Certificating students with intellectual and other impairments: A new approach

Graham Maxwell and Jo Soothill

Queensland Studies Authority

Queensland, Australia

Abstract

As secondary education broadens its scope to provide learning support for all young people, inclusiveness (as a principle of equity) requires that the learning outcomes of all young people be recognised. In Queensland, a completion certificate is awarded at the end of secondary education. This certificate has not been inclusive of students who follow highly individualised learning programs. A new certificate has been trialled successfully for these students. It is anticipated that approximately four per cent of the student cohort will eventually access the certificate. The target group is students with impairments (disabilities) and students with learning difficulties. Learning outcomes are reported as a statement of achievement. Teachers make descriptive statements classified under six curriculum organisers, as appropriate for individual students. Teacher-based moderation processes are employed to ensure the value and credibility of the certificate. These processes are similar to but different from the moderation processes adopted for other forms of school-based assessment in Queensland. The individualised and descriptive approach to reporting learning outcomes requires substantial professional development for teachers. There are implications for assessing and reporting achievements in other learning programs.

Inclusiveness of all students in the full range of schooling opportunities, together with appropriate recognition of their learning outcomes, is increasingly seen in many countries as a necessary requirement for equitable educational provisions. 'All students' is increasingly deemed to include students with impairments (disabilities) and students with learning difficulties. In many countries, it is already the case that all students are entitled to twelve years of schooling and this raises questions about the most appropriate way to provide for the educational development of all students.

In the Queensland, a recent government initiative, the Education and Training Reforms for the Future (ETRF) (http://www.education.qld.gov.au/etrf/) has been directed at ensuring that all young people achieve a worthwhile end-of-schooling certificate that allows access to alternative post-school pathways, including especially work, study and training. As all young people are entitled to twelve years of schooling, it is necessary to consider how best to provide certification of their learning at the end of their formal schooling. Necessarily, this also includes students with disabilities. It is no longer acceptable to allow students to leave school early because they felt that what the school offered was unsuited to their needs.

Currently, most students who complete twelve years of schooling in Queensland receive the Senior Certificate. This certificate, issued as a state-wide end-of-schooling certificate by the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA), reports results in approved subjects as well as results in accredited vocational education and training (VET) taken while at school. These are results in programs that have prescribed expectations and standards. Receipt of the certificate requires that the student achieve a recordable result in at least one subject or one VET competency. In this sense the certificate is a certificate of completion rather than a certificate of qualification.

Consultations are underway to change the Senior Certificate from a certificate of completion to a certificate of qualification by establishing a minimum amount and standard of achievement in order to receive the certificate. In conjunction with this, there will be increased broadening and flexibility for the types of learning that can contribute to it, extending to work-based, community-based and self-directed learning. Students also will develop a record of learning that provides the details of their achievements. They will be able to access this record of learning at any time and continue to add to it, even after leaving school, until they complete the Senior Certificate.

In its current form, the Senior Certificate does not adequately meet the needs of some students who follow highly individualised programs of learning. Some students cannot satisfy the requirements for existing courses of study and therefore cannot achieve any result for recording on the certificate. This can be the case even though a policy of special consideration (what in the USA is called 'accommodation') allows for students with some kinds of disabilities to undertake alternative assessments. However, at the heart of all subjects is the essential intellectual content that defines the essence of what students should know, and in some cases also the essential practical content that defines what students should be able to do. Results on a certificate ought to testify accurately what the student knows and can do. That is, it is not

appropriate to say a student possesses knowledge and skill that they do not in fact possess.

Typically, when students cannot manage the expectations of the regular curriculum, they leave school without any formal recognition of their achievements. The proposed changes to the Senior Certificate are unlikely to change this situation for students with intellectual impairments (or multiple impairments) or with idiosyncratic learning difficulties. Alternatives to current processes for recognising achievements, going beyond defined performance requirements and standards, are needed. The Certificate of Post-compulsory School Education (CPCSE) has been devised to satisfy this need.

In the USA, UK, New Zealand and Australia, certification of student's educational achievements from high school has historically been conceived in terms of meeting certain minimum, predefined standards. In these countries, there has been research about the effects of not receiving a certificate or diploma and what happens to young people who leave school early or 'age out', that is, remaining at school for the maximum allowed time but not receiving a certificate or diploma (Pitman 2002). However, the research emphasis has generally not differentiated different background characteristics, such as students with particular abilities and students with special disabilities or learning difficulties.

In the USA, in 1997, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required states to include students with disabilities in district and statewide tests unless an appropriate alternative is provided. Before this legislation, it was estimated that almost one-half of school-aged students with disabilities were being excluded from any state or national assessment (McGrew, Thurlow, Shriner & Spiegel 1992). There is ongoing research and debate about inclusion of students with disabilities in high school graduation certificates and diplomas. Across the USA, there is considerable variation in practice, from a single diploma to several options (up to five or more). A common pattern is a diploma for those who pass the state-based minimum requirements or a certificate of completion that records schooling achievements on a range of characteristics (Johnson & Thurlow 2003). This necessarily leaves out some students. In many cases, such students leave early as a result of constant failure.

In the USA, Smith and Smith (2001) researched the question of whether a certificate of completion is worthwhile or wasted effort for students who cannot achieve the regular diploma. Employers who they interviewed all indicated that a student who graduates with a certificate of completion is better qualified for employment opportunities compared to a student who has dropped out of high school. More than half of the employers surveyed considered a student graduating with a certificate of completion to be as qualified for employment as is a student graduating with a diploma.

All Australian states and territories have provided special consideration or special arrangements for students with impairments. The Australasian, Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) produced a set of guidelines about equitable assessment practices (ACACA 1996). These guidelines are for any high stakes assessment. However, in those states where external examinations are used, students with impairments are still

required to do the test in order to receive a certificate (albeit with accommodations). In Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory, both of which have school-based assessments rather than external examinations, alternative assessments can be provided for students with impairments to meet the standards articulated in the regular curriculum.

Research on participation in schooling in Australia (Roussel & Murphy 2000) has shown that, although there has been an overall increase in the number of students completing Year 12 and the academic standard of students completing Year 12, any further increase in participation is likely to come from students who have lower academic achievement. However, there is little research about the school completion rates of students with impairments.

Erikson (1998) describes alternative assessments as 'likely to include less traditional forms of assessment, such as performance tasks and portfolio development, and may include information gathered through videotape, interviews and direct observation'. These kinds of assessments have the potential to include all students.

In the Queensland system of school-based assessment, alternative assessment techniques have been widely used and accepted as valid and reliable techniques for the past 30 years. A range of assessment techniques is used to construct the student's portfolio for a subject or course of study. Representative samples of portfolios from schools are submitted to moderation panels made up of expert teachers who validate teacher judgments of student achievement against the syllabus standards.

Trial and implementation of the certificate

A trial of the CPCSE was conducted in 2002 and 2003. In the first year of the trial, 174 students from 63 schools received the certificate. In the second year of the trial, there were 233 students from 80 schools. In 2004, the certificate has been made generally available to all 400 schools with Year 12 students in the state and it is expected that about 500 certificates will be issued. It is anticipated that by 2007 there will be about 2000 students receiving the CPCSE. This represents about four per cent of the age cohort.

Access to the certificate is restricted to students who have either an impairment (or multiple impairments) or difficulties in learning that are not primarily due to socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. Currently, over 90 per cent of participating students have an intellectual impairment.

A restriction on eligibility is necessary to ensure that students who should be undertaking studies in the regular curriculum continue to do so. Students who should be taking the regular curriculum include students with special needs that are attributable to socio-economic, cultural and/or linguistic factors. Schools should not be allowed to use the alternative certificate as an escape from their responsibilities to provide appropriately and adequately for all students. While school principals make the decision about whether a student fits the eligibility criteria, these judgments are public and open to scrutiny. It is also expected that the parents be consulted.

There are three sections to the certificate:

- **Statement of Achievement** – describing achievement under six curriculum organisers (using as many of these organisers and making as many statements as appropriate for the individual student):

  1. **Areas of study and learning**: Performance in school subjects or broad areas of learning developed by the school to meet the educational needs of the student.

  2. **Communication and technologies:** Performance in language, literacy and numeracy including the use of adaptive and augmentative devices across calculation, reading, writing, listening, speaking (or speech equivalent) and viewing. It may also include information about the use of computer and communications technologies.

  3. **Community, citizenship and the environment**: Involvement in and contribution to the local and wider community through activities that may include a focus on the environment in both the natural and made world, and accessing community facilities.

  4. **Leisure and recreation:** Performance in competitive individual and team sports, outdoor pursuits, fitness and physical development programs, and the use of leisure time in active and constructive ways. It also may include health and well-being, safety, cooperative and group skills.

  5. **Personal and living dimensions:** Personal development and management, goal setting, decision making, community mobility, health, nutrition, interpersonal skills, independent and cooperative living skills.

  6. **Vocational and transition activities:** Performance in vocational and work-oriented activities undertaken in either school-based or accredited courses. It also may include student actions in accessing local and community resources for planning life pathways.

- **Accredited Vocational Education and Training** – achievement in VET modules, competencies and certificates accredited under the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and results from other recognised organizations. Examples might include:

  - completed VET certificates

  - individual VET competencies.

- **Statement of Participation** – a list of activities in which the student has participated in their senior years of schooling (Years 11 and 12). There is no provision for explanation of the activity nor is there any indication of achievements or standards that might be associated with the activity. Examples might include:

  - community-based learning

  - work placement or work experience

  - extra-curricula activities

  - community access programs

- mentor programs with employers.

Some key features of the certificate

What is different about the statements of achievement on this certificate is that there are no pre-specified expectations or standards. Teachers design statements to describe the achievements they observe. The statements fit the individual student and may be idiosyncratic. Much was learned in the trial period about teachers' capacity to generate such statements and about how to make the statements meaningful. From this experience, guidelines have been produced to ensure a common framework for the statements (see appendix 1). Teachers have been encouraged to use the following model to generate statements. The general characteristics of this model is shown below:

(The student)   Verb   Adjective   Subject   Qualifier/Context1

Some examples are:

- Accesses familiar community facilities with support

- Follows two-step verbal instructions during hospitality work placement

- Designs art projects using a variety of styles

- Communicates wants and needs with simple vocalisation and sign communication

- Maintains fitness with hydrotherapy activities and by riding tricycles

- Plans and shops for preparation of simple meals.

Quality assurance

As for the Senior Certificate, the processes that lead up to the reporting of student achievement on the certificate are a collaborative effort between the certificating authority (QSA) and the schools. This is seen as a partnership in which both parties have defined responsibilities. Schools are required to accept their responsibilities, especially for appropriate implementation of quality assurance processes that lie within their domain. The QSA exercises general oversight and checks the overall coherence and consistency of the results reported to it by the schools. Any changes that the QSA considers desirable are negotiated with the school. The school makes any final changes.

In 1999, the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA) published its *Principles for the Integrity, Quality and*

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1   Context: refers to the situational variables of any spoken, written or mathematical text and the relationship between them. These will include the subject matter, the participants, the purposes (both implicit and explicit), and the social environment in which the text or activity occurs (see National Reporting System).

Long-term Credibility of Certificates of Achievement which identified a number of principles for certification:

- high quality curriculum documents, assessment procedures and performance standards

- open and transparent processes

- monitoring the currency, relevance and value of the results recorded on certificates and the procedures and practices used in their production

- the issuing authority taking responsibility for the substantive truth of the statement implied by a result on its certificate.

The first of these principles needs some translation for application to the CPCSE – high quality individual education programs rather than curriculum documents, observation processes and other alternative assessment processes rather than formal assessment procedures (especially 'tests'), and performance descriptions rather than defined standards. Implementation of these principles requires deliberate quality assurance processes. The key quality assurance processes for the CPCSE are support for schools and teachers, internal school processes, submission of curriculum plans, information technology systems and peer moderation.

Support for schools and teachers

The Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) provides project officer support to schools. This includes the provision of four half-day workshops on:

- an introduction for schools who are using the certificate for the first time

- how to describe student achievement for certification

- how to design a curriculum plan and internal school processes

- peer moderation of the performance statements

- QSA information technology software and quality procedures.

Further advice can be obtained through a website discussion list and direct contact with the project officer.

Internal school processes

Internal school processes need to be put in place to identify eligible students, design their curriculum plans, monitor their progress, assemble evidence on their performance, and make valid statements about their performance. As with school-based assessment more generally, students and their parents are entitled to query the results recorded on the certificate. Therefore, schools need to keep records to substantiate their decisions.

Curriculum plans

In parallel with the requirement on schools to submit a teaching and assessment plan for regular subjects they are offering, schools are required to

submit a curriculum plan for CPCSE students. This is used to check whether students meet the eligibility requirements, to check the coherence of the overall plan, and to inform the moderation process of the probable range of intended programs and achievements.

Information technology

Data is collected from schools electronically and support is given to schools for managing the data systems. Software packages assist teachers in writing achievement statements and entering the data. Currently, students are identified as CPCSE students at the beginning of their second last year (Year 11).

Moderation

In Queensland, moderation processes are directed at ensuring consistent interpretation of the meanings of descriptors of student achievement and confirmation of the judgments that teachers make about student achievement. This is done by having teachers consider and discuss the evidence on which the judgments are based.

There are two moderation activities, both involving district meetings with at least one teacher from each school. For the first activity, teachers bring the following:

- certificate information and curriculum plans for all eligible students

- a sample of the evidence used to make judgments about the educational achievement for one eligible student.

For the first activity, the sample of evidence is reviewed by another teacher to see whether the evidence justifies the proposed statements of educational achievement. Differences of opinion are resolved through discussion. The process is directed at giving schools feedback about the validity of their judgments and the quality of their draft statements. Teachers also receive assistance from other teachers in describing student achievement.

For the second activity, schools submit their final draft statements electronically. These statements are reviewed by an advisory committee and district representatives. Schools receive feedback with suggestions for any desirable changes before they enter the final statements.

Other processes

Various data checks are made throughout the year leading up to the certificate production. Assistance is given to schools if difficulties arise. All certificates are checked for errors and misprints. Students have access to appeal procedures as for the Senior Certificate.

Evaluation

An evaluation of the trial was undertaken in 2003. The evaluation collected of a range of qualitative and quantitative data. These included:

- decisions and participant evaluations from the curriculum organisers workshop and the two teacher workshops focusing on evaluating the certificate inclusions, data collection and quality processes

- a school survey to gain reflective commentaries about the students who were included in the trial and the processes used

- a parent and student interview to gauge parent and student perceptions about the value of the certificate

- a general survey to gauge the value of the certificate

- an internal evaluation of the IT aspects of the project

- other internal consultations.

The conclusions of this evaluation were that:

- students, parent/carers, schools and future options providers supported the continuation of the certificate

- the curriculum organisers in their current form are flexible enough for schools to use and easy for future options providers and parents to understand

- teachers without prior knowledge of how to describe student achievement can do so after specific training

- support for schools by the QSA is crucial in ensuring that high-quality information appears on the certificate

- moderation procedures need to be maintained to ensure the accuracy of the information that appears on the CPCSE

The evaluation also found that teachers perceived the opportunity to discuss student achievement with other teachers as an extremely worthwhile activity. Further, the decision as part of the trial to confine the certificate information to demonstrated knowledge and skills (what the student knows and can do) and not attitudes, behaviour, comparisons or value judgements meant that the ways in which teachers articulated student achievement required professional development.

A common assumption about certification is that there is a pre-determined standard of performance to be met. There is also the assumption that if a student meets the required standard and receives a certificate, that certificate is a form of social currency that will lead to a job, give access to further study opportunities or increased opportunity to succeed in society. In the case of individualised curriculum, as used for the CPCSE, there is no state-based standard or outcome. This is only a problem if it is thought that these students can all reach a common goal by the end of their schooling, which is patently unachievable. On the other hand, the individualised reporting approach adopted for the certificate allows a profiling approach to recognising the

progress made by individual students and the capabilities they are demonstrating.

Further research indicates that in 88 per cent of the samples of student evidence of achievement, a variety of types of assessment are being used as evidence of achievement. This strengthens the claim to validity by ensuring that many different contexts and opportunities for performance are considered. In five of the six curriculum organisers, there is at least 89 per cent agreement between the evidence of student achievement and the words used to describe those achievements. This strengthens the claim to reliability in the teachers' judgements. Further investigation is needed to determine why Leisure and Recreation has comparatively little agreement compared to the other five curriculum organisers.

Teachers' perceptions of the moderation process are extremely positive. There is a perception that there is value in the process because teachers have an opportunity to share what they are doing. It is also having an impact on how teachers view their own assessment practices with most teachers saying that they are adjusting how they collect evidence of achievement and thinking in more depth about what they are assessing. As is the case in the regular curriculum, moderation is proving to be a powerful agent for professional development and self improvement among teachers.

Issues

The certificate has been a successful innovation and has satisfied a felt need. Over time, it is likely to evolve. It is unlikely that it is satisfactory in every respect. The impending changes to the Senior Certificate will require some reconsideration of the place of the CPCSE, especially whether it should remain a separate completion certificate or whether it should simply fold into the record of learning that all students will have. The question is whether a separate certificate sends a positive (recognition) message or a negative (different) message. By remaining separate there is a danger that there will be pressure from those denied the Senior Certificate to be allowed the CPCSE. This would alter its purpose away from servicing those students for whom regular expectations are inappropriate and unachievable.

There is criticism from employers that the way in which results on the current Senior Certificate are reported, as summary 'grades', has little meaning to employers. Conversely, employers interviewed about the CPCSE have commended the certificate for the clarity and specificity of language used to describe student achievement. Perhaps the use of verbal descriptions of achievement rather than as grades ratings or levels may be eventually a clearer way to report all student achievement. Grades, ratings or levels convey strong information about relative performance but weak information about the student's actual knowledge and capabilities.

References

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Appendix 1

Guidelines for writing the statement of achievement

The aim of the statement of achievement is to create a complete picture of the student's demonstrated educational achievement under the 'curriculum organisers'. You do not have to record achievements against every curriculum organiser. As a guide, write two to three sentences per curriculum organiser. If a student has no vocational education and training achievements, you can expand to four or five sentences per curriculum organiser.

There is also needs to be a degree of consistency in the style of language use for each student. These guidelines will help you. They will be covered in more detail through professional development.

- Express statements positively.

- Aim for clear and specific statements about demonstrated achievement.

- Describe demonstrated knowledge and skills.

- Include the context for the achievement.

- Focus on achievement ('does') rather than ability ('can do', 'may be able to do', 'able to', 'ability to').

- Keep the tense the same (e.g. Produces emails using familiar software).

- Do not use the official Authority or Authority-registered subjects name - use a generic name for the program e.g. "art program" rather than "arts in practice".

- Use words rather than numerals.

- Do not repeat the same knowledge or skill (either in the curriculum organisers or in programs that appear on other parts of the certificate e.g. VET).

- Do not describe attitudes or behaviour (e.g. do not write 'behaves well', 'is courteous', 'work ethic').

- Do not make value judgments or predictions such as 'will do well', 'will be suitable'.

- Do not use comparative language ('good', 'high', 'advanced', '80%').

- Do not be specific about locations — do not write 'TAFE', or 'McDonald's').

- Do not use product names such as MS Word.

- Do not use technical or specialist terms.

- No personal pronouns or the student's name.

- No abbreviations (e.g. AAC, ATM).

- No dot points or paragraphing.

- No lists.

- Avoid the word 'demonstrates' (the statement of achievement is demonstrated achievement in itself).

- Avoid the word 'participates' (if participation is the achievement, then it needs to be included in the statement of participation).