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VCAA Consultation on Literacy and Numeracy attainment in Victorian senior secondary qualifications.

SUBMISSION OF THE VICTORIAN STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL

The Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body representing school aged students in Victoria. Our vision is for a student-focused education system that enhances young people's capacity to change the world.

We exist to empower all student voices to be valued in every aspect of education.

The VicSRC is auspiced by the Youth Affairs Council Victoria, and funded through the Department of Education and Training Victoria (DET), Newsboys Foundation and Catholic Education Office Melbourne.

The VicSRC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the VCAA consultation on Literacy and Numeracy attainment in Victorian senior secondary qualifications.

Victorian Students have reported to the VicSRC a need for the curriculum to reflect more real world situations and the skills to deal with these. In 2017, the opportunity to explicitly learn more Real World Skills was identified as a top priority for Victorian student delegates at Congress. Many of the 'real world skills' identified- such as preparing tax returns, household budgeting and understanding rental agreements - require practical literacy and numeracy skills. We conclude from this that students do not currently feel prepared for the world beyond school and ensuring minimum literacy and numeracy standards would assist in better preparing them.

However, students are also reporting increasing levels of stress as they undertake their senior secondary years. This is driven by high expectations they have of themselves, as well as the pressure from parents and teachers to achieve an ATAR that will enable them to continue to higher education.

The VCE system was first trialled in 1987 when Australian unemployment was low, wages were high and fewer than four hundred thousand students were enrolled in higher education according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Come forward thirty years, they record more than three times as many students studying at the tertiary level and their experience of employment is shifting, becoming less secure and more changeable.

But VCE is not the time to begin teaching and testing for these skills. We believe students should have multiple opportunities to demonstrate minimum standards of numeracy and literacy throughout their education across all subjects to ensure multiple opportunities to learn numeracy and literacy.

“Placement and implementation of this in VCE is too late – these skills should be worked on much earlier in a student’s education. You know, there is a massive jump between younger high school year levels and the standard of VCE and some students can really struggle with this,” said Year 12 VicSRC Student Executive Alyssa Shannon.

As identified in the VicSRC Policy Platform, students want an education that prepares them for a changing world and this extends to assessment. We believe that while minimum standards of numeracy and literacy will assist in improving student outcomes, the assessment must be anchored in practical knowledge. Focusing on comprehension, problem solving, critical thinking and conceptual knowledge will be a better reflection of skills learnt and the effectiveness of the Victorian curriculum.

We believe that more explicit assessment and measurement of literacy and numeracy should be included within current assessment tools in order to minimise the amount of pressure and stress on students. Literacy and numeracy should be reported in terms of minimum standard being met or not met to minimise extra pressure and stress for students and to acknowledge that learning is applied in many different situations and standardised testing is not the most accurate measurement across the board.

Understanding literacy and numeracy concepts that apply to everyday situations and being able to expand that knowledge through self-directed study would be most beneficial to prepare students for a changing world. A focus on these practical skills is also key to including disengaged or at risk students, who are likely to be discouraged by further standardised testing. As Mia Sherman, year 11 VicSRC Executive member, said “I think it will be a burden having to put another test on the students, I think they are already at risk of being left behind by the VCE and dropping out. It potentially places another barrier between them and continuing.” A student-centred approach can provide valuable avenues for outreach to those traditionally marginalised and excluded by score-focused systems.

The most appropriate way to explicitly assess minimum standards is through expansion of the current GAT to both VCE and VCAL students. We also encourage expansion to include apprenticeship programs. We believe that this assessment should report on students’ comprehension, ability to apply knowledge through problem solving and critical thinking.

We believe that a minimum literacy and numeracy standard should be a requirement of qualification but that the level demonstrated should not be reported as part of the certification.

The benefits of explicit reporting could include;

- Assessment of effectiveness of Victorian Curriculum in teaching core skills
- Clear indication for students and employers of their readiness for the real world

The risks could include;

- Added pressure for students, particularly if new tests were introduced.
- Potentially creating biases against students who do not speak English as a first language, students with a disability or students experiencing or who have experienced significant disadvantage.

We appreciate the Andrews Government's dedication to ensuring diverse consultation within this review and look forward to continuing to create a more student focused education system. Together students, teachers, the government and the community can create an active learning environment for the future.