agencies in an active mutual engagement and interaction.

3. To develop and maintain community acceptance of the legitimacy of their processes and products, assessment and certification agencies in the senior secondary sector should be sufficiently independent of individual providers.

4. The active involvement of teacher communities of practice in senior secondary assessment and certification makes a significant contribution to public acceptance of the legitimacy of such assessment and certification.

5. A senior secondary assessment and certification agency should be designed, constructed and resourced so that it is able to build effective interactions between it as a central agency and the teachers and schools that work with it.