

# ABLES trial

Final evaluation report

July 2021

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# 1 Purpose

In Australia, teachers use a variety of assessments and resources to provide baseline data and formative assessment information to support their planning for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Schools in some jurisdictions access the suite of Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) resources for this purpose. Developed by researchers at the University of Melbourne in collaboration with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria in 2008, the ABLES assessments and resources were initially designed to assess students with significant intellectual and multiple disabilities in special school contexts. Over the past 12 years, the ABLES resources have also been increasingly used in primary and secondary settings.

Over a span of three years (2019–21), the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) conducted a trial of the ABLES assessments and resources in a cross-section of Queensland schools. The trial sought to evaluate the use and usefulness of the ABLES assessments and resources for supporting the learning of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs in the Queensland context.

This report provides an overview on the outcome of this evaluation, including an analysis of feedback provided by trial schools.

## 2 Background

### 2.1 Prior to the ABLES trial

In 2015, the Queensland Department of Education and Training asked the QCAA to investigate the provision of ABLES resources to support teachers in designing curriculum and assessment for students with disabilities in Queensland. Stakeholders presented varying levels of support for the trial, as well as different perspectives on the resources' value in supporting the needs of students with disabilities, particularly in relation to their alignment to the Australian Curriculum. As such, a decision was made not to proceed with the provision of ABLES in Queensland at that time. In early 2018, the President of the Queensland Association of Special Education Leaders (QASEL) asked the QCAA to investigate the ABLES assessments and resources. In October 2018 the QCAA Board approved a small-scale ABLES trial to evaluate the usefulness of the assessments and resources for teachers working with students with disabilities and diverse learning needs.

#### ABLES reference group

A reference group was established by the QCAA in March 2019 as an avenue to communicate feedback and progress to key stakeholders at key junctures of the trial. The reference group comprised representatives from:

- Department of Education
- Queensland Catholic Education Commission
- Independent Schools Queensland
- Brisbane Catholic Education (withdrew from reference group in 2020)
- Queensland Association of Special Education Leaders

- Special Education Curriculum Cluster
- Queensland Teachers' Union
- Independent Education Union of Australia — Queensland and Northern Territory Branch.

Throughout the trial, reference group members were provided with opportunities to discuss the trial and hear directly from a sample of participating schools, which were invited to present to members. Trial schools were selected based on their participation in the trial activities and overall usage of the ABLES assessments and resources across the trial.

Appendix 1 outlines the schedule of meetings convened throughout the trial. Members used these meetings to share and discuss their perspectives.

## 2.2 Initial ABLES trial

In 2019, the QCAA commenced a trial of the ABLES assessments and resources in Queensland schools and commissioned an external evaluation of these tools by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The principal evaluators, Professor Suzanne Carrington, Associate Dean of Research, and Dr Julie Dillon-Wallace, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, collected data within the small sample of schools (n = 20). The trial sought to evaluate the use and usefulness of the ABLES assessments and resources.

Data was collected via surveys and interviews at three points across the trial. From the initial data collected, the evaluators developed a series of research propositions that outlined several ways in which teachers use the ABLES tools and the impact of their use. These were further refined and tested during the second and third data collections, respectively. A list of the verified research propositions are listed in the QCAA executive summary of the QUT evaluation (Appendix 2).

Based on the overall data, the evaluators concluded that:

*The study results provide evidence to support the theory that the ABLES assessment tools and resources support teachers in schools to plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional support needs in Queensland.*

While these findings were supported by evidence collected throughout the trial, the evaluators pointed to two key limitations of the evaluation:

1. the small number of schools involved in the trial
2. the teaching teams' perceived need for more time to fully understand and use the assessment tools and resources to support their teaching.

To mitigate these limitations and ensure the validity and reliability of results, both the size and duration of the ABLES trial were extended.

## 2.3 Extension of the ABLES trial

In November 2019, schools were invited to submit an expression of interest to participate in the extended ABLES trial. Fifty-nine schools chose to participate, including 11 of the initial trial schools. At the time, the extended trial was scheduled to conclude in December 2020.

In recognition of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the associated workload challenges experienced by teachers, the QCAA decided to temporarily suspend the trial in Term 2, 2020 (effective 6 May) and recommence in Term 3, 2020.

To support the needs of trial schools during this period, the QCAA removed the scheduled data collection point in Term 2 (1 May) and permanently withdrew the requirement for trial schools to

submit de-identified examples of student reports. Trial schools were also offered an opportunity to connect with other participating schools via voluntary, online cluster meetings in Term 2.

To compensate for the temporary suspension, the QCAA further extended the ABLES trial until the end of Semester 1, 2021. In addition to existing trial schools being invited to continue in the trial, non-participating schools were invited to submit an expression of interest to join the trial. At the start of 2021, a total of 63 schools were confirmed in the trial for Semester 1, 2021. Overall, a total of 94 schools trialled the ABLES assessments and resources in some capacity across 2019–21.

## 3 Data collection

To obtain feedback on the ABLES assessments and resources and inform the evaluation, the following four data collection methodologies were employed at various points throughout the trial:

- surveys
- interviews
- cluster meetings
- case studies.

A schedule of data collection activities is provided in Appendix 3.

### 3.1 Surveys

Throughout the trial's duration, seven surveys in total were administered to trial schools.

#### Initial trial

Three online journal surveys (April, June and September 2019) informed the initial external evaluation led by QUT. The surveys asked trial schools to report on how they were using the ABLES assessments and resources and what effects this had on supporting students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. From 2020 onwards, the QCAA began administering its own surveys via the online platform Survey Monkey.

#### Extension of the trial

Two surveys were administered in both years of the extended trial — Surveys 4 and 5 in 2020 and Surveys 6 and 7 in 2021. Surveys conducted at the start of the school year (Surveys 4 and 6) measured attitudes related to the ABLES professional learning day provided to new trial schools. Surveys later in the school year (Surveys 5 and 7) sought to collect comparable data to the QUT-administered surveys, providing longitudinal information around the use and perceived usefulness of the ABLES assessments and resources.

### 3.2 Interviews

To inform the initial evaluation, QUT conducted three phone interviews with each trial school in the period April to November 2019. This provided an additional opportunity for trial participants to reflect on and share their experience using the ABLES assessments and resources.

### 3.3 Cluster meetings

Data was also collected through cluster meetings convened at three different points across 2020 (May/June and September) and 2021 (March). To allow adequate time for discussion between schools at the meetings, trial schools were arranged into geographically based clusters.

Through a sequence of questions posed to trial schools, each online cluster meeting gathered feedback on engagement with the ABLES assessments and resources. In addition to data collection, these discussions allowed trial schools to share their experiences of using the ABLES assessments and resources and to ask questions. Where participants expressed gaps in knowledge and understanding, the QCAA provided professional development to support schools.

### 3.4 Case studies

Case studies were the final means of data collection. In 2021, the QCAA commissioned one of the previous QUT evaluators to develop in-depth case studies in a sample of trial schools. The aim was to obtain a more detailed account of the implementation of the ABLES assessments and resources within these varying school contexts. The case study schools comprised a state primary school, an independent secondary school and a state special school. These case studies are included in Appendix 4.

## 4 Results

Data collected throughout the trial sought to evaluate the use and usefulness of the ABLES assessments and resources in supporting the learning of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. The extension of the trial facilitated a longitudinal analysis of trial schools' experiences in implementing the ABLES assessments and resources.

Findings from data collected by the QCAA primarily support and reinforce the initial findings of the QUT evaluation. The ABLES assessments and resources were effective for some teachers and some students in some school contexts.

Both the use and perceived usefulness of the resources varied across trial schools. This is reflected in the sections below, which capture the broad themes that emerged throughout the trial, including the strengths and challenges reported by trial schools.

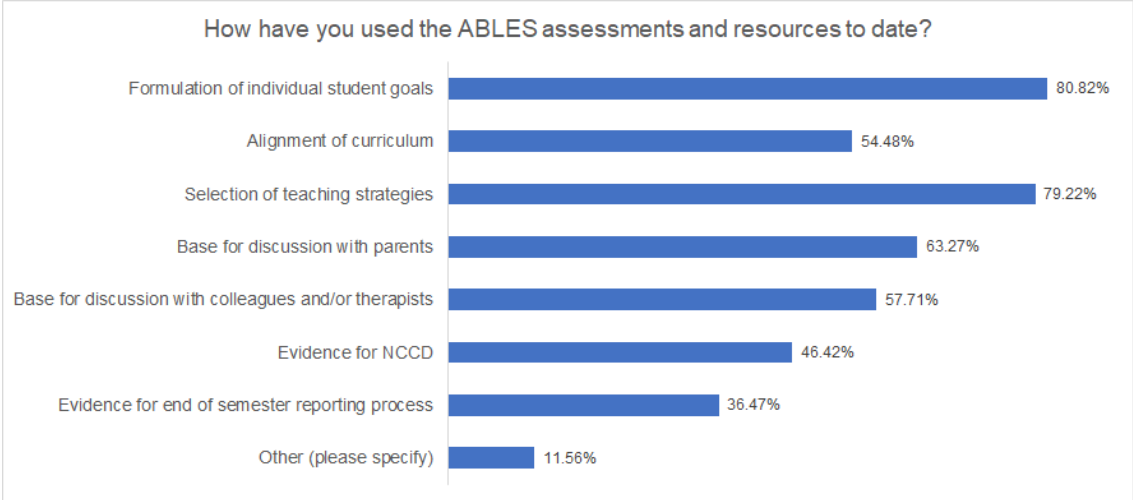
### 4.1 Diverse use of resources

Schools used the ABLES assessments and resources for a variety of purposes. In 2019, schools reported using the assessments and resources to determine student learning goals for individual learning plans (ILPs) and inform teaching strategies to work towards these goals. Schools also highlighted strengthened and intentional collaboration as teachers often worked together to review students' learning profile reports and make joint decisions. In some cases, these reports and discussions were shared with other stakeholders such as parents and therapists.

Data from 2019 also revealed that teachers conducted subsequent assessments to monitor the efficacy of teaching strategies and the continued appropriateness of individual learning goals. A further use of the ABLES assessments was to support and inform Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) reporting.

Similar trends of varied use by teachers are evident in the data from 2020 and 2021. Figure 1 displays the most current use of the ABLES assessments and resources by the schools that commenced the trial in 2019 or 2020.

**Figure 1: Survey question — How have you used the ABLES assessments and resources to date?**

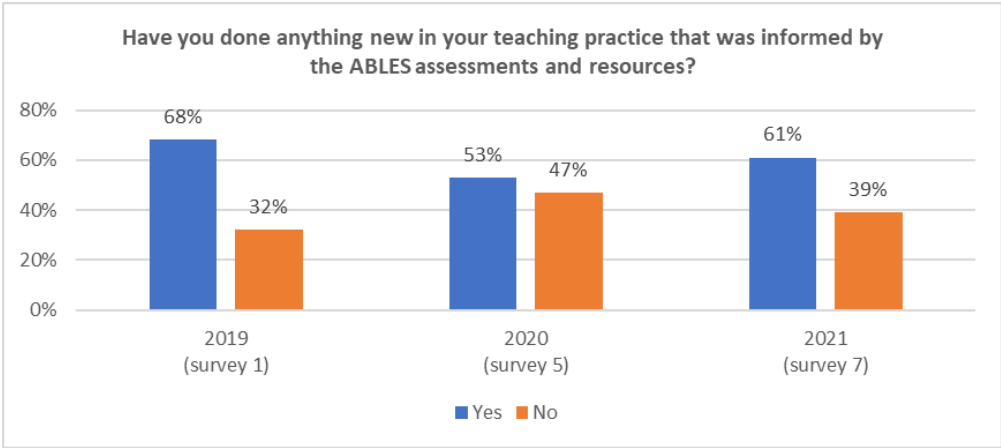


While the varied use of the assessments and resources was a consistent theme across the trial, data from Survey 7 (June 2021) suggests that aligning ABLES assessment data to the Australian Curriculum was an emerging practice among schools that had been in the trial for at least 12 months.

## 4.2 Broadened teaching repertoires

The collective data indicates that the ABLES assessments and resources have been used to broaden participating teachers’ classroom practice. At each feedback opportunity over the course of the trial, most schools reported that the ABLES assessments and resources informed changes to their teaching practice. See Figure 2 for longitudinal results.

**Figure 2: Survey question — Have you done anything new in your teaching practice that was informed by the ABLES assessments and resources?**



Survey results indicate that teachers made changes in their teaching practice because of the ABLES assessments and resources. Notably, in the second year of the trial, there was a significant decline in the number of schools reporting that the ABLES assessments and resources informed new teaching practice. However, in 2021, the percentage of schools answering ‘Yes’ increased by 8%. Demographic survey data indicates that fewer schools from the 2019 and 2020 intakes completed Survey 7. This jump in affirmative responses could reflect the high proportion of new trial schools (2021 intake), which were undergoing a relatively steep improvement journey.



Data gathered via supporting methodologies highlights the valuable and influential impact the teaching strategies suggested in ABLES resources had in broadening pedagogical practice in trial schools. Teachers identified that these strategies helped target their teaching and, as a result, were instrumental in supporting the progression of student learning. Comments from teachers included:

*'Using the strategies and information in the reports assisted in more specific targeted teaching of content.'*

*'It's helped me with ideas for targeted teaching strategies for students not yet working at a Prep level.'*

*'Increased teacher clarity and confidence in implementing school-based programs that are tailor made for our students with disabilities.'*

*'Provided meaningful data to inform teaching practices and curriculum decision-making.'*

*'The strategies gave me some great ideas that I had not even thought of.'*

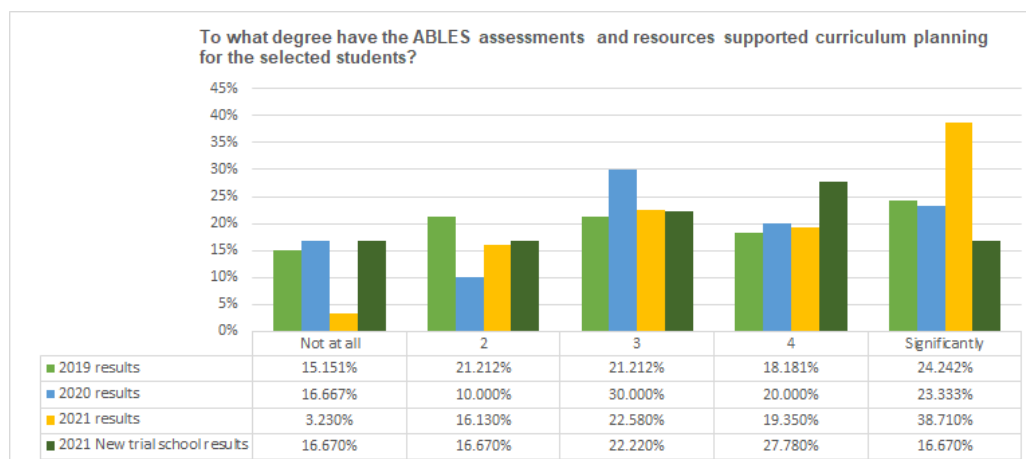
However, some teachers with extensive experience working with students with disabilities and other complex needs were less likely to report strengthened practice. Feedback gathered in cluster meetings indicates that these teachers recognise the potential of the ABLES assessments and resources to support teachers, but believe they are better suited to teachers with less experience working with students with disabilities and diverse learning needs.

### 4.3 Curriculum planning

The collective data indicates that the ABLES assessments and resources support teachers in curriculum planning for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Figure 3 shows how schools rated the ABLES assessments and resources across each year of the trial in supporting curriculum planning.

The data identifies a gradual increase in schools' use of the ABLES assessments and resources to support curriculum planning for selected students. When asked to determine the degree to which ABLES assessments and resources had supported curriculum planning on a five-point scale, the combined sum of the two highest response options ('4' and 'Significantly') steadily increased each year of the trial, from 42% in 2019 to 58.06% in 2021. Conversely, the decrease in the combined responses in the two lowest response options ('Not at all' and '2') decreased from 36% in 2019 to 19% in 2021.

**Figure 3: Survey question — To what degree have the ABLES assessments and resources supported curriculum planning for selected students?**



Cluster meeting and case study data also revealed that the ABLES assessments and resources support curriculum planning for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Schools that found the ABLES assessments and resources useful in this area consistently commented that they supported them to enact the Australian Curriculum with fidelity and responsiveness to learners' needs. This included identifying and planning for age-equivalent curriculum access points for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Some feedback from trial participants exemplifies this experience:

*'Using the assessments and resources has improved our understanding of where students are currently 'at' with their learning and so can plan 'next steps' with greater confidence.'*

*'I believe ABLES helped teachers understand the Australian Curriculum and the adjustments required for students operating within the extended general capabilities.'*

*'[ABLES] has assisted me in how I plan and implement the general capabilities element of the Australian Curriculum.'*

*'[We] have been able to target the next learning step within age-equivalent content contexts.'*

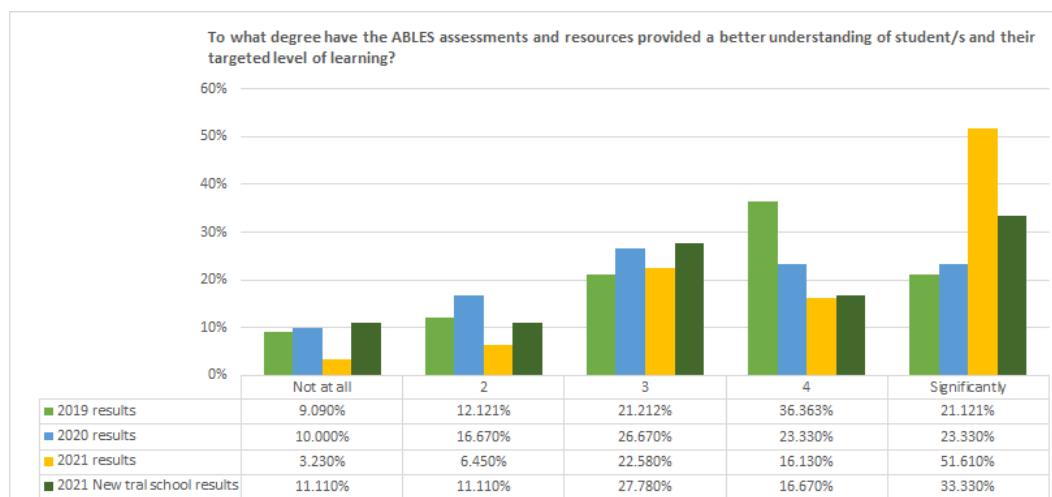
*'The ABLES reports have been helpful in providing guidance on aligning the curriculum to a lower working year level and where the student is heading next.'*

## 4.4 Targeted differentiation

The evaluation data indicates that the ABLES assessments and resources enable targeted differentiation for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs (see Figure 4). Teachers identified two aspects of the ABLES assessments and resources that enabled this greater level of differentiation:

- data that identifies and describes the point at which a student is currently working
- teaching strategies appropriate to a student's zone of proximal development.

**Figure 4: Survey question — To what degree have the ABLES assessments and resources provided a better understanding of student/s and their targeted level of learning?\***



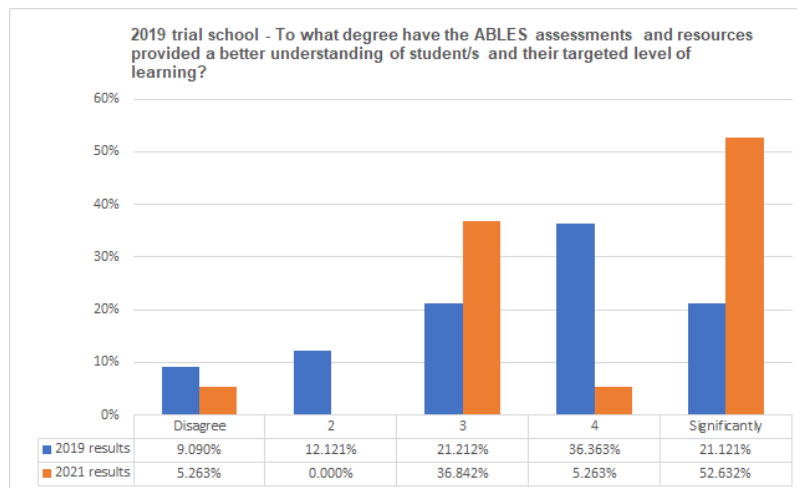
\*This question was changed in 2020 to provide better clarity within the survey questions. The comparable 2019 survey question was *To what degree are you more aware of your students' readiness to learn, in particular curriculum areas, as a result of using ABLES?*

## Identifying students' level of understanding

There was an overall increase in schools' use of the ABLES assessments and resources to better identify and understand students and their targeted level of learning. For instance, the combined sum of the two highest response options increased by 11% (from 57% in 2019 to 68% in 2021).

The longitudinal results of the 2019 trial schools indicate that the longer a school has engaged in ABLES assessments and resources, the more likely they have become established classroom practice in helping teachers better understand students' targeted levels of learning (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Understanding of student/s and their targeted level of learning comparison of 2019 and 2021 results**

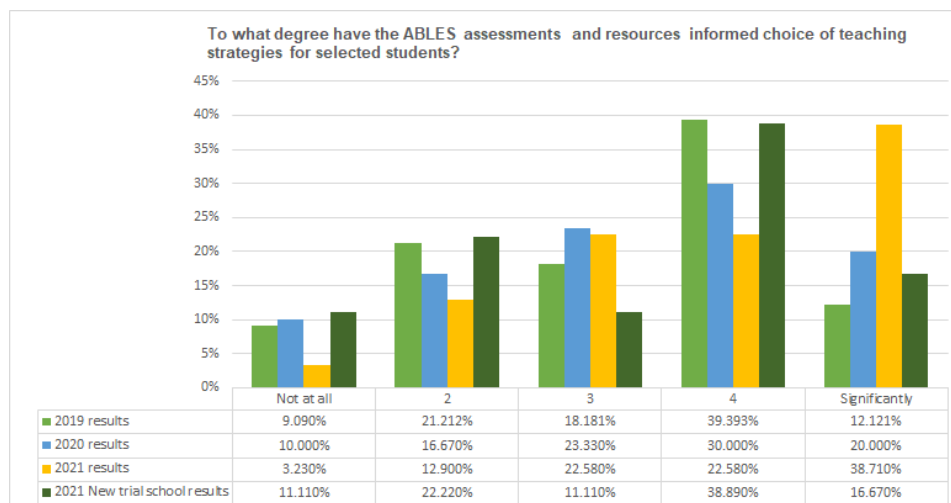


Regardless of schools' overall perception of the ABLES assessments and resources, there was a general acknowledgment that the ABLES data was informative. Although, schools with low appraisal of ABLES stated that the assessments did not supersede other data tools already in place in their context.

## Targeted teaching strategies

Additionally, the evaluation indicated that, over the course of the trial, there was an increasing use of ABLES resources to make informed choices for differentiation (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Survey question — To what degree have the ABLES assessments and resources informed choice of teaching strategies for selected students?**



Trial schools attributed their increased awareness of students' level of understanding to the information captured in the ABLES Learning Readiness Reports. It was regularly communicated that the reports clearly outlined a student's level of understanding and the next steps in a student's learning progression. According to trial schools, the support this provided to teachers was twofold:

- pinpointing the level at which students were accessing the curriculum
- targeting their teaching to help students move forward in their learning.

Many teachers used the teaching strategies offered in the reports to respond to students' immediate learning needs. When discussing the ABLES teaching strategies, schools regularly used the phrases 'targeted teaching' and 'targeted learning'. Schools that used these strategies commented that they promoted and enhanced student engagement with learning and, in a number of cases, even promoted student growth in learning (e.g., case study 2 in Appendix 4).

However, there were some schools that did not find the strategies particularly useful. For these schools, the strategies were considered too broad and/or generic or provided no new suggestions beyond what teachers were already using in their school context.

Overall, the ABLES assessments and resources enable targeted differentiation by providing both detailed data on the level at which a student is working within the curriculum and teaching strategies that accurately target that level. Comments from the final survey exemplify this:

*'As the ABLES resources provide more details of students' abilities within their current curriculum access point [than] other assessment tools, we have been able to provide targeted support within their zone of proximal development.'*

*'There [are] no other Australian-developed assessments and resources that provide this level of detailed information about the learning needs and progress of our students.'*

*'It gave me a clearer understanding of the level of ability of the student and strategies to assist in their engagement in the curriculum.'*

*'It has allowed me a greater understanding of each student's individual learning journey and to [provide] adjustments in line with each student. I certainly gained professional confidence in my decision-making about the teaching strategies and resources to be used for each student.'*

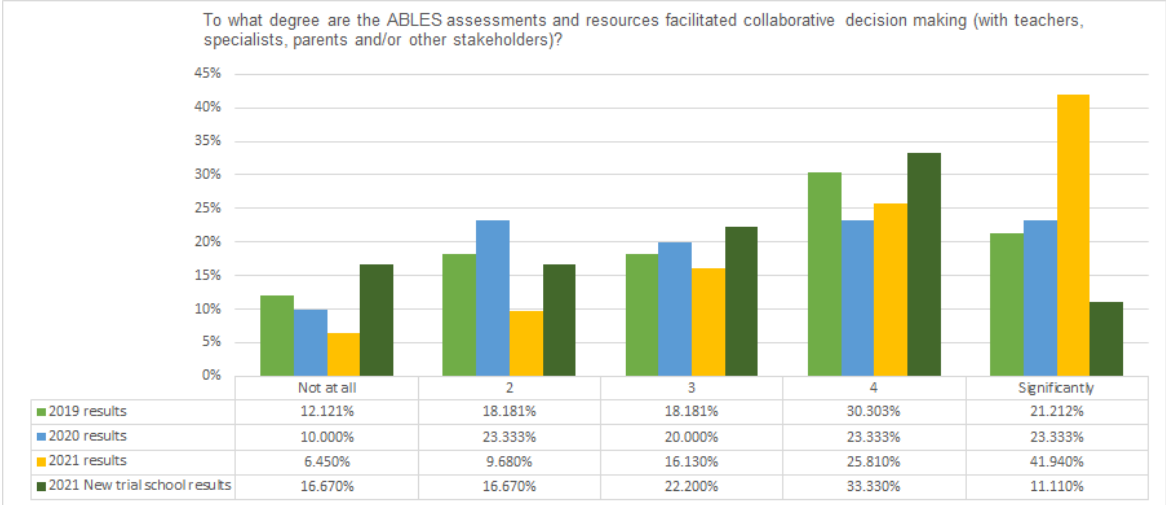
*'For students accessing the curriculum lower than Foundation it has been a valued resource. To be able to accurately assess a student's level of functioning through work samples and discussion and then to create a sequence of learning moving toward Foundation, which also provides research-based strategies has been an amazing opportunity.'*

It is evident that the ABLES assessments and resources provide an understanding of student learning and can contribute to more targeted differentiation for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs, particularly in school contexts that do not have established school assessments in place.

## 4.5 Collaboration

The evaluation data reveals that the ABLES assessments and resources facilitate collaboration among stakeholders supporting the learning of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Figure 7 shows the degree to which trial schools found the ABLES assessments and resources useful in facilitating collaborative decision-making.

**Figure 7: Survey question — To what degree are the ABLES assessments and resources facilitated collaborative decision-making (with teachers, specialists, parents and/or other stakeholders)?**



The data shows that there has been an increase throughout the trial in schools identifying that the ABLES assessments and resources facilitated collaborative decision-making. The combined sum of the two highest response options ('4' and 'Significantly') increased by 16% from 2019 (52%) to 2021 (68%). Similarly, the inverse occurred with a 17% decrease in responses across the two lowest response options ('Not at all' and '2').

While there were significant data trends from the first year to the third year of the trial, it is worth noting the 2020 data again. There was a 5% decline in schools that found the ABLES assessments and resources facilitated collaborative decision-making and a 3% increase in schools that found they did not. As previously mentioned, a probable reason for this is COVID-19 and the limitations it placed on teachers.

Overall, however, the survey data suggests that the longer the schools used the ABLES assessments and resources, the more likely they were to use them to facilitate collaborative discussion and decision-making in their context.

Qualitative evaluation data provides more details on the extent of the collaboration. During cluster meetings, some schools indicated that ABLES-driven collaboration remained centred on the school and its staff, while others commented that discussions and decision-making centred around ABLES data involved all stakeholders, e.g. parents, therapists. Comments provided in the final ABLES survey highlight the extent and nature of collaborative practices during the trial:

- 'It provided a tool to have more collaborative conversations with other teachers, with students and parents'*
- 'Collegial discussion was more targeted around student ability levels and what we could look for in terms of evidence to support goals'*
- 'Teachers, parents and therapists have found the data highly useful when collaboratively planning, teaching and tracking progress for our students'*
- 'The large number of strategies for each level has provided a great discussion point for meetings with staff, particularly class teachers'*
- 'Collective wisdom as a result of collaboration has been so helpful in targeting learning opportunities for our students with disabilities'*

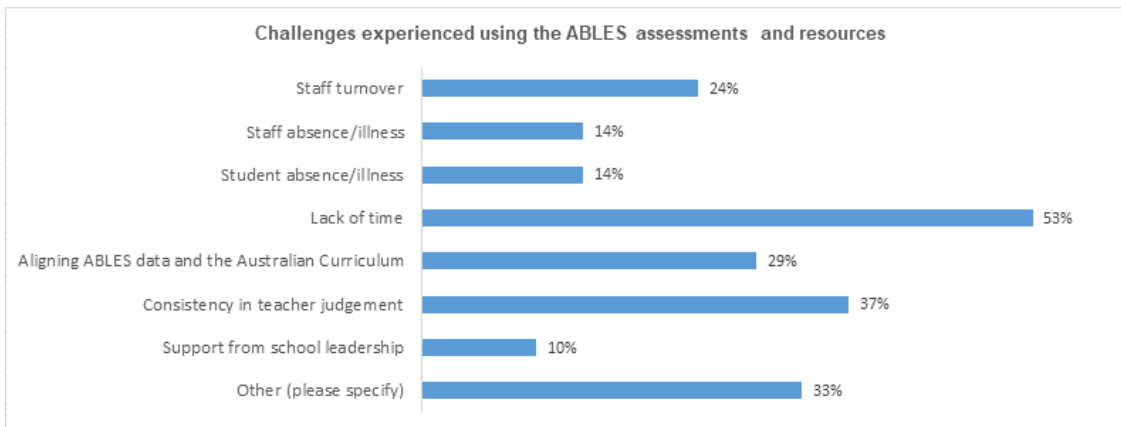
## 4.6 Challenges

Most schools faced some challenges in using the ABLES assessments and resources. In 2019, all trial schools reported that much time was required to fully understand and embed the new assessments and resources into practice and to give this due diligence. Some schools also expressed concerns about the ability of staff to make consistent judgments when conducting the ABLES assessments. Staff found it difficult to discuss a student's learning with other teachers due to time and accessibility constraints, which affected their ability and confidence to make sound judgments about student performance while completing the ABLES assessments.

Schools also reported that they had difficulty aligning ABLES data and the Australian Curriculum. As a Victorian-developed suite of resources, the link between the ABLES data and the Victorian Curriculum caused confusion among some schools, as they are required to plan and report against the Australian Curriculum. Some other challenges noted in the 2019 QUT report include technical issues with the ABLES platform, lack of applicability to higher achieving students with disabilities and diverse learning needs, broadness of teaching strategies, and challenges relating to the continued of implementation of teaching strategies, especially during assessment periods.

Schools faced similar challenges in the later stage of the trial as well, which is evident in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Survey question — What challenges did you experience in using the ABLES assessments and resources?**



New difficulties emerged through the 2021 survey, including staff turnover, staff absence/illness, student absence/illness and limited support from leadership. Some of the 'Other' challenges noted by trial schools included:

*'Most of our students are more capable academically than the range that ABLES is aimed at.'*

*'Students transitioning to another school.'*

*'Teachers struggled to understand vocabulary used in the assessments.'*

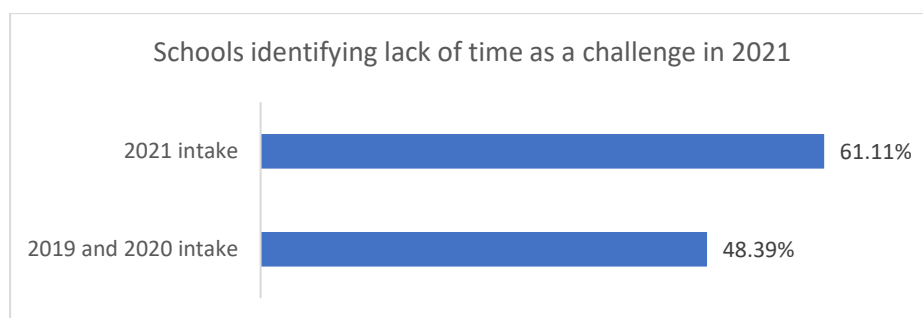
Some of the challenges communicated by participating schools and stakeholder groups are explored in detail below.

### Building teacher capacity

Schools consistently faced challenges in investing the time to explore and understand the ABLES assessments and resources in detail, as well as develop and implement teaching strategies. Additionally, cross referencing to ensure consistency in teacher judgment required time to be set aside.

This challenge was particularly prominent in schools' initial experiences of participating in the trial. For example, 2021 survey data indicates that schools that had been in the trial for less than six months were more likely to list lack of time as a challenge (61%) than those schools that had been part of the trial for over a year (48%). See Figure 9 below.

**Figure 9: Schools identifying lack of time as a challenge in 2021**



Some schools involved in the trial since 2019 and 2020 highlighted that the time invested was worth the outcome of information on their students. This may explain its reduced impact as a challenge for these schools.

There was also variability in where schools identified the greatest challenges in relation to time. These included:

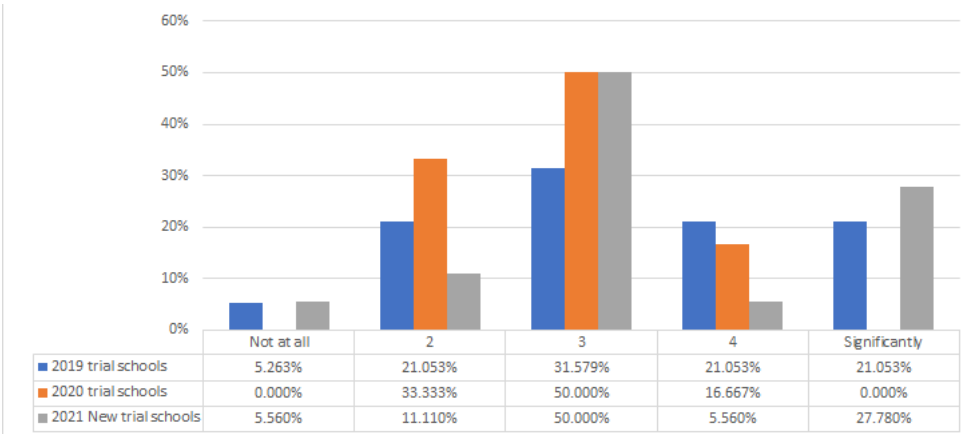
- functionality of the resources, e.g. lack of ability to save progress midway through assessments; being required to copy and paste information to Microsoft Word in order to print assessments
- competing priorities within the school, e.g. *'We had limited ability to implement ABLES program with our students due to other competing agendas limiting time'*
- whole-school teacher buy-in, e.g. *'difficult to get teachers on board because of time requirements'*.

## Aligning the ABLES data to the Australian Curriculum

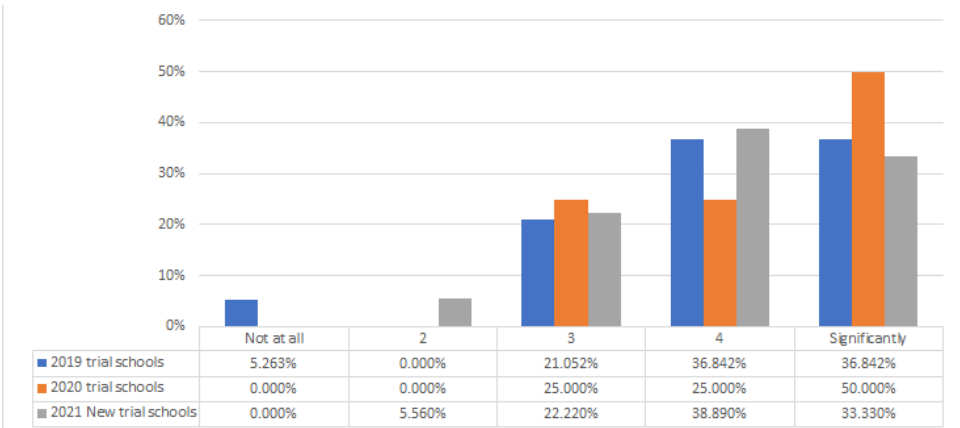
Queensland schools use the Australian Curriculum to plan, teach, assess and report; however, the ABLES assessments, as a Victorian resource, are aligned to the Victorian Curriculum. Misalignment to the Australian Curriculum emerged as a challenge for some trial schools (25% in 2021) and a significant concern for some stakeholder groups.

Despite this, overwhelmingly, trial schools indicated that their confidence in using the Australian Curriculum to support planning for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs was strengthened over the course of the trial.

**Figure 10: Survey question — Prior to using the ABLES assessments and resources, to what degree were you confident in using the Australian Curriculum to support you in your planning for the selected students?**



**Figure 11: Survey question — After using the ABLES assessments and resources, to what degree were you confident in using the Australian Curriculum to support you in your planning for the selected students?**



All three intakes of trial schools reported increased confidence in using the Australian Curriculum to support the planning for the selected students in the trial **after** using the ABLES assessments and resources. A comparison of each intake’s combined sum of the two highest response options (‘4’ and ‘Significantly’) indicates that:

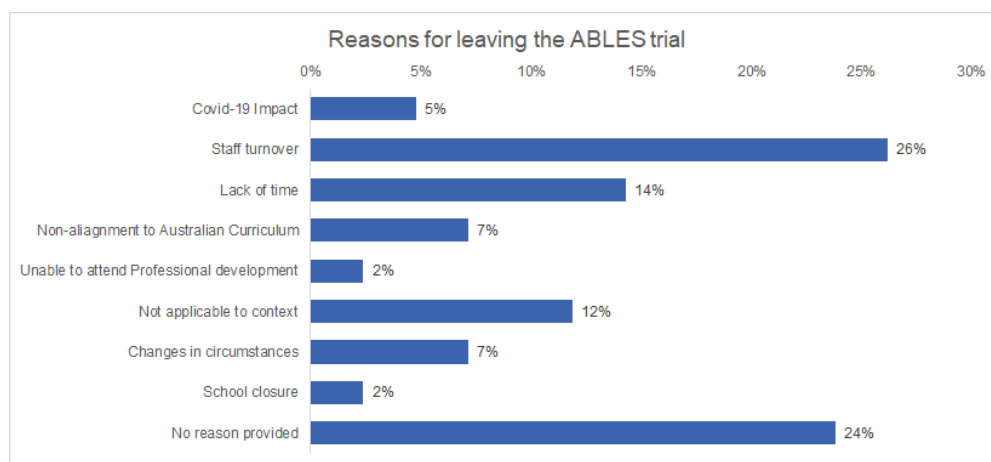
- 2019 trial schools had a 32% increase from prior to using the ABLES assessments and resources to after use (42% to 74%)
- 2020 trial schools had a 58% increase from prior to using the ABLES assessments and resources to after use (17% to 75%)
- despite only participating in the trial for six months, 2021 trial schools had a 39% increase from prior to using the ABLES assessments and resources to after use (33% to 72%).

**School withdrawal**

Across the trial, the number of schools involved has fluctuated. A total of 94 schools have been involved in some capacity across the five semesters of the trial. In October 2019, all schools were invited to submit expressions of interest to join the extended trial for 2020. Just under half of the schools (n = 9) involved in the 2019 trial did not reapply. In 2020 and 2021 there were school interruptions and lockdowns due to COVID-19 and 24 schools withdrew. Participants cited various reasons for withdrawal. Figure 12 captures this data across 2019–21.



Figure 12: Reasons for leaving the ABLES trial



Staff turnover (26%) was the primary reason schools cited for withdrawing, indicating the importance of staff having shared understandings about the use of the ABLES assessments in their school context. At the 2019 and 2020 professional development days, a maximum of two teachers were able to attend. Often due to promotion and/or transfer, these participants moved settings, sometimes without passing on relevant information about the trial. This had a significant impact on these schools' ability to continue in the trial.

Further, some schools did not provide a reason for withdrawal (24%), while others cited a lack of time (14%), applicability to the context (12%), non-alignment to the Australian Curriculum (7%) or change in school circumstances (7%).

## 4.7 Validation of propositions

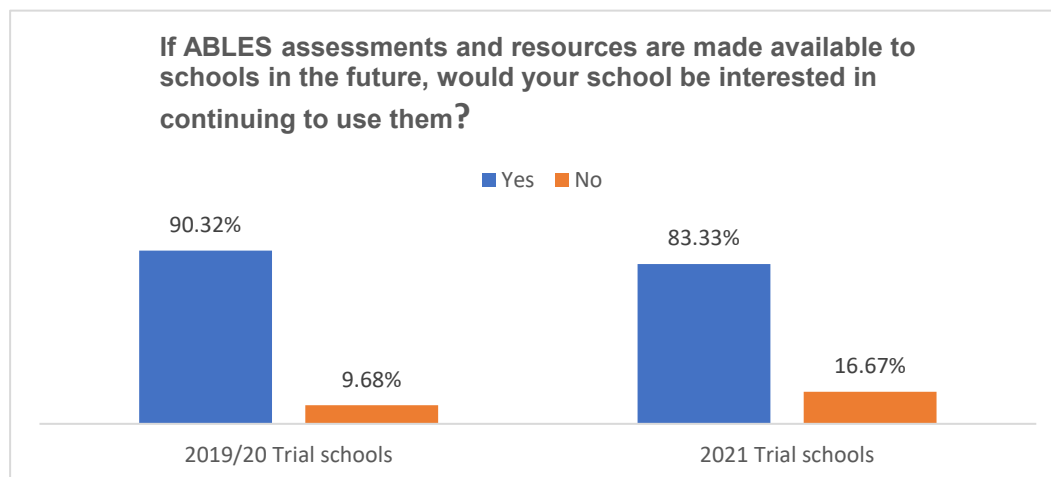
In 2019, evaluators from QUT concluded that the ABLES assessments and resources support teachers in schools to plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional support needs in Queensland. To reach this finding, they developed a series of propositions (see Appendix 2: Initial evaluation report — Executive summary). The key themes that emerged from the extended trial closely align with the seven propositions that QUT evaluators confirmed in the first year of the trial. They are that:

- Teachers use ABLES assessments and resources to increase their confidence and support their decision-making for students with a range of disabilities and complex needs.
- Teachers use the profile reports to provide rich data to develop shared understandings and shared language with parents.
- Staff can use the profile reports to track and monitor individual student progress.
- Teachers in special schools and mainstream schools can use the ABLES-suggested strategies to support adjustments and differentiation.
- The ABLES strategies helped to inform lesson plans for both whole class and individual students.
- Teachers found the general capabilities component of ABLES particularly useful, as that area is not well covered in the Australian Curriculum.
- Teachers in special and mainstream schools can use the ABLES resources to positively support collaboration.

## 4.8 Schools' continued use of ABLES

When asked about the ongoing use of ABLES in Queensland, schools overwhelmingly indicated their interest in continuing to use the assessments and resources (see Figure 13). Schools that had participated in the trial for longer were more likely to indicate a preference for continued access (90%) compared to newer trial schools (83%).

**Figure 13: Survey question — If ABLES assessments and resources are made available to schools in the future, would your school be interested in continuing to use them?**



Notably, this data only includes respondents to the final survey (n = 49) and does not capture the views of all trial schools, such as those schools that have chosen to withdraw.

## 5 Conclusion

The ABLES trial in Queensland aimed to understand how teachers and curriculum leaders used the ABLES assessments and resources to guide their planning and teaching for the individual needs of students with disabilities and diverse learning needs. The primary question underpinning the trial centred on the use and usefulness of the suite of assessments and whether the data obtained can be aligned to existing sector policies for planning and reporting purposes.

The extended ABLES trial across 2020–21 sought to overcome the stated limitations with the QUT final report (small sample size and duration of trial) by increasing the number of schools (64) and ensuring teachers were able to consider the data within full planning cycles across years. Contextual issues noted by QUT in 2019 such as the amount of school support provided to staff from school leaders and system leaders have been explored further, as has the issue of varied experience in relation to how teachers understand and engage with the Australian Curriculum.

In contexts where schools have scheduled regular opportunities for intentional collaboration to analyse student data and make informed decisions regarding access levels to the Australian Curriculum, respondents were positive about the usefulness of the data. When teachers have a clear line of sight of the planned and enacted curriculum, incremental student progress has been recorded within the ABLES reports. These reports have been used as a basis for discussion by schools in planning meetings with parents/carers and external stakeholders such as therapists and behaviour support staff, and as evidence for the NCCD for students with disability processes.

Data obtained from the ABLES assessments can be used to target specific areas of need and plan age-equivalent learning goals on the same basis as a student's peers. It is important to note that not all teachers in Queensland are familiar and confident with the process for personalising

learning and assessment outlined by the Australian Curriculum. Where teachers in trial schools were provided collaborative opportunities to familiarise themselves with the ABLES assessments, the data and teaching strategies can be utilised effectively to progress student learning.

Concerns still exist among some professional associations, sector representatives and school leaders regarding teachers who are unfamiliar with the process for aligning learning within age-equivalent contexts. In these instances, concerns centre around teachers drawing on the Victorian Curriculum's Towards Foundation Levels A–D, which are not supported by or included in the Australian Curriculum.

An overall summary of the ABLES trial has provided the following information in the Queensland context:

Positives	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teachers use assessment data to moderate, confirm and affirm teacher judgments about students' targeted level of learning</li> <li>• teachers use the teaching strategies in the reports to enhance personalised learning plans</li> <li>• teachers use data to provide targeted intervention for learners in specific areas of need</li> <li>• ABLES assessments inform and support collaborative discussions between teachers, parents and external stakeholders</li> <li>• teachers use assessment data to plan individual learning goals within age-equivalent contexts when they are familiar with this process</li> <li>• parents, therapists and external stakeholders provide positive feedback when shown assessment data</li> <li>• schools use assessment data as evidence for the NCCD for students with disability processes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• schools are adversely affected when teachers trained in ABLES leave</li> <li>• COVID-19 has impacted school staffing, student absences and routine in 2020 and 2021</li> <li>• time is a factor in completing assessments and collaborating with colleagues</li> <li>• descriptions in the ABLES assessment reports point to curriculum levels within the Victorian Curriculum, including prior to Foundation</li> <li>• consistency of teacher judgment and understanding of assessment items requires planning and time to embed.</li> </ul>

Overall, the trial has revealed that the ABLES assessments and resources support teachers to plan for students with disabilities and diverse learning needs in specific contexts, schools, and for particular students.

With the conclusion of the ABLES trial 2019–21, the following points are noted:

- there are ongoing and alternative viewpoints in Queensland that exist around the ABLES assessments and resources
- principals, curriculum leaders and teachers are best placed to make choices that align with the needs of individual learners in their context, in line with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (Cth) and *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (Cth)
- ACARA may provide further advice and additional resources for teachers working with students with disabilities and diverse learning needs upon completion of the P–10 Australian Curriculum review
- the QCAA does not support or advocate for the introduction of achievement standards and content descriptions at levels prior to Foundation.

# Appendix 1: Schedule of ABLES reference group meetings

Date	Focus	Scheduled presentations
29 May 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of trial schools</li> <li>• Process for trial</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autism Queensland</li> <li>• Cairns Special School</li> </ul>
28 August 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interim evaluation report findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marian Catholic School</li> </ul>
23 October 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preliminary final evaluation findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mount Ommaney Special School</li> <li>• Nursery Road Special School</li> <li>• Evaluator (QUT)</li> </ul>
16 March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of trial schools</li> <li>• Key findings from final evaluation report</li> </ul>	
29 July 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 changes to trial</li> <li>• Online Formative Assessment Initiative update from ACARA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concordia Lutheran College</li> <li>• Glenella State School</li> </ul>
12 October 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extended trial processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darling Point Special School</li> <li>• Cairns West State School</li> </ul>
22 February 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirmation of trial schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innisfail State School</li> <li>• St Joseph's Catholic School</li> </ul>
7 June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preliminary findings across 2019–2021</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maryborough Special School</li> <li>• Redlands Special School</li> <li>• Mundubbera State School</li> </ul>
16 August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final evaluation and next steps</li> </ul>	

# Appendix 2: 2019 evaluation report — Executive summary

## Evaluation of Queensland Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) trial for students with disability

Executive summary

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### Purpose

There is a growing need to support the teaching of students with disabilities and additional learning needs. Support for teachers in various states and territories in Australia is provided through the Abilities Based Learning and Educational Support (ABLES) resource. This resource was developed by researchers at the University of Melbourne in collaboration with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria in 2008. The ABLES resources can be used by teachers in primary, secondary, and special schools. The resources enable teachers to draw on a set of developmental learning pathways to develop individual learning plans that support student needs (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2011).

The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) conducted a trial of the ABLES resources in 20 Queensland schools and commissioned an external evaluation of the use of the ABLES assessment tools and resources. The external evaluation was conducted by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) academics Professor Suzanne Carrington, Associate Dean (Research) and Dr Julie Dillon-Wallace, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education.

The evaluation examined how:

- teachers and curriculum leaders from 20 schools in Queensland used the ABLES assessment tools and resources
- teachers' understanding of the resources guided their teaching strategies and use of resources to plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional support needs.



*For all Queensland schools*

2020/26

## Process

The QCAA arranged for the ABLES resource to be trialled for the first time in Queensland schools in 2019, with 20 mainstream and special education schools across State, Catholic and Independent sectors volunteering to participate in the trial. QCAA organised for a teaching team, comprising a curriculum leader and teacher from each school, to attend a professional development day in Brisbane and then use the ABLES approach and resources in their school over the school year.

Data was collected from each teaching team across the 20 schools. The evaluation drew on a Realist Evaluation Approach (Pawson & Tilley 1997) to develop a theory of how the ABLES program was working in the schools in Queensland. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do the curriculum leader and teacher use the approach in their school to guide their teaching strategies and use of resources to plan and teach for the individual needs of students?
2. Considering a cross-school, intra-program, and inter-context analysis, are there different results in different schools?

Participants were asked to complete an online journal survey which measured their use of ABLES and gauged how effective they found the resource in supporting their teaching, curriculum and assessment goals. These same survey questions were repeated at three different points between April and September 2019 to add a longitudinal dimension to the study. Although there was some natural teacher movement due to employment changes and leave factors, the response rate from participants was close to 100%.

Participants were also invited to attend three phone interviews between April and November 2019. Interview 1 focused on collecting data about how the participants thought they would use the ABLES tools and resources. Interview 2 focused on collecting data to refine the propositions developed by the evaluators from the first data intake. Interview 3 tested the revised propositions.

## Conclusions

The study results provide evidence to support the theory that the ABLES assessment tools and resources support teachers in schools to plan and teach for the individual needs of students with disabilities and additional support needs in Queensland. This is supported by the following theory propositions:

- Teachers use ABLES resources to increase their confidence and support their decision-making for students with a range of disabilities and complex needs (Proposition 1).
- Teachers use the profile reports to provide rich data to develop shared understandings and shared language with parents/carers (Proposition 2).
- Staff can use the profile reports to track and monitor individual student progress (Proposition 3).

- Teachers in special schools and mainstream schools can use the ABLES suggested strategies to support adjustments and differentiation (Proposition 4).
- The ABLES strategies helped to inform lesson plans for both the whole class and individual students (Proposition 5).
- Teachers found the general capabilities component of ABLES particularly useful as that area is not well covered in the Australian Curriculum (Proposition 7).
- Teachers in special and mainstream schools can use the ABLES resources to positively support collaboration (Proposition 9).

The evaluators identified two key limitations of the project. These were:

1. a small number of schools involved in the trial
2. the perceived need by the teaching teams for more time to fully understand and use the assessment tools and resources to support their teaching.

## References

Pawson, R & Tilley, N 1997, *Realistic Evaluation*, SAGE, London.

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2011, *Abilities Based Learning & Education Support. An introductory guide for Victoria government schools*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne.

# Appendix 3: Schedule of data collection activities

Timelines	Actions		
April 2019	Term 1 QUT survey		
June 2019	Term 2 QUT survey		
September 2019	Term 3 QUT survey		
April – November 2019	Phone interviews (three interviews conducted over the specified time period)		
24 January 2020	Professional development event, in partnership with University of Melbourne and Department of Education, Victoria		
3 March 2020	Closing date for Survey 4		
19 May – 4 June 2020	Voluntary school cluster meetings (online due to COVID-19)		
	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Cluster location</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>
	19 May 2020	Cairns	11
	20 May 2020	Brisbane North	4
		Brisbane West	4
		Sunshine Coast	2
	26 May 2020	Mackay	4
		Townsville	4
		Rockhampton	4
27 May 2020	Brisbane East	6	
	Gold Coast	3	
3 June 2020	Darling Downs	3	
	Wide Bay	4	
4 June 2020	Brisbane Central	7	
	Brisbane South	2	
1–16 September 2020	School cluster meetings (online due to COVID-19)		
	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Cluster location</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>
	1 September 2020	Brisbane Central	7
		Brisbane South	2
	2 September 2020	Brisbane East	6
		Gold Coast	3
	8 September 2020	Brisbane North	4
		Brisbane West	4
		Sunshine Coast	2
9 September 2020	Cairns	11	
15 September 2020	Mackay	4	
	Townsville	4	
	Rockhampton	4	
16 September 2020	Darling Downs	3	
	Wide Bay	4	
16 October 2020	Closing date for Survey 5		
6 November 2020	Closing date for expressions of interest from new schools to join in 2021		



Timelines	Actions		
22 January 2021	Professional development event, in partnership with the Department of Education, Victoria		
5 February 2021	Closing date for Survey 6		
3–25 March 2021	Online school cluster meetings		
	<b>Dates</b>	<b>Cluster location</b>	<b>Number of schools</b>
	3 March 2021	Brisbane Central	7
		Brisbane South	2
	4 March 2021	Brisbane East	6
		Gold Coast	3
	10 March 2021	Brisbane North	4
		Brisbane West	4
		Sunshine Coast	2
	11 March 2021	Cairns	10
17 March 2021	Mackay	4	
	Townsville	4	
	Rockhampton	4	
18 March 2021	Darling Downs	3	
	Wide Bay	4	
24 March 2021	Cairns/Mackay/Townsville/ Rockhampton/Bundaberg	11	
25 March 2021	Brisbane/Gold Coast/ Sunshine Coast/Toowoomba	11	
May – June 2021	School case studies		
7 June 2021	Closing date for Survey 7		
June – July 2021	Final collation and reporting of ABLES feedback		

# Appendix 4: Case studies

## Case study 1

School 1 is located in Brisbane and has 106 enrolled students. Many of these students have multiple and complex disabilities. School 1 participated in the ABLES trial from its inception in 2019. The school strongly believed it needed more information about its learners, as the existing formative assessments did not provide enough in-depth information about focused learning and what the next steps were in learning progression for its students. The school found there was a significant gap in supporting those students working at levels prior to Foundation to set learning goals using the Numeracy and Literacy general capabilities.

School 1 uses the ABLES suite of resources across most classes in the school. The school reports that the ABLES assessments and resources are easy to use and that the platform is very user friendly. One of the strongest appeals of the ABLES assessments and resources, apart from setting goals and conducting assessment, is that the strategies were designed by Australian researchers and are evidence based within the Australian context.

At School 1, 80% of students are on a highly individualised curriculum, so staff felt it was important to track communication behaviours and communication functions to gain meaningful information and set specific goals in those learning area contexts.

School 1 has used the ABLES assessments and resources to identify and track progress incrementally within multiple entry and exit level curriculum access points, across and within the general capabilities. Staff found that some students had individual learning goals aligned to adjusted year levels of curriculum for Prep and above but were assessed at levels prior to Foundation. The ABLES assessments and resources have been fundamental in assessing learning in addition to Literacy and Numeracy general capabilities.

Teachers have used the ABLES suite to look deeper at critical and creative thinking, and this has really helped them discover why some students are plateauing in their learning. This information was not attainable until the ABLES assessments were made available. As a result, staff have witnessed important progress for students by way of goals that targeted critical thinking. Additionally, students felt they were understood by teachers; for some, for the first time.

*No other dataset has those incremental steps that ABLES has, for us, and it just lends itself to our students being successful, and us knowing our learner, which is the absolute number one.*

School 1 has made the rollout of the ABLES assessments and resources a school-wide priority over two years. The school has progressively focused on building teacher capacity, appointing a senior teacher as lead. The professional development meets the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers through this 'hub style' tiered approach to mentoring. Teachers are instructed on how to implement the easy-to-use assessment, read through reports and set goals. A PowerPoint presentation is available for all teachers on their SharePoint for future reference. As expressed by the mentoring teacher:

*I feel that ABLES is one of the only tools to inform curriculum that's specific, in Australia, to students with disabilities. We're not having to continually adjust format of assessments to try and engage the student in that assessment task. We don't have to do that with ABLES. So that's been really good.*

Teachers meet with the mentoring teacher twice per term, as part of a professional learning community, to plan for the next semester's Individual Curriculum Plan (ICP) goals. Teachers have reported that this process has dramatically reduced workload, as the generated reports are easily

adapted and personalised for ICP reporting. Students are working within their zone of proximal development and engaging in highly differentiated instruction, as supported by the ABLES suite.

ABLES assessments and associated reports provide a common language for both staff (teachers and teacher aides) and allied health professionals to maximise collaborative learning opportunities. The ABLES tools strengthen discussions when meeting with parents and therapists, by way of setting meaningful goals through backward mapping. Parents can also share the information with their child's private therapists, saving them a great deal of time and money.

For parents, the ABLES assessments and reports provide not only more comprehensive information about their child, but also comfort and confidence. Parents stated that the reports truly reflected their child. Teacher-parent relationships were further strengthened with a renewed, deeper understanding of the child, which is what families want.

Finally, as expressed by one senior teacher:

*I think ABLES gave us a number of signposts along the way for next steps. It just changed the entire narrative around developing educational programs and plans. How do we adjust this to meet you? This is who you are. Let's begin there.*

## Case study 2

School 2 is a primary school situated in far north Queensland. The school has a rich multicultural history reflected in the student cohort mainly comprising of Aboriginal students, Torres Strait Islander students, Cook Islander students and Pacific Islander students. Less than 10% of the student cohort have English as a first language.

School 2 has participated in the ABLES trial since its inception in 2019. The school saw the ABLES trial as an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of how to make adjustments for those students working at levels prior to Foundation who require intensive support. Initially, the ABLES assessments identified baseline data for five students who engaged in 10 weeks of intervention and informed the setting of appropriate Individual Curriculum Plan (ICP) goals and strategies guided by one Head of Special Education Services (HOSES) and one teacher.

During these initial stages, the ABLES reports provided a visual snapshot of a student's strengths and areas requiring support. The class report was used to track the individual student's progress and achievements within a whole-class context. Some students benefited more from the Personal and Social Capability assessments, while others were more suited to the assessments linked to learning area curriculum such as English, Reading and Writing. Previously, sharing student progression was very difficult with the existing tools available to the school. ABLES reports provided more information, allowing teachers to extrapolate the teaching strategies that were or were not successful for students. This was used to further develop personalised learning and implement pathways that ensured student growth and success. An example of this success was highlighted by the lead teacher:

*... one particular student in reading and writing moved two whole bandwidths in the two-year period from a Foundation level to Levels 3 and 4. For most other students, considerable growth was measured from the beginning of the trial 2019 to 2021.*

Throughout the school, the ABLES assessments and resources have been very positively received. Teachers at School 2 have found the ABLES suite of resources very helpful when planning curriculum access points because they identify students' strengths and their areas of need. Participation in the school has now increased to teachers from both the lower and upper primary year levels. Several other students have been involved to compare student abilities across and within grades, and during transitions from one year level to the next.

The ABLES assessments and resources have supported intentional teacher collaboration and productive conversations between cohort teachers. Teachers within the school have been able to compare the abilities demonstrated by students in different settings across the school. Appropriate adjustment strategies, considering content, process, environment, and assessment, have been aligned with learning progressions and foregrounding: where to next? ABLES generates reports that provide a common document to speak to. Staff at School 2 have found this process very powerful, as conversations now have a shared understanding based on concrete data.

Teachers have found the ABLES reports accurately correlate with the results of the speech language pathologist's communication matrix for students. This has been particularly useful when communicating with allied health professionals and visiting paediatricians. Teachers have found it very helpful to have something concrete (reports) to share which provides background information and accelerates processes if further investigation is required.

The ABLES assessments provide an overall visual snapshot of where students are placed on the learning continuum and this has been very parent friendly. ABLES has been particularly useful at parent-teacher interviews. The ABLES Learning Readiness Reports visually show parents that even if their child hasn't moved into the next year level, they can see there has been growth within the learning continuum of their targeted ability level. For many parents, this is important to

share, without having to discuss complicated planning and assessment processes. The A to E reporting system does not always fully represent student's growth when on highly individualised plans, so it has been exciting and beneficial for parents to see.

*For us, we're just at the very start of the journey but it's been a really positive start ... the students are always at the forefront.*

At School 2, the whole process of using the ABLES assessment and resources has validated teacher judgment and deepened knowledge about students through identifying abilities and specific points of need for those working on a highly individualised curriculum. In Queensland, all the available resources are from Prep through to Year 12. The ABLES assessments have helped fill the gap for students working at levels prior to Foundation.

Teachers found time to be the biggest factor to consider when first implementing the ABLES assessments. Professional development to support all teachers to complete the questions and further collaborate with all stakeholders involved in teaching the students is important to maximise the benefits of the ABLES assessment and resources in mainstream classes.

Overall, matching the best strategies with the needs of the student's abilities, and sharing and collaborating best practice with others involved in the student's learning across the different contexts within the school, has been a highlight of the ABLES trial at School 2. It has guided year level planning, mapping what the cohort are learning, and how teachers can align what individual students are focused on too — to pull apart the parts that they will be successful at and what steps teachers need to take to ensure a student's progress and meet with success.

### Case study 3

School 3 is a Years 7–12 Edmund Rice secondary school in Townsville with approximately 1000 students. The school strongly promotes the education of each and every student and expressed interest in trialling the ABLES assessments and resources as a couple of its students had complex learning profiles. The school was looking for an assessment tool to track its students' progress when using a modified curriculum and provide more detailed reports to parents.

School 3 now uses the ABLES assessments and resources with all students who have complex learning profiles. After students are assessed, teachers and teacher aides collaborate closely to use the strategies to modify the curriculum in targeted ways within each learning area. The ABLES reports are then attached to each learner profile, with the strategies for each learning area generated from the ABLES assessments and resources. These processes in this high school context are described by the program leader:

*... we've assessed the students using all their teachers around the table, so we collaboratively assess them. Then once the assessments have come out and the strategies have come along, the teachers for those specific classes in high school highlighted which strategies they could use in their classrooms and then use those strategies to be able to teach and modify the curriculum.*

The secondary school found the ABLES assessments and resources to be particularly valuable for students who are transitioning into Year 7. The school used the ABLES assessments and resources to assess a student in Year 6, before starting at the secondary college. The teachers in each setting used a coordinated approach to set goals and strategies in the primary school, which would support the student in the secondary placement the following year.

The school has also found the ABLES assessments and resources useful when backward mapping the curriculum, especially for students on the autism spectrum. The ABLES assessments support teacher judgment when adjusting the curriculum to target the current abilities of the student, while working within the student's zone of proximal development. The ABLES data provides teachers with affirmation that they are accurately backward mapping for students with complex learning profiles, validating their teaching practice.

Recently, the school has implemented co-teaching pedagogies, with students being assessed using ABLES. Teachers have reported positive outcomes for both teachers and students using a modified curriculum, as the ABLES assessments and resources strongly support inclusive practice in the classroom. The school has embraced this process, providing time for teachers to meaningfully engage in discussions with each other about the goals and purpose of the assessments and resources.

Parents at School 3 have been very appreciative and thankful for the ABLES assessments and resources. In the past, their children would receive an 'M' (modified program) on their school report without any evidence of assessment, as there was no avenue for generating reports. Now, parents can clearly see the level of understanding at which their child is achieving. This process enables teachers to meet with parents and carers more regularly to discuss reports. It provides a common understanding, and parents are really on board.