



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS  
COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

# Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

## Submission by

### The Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA)

#### Introduction: About ISCA

ISCA is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISCA represents a sector with 1,140 schools and over 617,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISCA's major role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors.

Many Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include the Independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas, special schools for students with disabilities and boarding schools to educate children from rural and remote areas. There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that seek to practise an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Rudolf Steiner or Montessori schools. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the Independent sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

## 1. What are your expectations of a national aspirational declaration on Australian education?

A national aspirational declaration on Australian education should demonstrate a common focused commitment to action to ensure students develop the capabilities, skills and knowledge to engage successfully in all facets of their life, individually, and in relation to others.

These attributes need to be adaptable and transferrable across a range of educational, social, geographical, and professional contexts.

It should provide an overarching vision on agreed national purposes and the role of schooling in order to deliver high-quality education regardless of cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds.

It should be transformative in nature in order to capture that schooling needs to serve not only students but also society. That goals and measures should not solely focus on being prepared for the transition to study or work but also in becoming good at learning and good at life.

A national aspirational declaration should reflect global significant and rapid changes that affect the nature of the workforce, the direction of the education system, and the way students are educated and assessed. It requires flexibility in the way the vision is articulated to allow the contemporising of goals for the next decade in schooling.

It should address the connection between student learning and student well-being and acknowledge the importance of non-cognitive attributes and qualities, extra-curricular activities, and parental engagement as important components of strong student outcomes.

The physical, social and emotional well-being of students underpin academic achievement and success in life. Being confident, resilient with a capacity for emotional intelligence supports better academic performance and satisfying lives.

## 2. Who should the national declaration inspire and/or guide?

The national declaration should guide the collaboration of governments in developing national frameworks to implement national policy initiatives and measures that identify academic achievement for all students, student engagement in schooling, and ensuring students gain the skills they need to transition to further study and/or work and in achieving life success.

Since the Melbourne Declaration has been in effect, the world has undergone rapid change that has inevitably affected the nature of the workforce, the direction of the education system, and the way in which young people are educated and assessed.

The national declaration should guide the key activities of national bodies such as the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

The national declaration should guide the Australian Curriculum to be flexible and adaptable to the needs of students and their contexts and be relevant in their pursuit of fulfilment as learners now and in the future.

The curriculum needs to emphasise the importance of foundation literacy and numeracy skills as the building blocks for all further learning. These skills are the basis for students to develop capabilities for deep, reflective learning, collaborating with others and sharing ideas, and looking beyond operating in explicit traditional subject areas. The focus of Australian schools, whether in curricula, extra-curricular or beyond should reflect, promote, and enable these aspirations.

An emphasis on interpersonal skills and the strengthening of critical thinking skills are increasingly important in a workforce that is highly dynamic, allowing students to be adaptable in any situation. Developing students who are highly literate and numerate, able to solve problems in a variety of contexts, to communicate effectively and develop, and maintain positive relationships across a number of different situations contributes to being successful in life.

Also important is the way we assess student learning in the classroom with the move to developing learning progressions, alternative and online assessments challenging the view of traditional point in time assessments. Assessments need to capture the growth of individual student outcomes over time and not be overly reliant on comparing students with other students.

The goals of schooling are broad, involving the education of the whole person, therefore measures should not be confined to a limited definition of academic achievement.

Providing opportunities for creating stronger partnerships between the work of organisations such as AITSL and schools will ensure that schools can harness tools such as the national professional standards for developing quality teachers and school leaders.

### 3. How has the *Melbourne Declaration* impacted or influenced you?

As a national peak body education stakeholder, the *Melbourne Declaration* has provided a strategic framework in developing key documents such as the Measurement Framework, used as the basis for reporting to the community on progress towards the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, and the National School Reform Agreement which sets out a four year agreement on strategic reforms in areas where national collaboration will have the greatest impact on driving improved student outcomes.

The important role of the non-government sector in school education is recognised through the implementation of bilateral agreements which set out state-specific reform actions to improve student outcomes. State and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) support these reform actions through the delivery of professional learning and the provision of school-based services. In turn each Independent school participates in activities to support students, student learning and student achievement, and to support teaching, school leadership, and school improvement.

States and Territories have collaborated to produce a national curriculum that provides the core knowledge that students need to succeed. National teaching standards underpin reforms across the country to support a quality teaching profession. A program of national assessments and a common reporting framework provides the means for measuring progress against national goals.

The Independent sector participates in discussions around national and jurisdiction reforms and strategies, and supports the process of ongoing collaboration across all sectors of schooling. Acknowledging the unique nature of the Independent sector and allowing flexibility to support initiatives at the school level, allows a more nuanced and contextual approach to achieving similar goals.

#### 4. What do you consider are the three most important economic, social and technological changes that will shape the future of education in Australia?

##### *Economic*

As the Discussion Paper acknowledges, Australia's economy, workplaces, and what is required of our workforce is changing. The *Through Growth to Achievement* Report highlighted the decline in the share of both manual and cognitive routine jobs and the growth in non-routine employment.

Focusing on how employment is being transformed rather than simply on the disappearance of existing jobs will require learners with STEM knowledge and literacy but also education and experiences beyond STEM. The greatest challenges of the present and into the future will test not only our technical and scientific knowledge and skills but also our ethical, empathetic, and civil capabilities. Learners require experiences and knowledge to connect and collaborate, not only across nations and cultures but also to bridge divides across a diversity of viewpoints, approaches, and traditions.

##### *Social*

There is a renewed recognition, across a range of social, educational, and civic settings, of the continued importance of local communities, local decision making according to the local context, and local engagement in order to present global knowledge and perspectives.

In the education context, local autonomy enables schools to respond more flexibly and innovatively to their local community and to their students' needs. Top down recommendations of specific strategies or programs do not work for all schools and can often add pressure to participate in something that is not well suited to their context or community.

Australian and international research indicates it is where autonomy is coupled with appropriate accountability for educational provision and student learning, as well as for responsible financial management, that it has been found to be associated with better student outcomes.

##### *Technological*

As the Discussion Paper acknowledges, technology is changing the nature of teaching and learning, the economy, work, and social aspects of the Australian community. Addressing technological developments will involve challenges for digital literacy (for both teachers and students), pedagogy, Initial Teacher Education, teacher Professional Learning, and school administration.

Increasingly, in addition to developing a complex knowledge of how students typically develop skills and progress, teachers and schools need the skills to analyse and use the data that comes from assessment to inform their teaching.

These changes will also require further consideration of how technology effects student safety and wellbeing (particularly mental health), and how to mitigate the worst elements of these effects.

## 5. How can a national declaration best reflect that Australians need to continue to participate in learning throughout their lifetime?

Each student needs to develop the capabilities, skills, and knowledge to engage successfully in all facets of their life, both individually and in relation to others. Their skills and capabilities need to be individual for personal development including in order to participate in economic growth and also civic in order to contribute as active citizens. These attributes need to be adaptable and transferrable across a range of educational, technological, social, geographical, and economic contexts.

Michael Barber (2015) has stated, “It is important that at school students learn the knowledge, master the skills and develop the attitudes that will enable them to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. But we should not think of school as being solely about preparation for the future but also about building a community of work and learning, a productive place where today matters because every day matters.”

Starting from this premise, the national declaration should position learning, not only as a preparatory process undertaken only by young(er) learners in a defined and separate formal location. Such an emphasis may mean that the national declaration needs to address learning and education beyond the scope of schooling for young Australians to encompass a vision of learning for all Australians.

The declaration should emphasise that learning and communities, which may be educational, work, civic, social, or otherwise, are connected. This emphasis could encourage thinking and practices which aim to overcome any separation of theory, practice, and experience which creates barriers to developing the technical and transferable skills which are required of lifelong learners throughout their life.

## 6. How could the concepts of equity, excellence and the attributes for young Australians in the *Melbourne Declaration* be updated to ensure they are still contemporary over the next decade?

ISCA supports the view of the Education Ministers and stakeholders who attended the February 2019 Forum that the two goals of the *Melbourne Declaration* remain relevant.

The *Through Growth to Achievement* Report considered how to improve student achievement and school performance. It recommended that a greater focus be placed on accelerating individual student learning growth in each year of school. This focus is the foundation on which strategies and initiatives to support equity and excellence in Australian education should be based.

Ken Robinson (2015) provides a useful approach by identifying four basis purposes of education:

- Economic: education should enable students to become economically responsible and independent.

- Cultural: education should enable students to understand and appreciate their own cultures and to respect the diversity of others.
- Social: education should enable young people to become active and compassionate citizens.
- Personal: education should enable young people to engage with the world within them as well as the world around them.

The precise strategies and initiatives that will be implemented over the next decade in support of the goals of equity and excellence should be developed in a national Action Plan which outlines the policies and programs to which governments will commit.

## 7. Are the eight areas for action in the *Melbourne Declaration* still contemporary and how well do they address the goals?

While there is a general consensus that the eight goals are still relevant and contribute to addressing the goals, there is scope for updating and refocusing in light of economic, social and technological changes over the last decade and current predicted trends in the coming decade.

There is evidence that developing strong partnerships, within and between the school, the immediate community it serves, and the broader community, is a critical factor to improving educational and social goals. Whilst the *Melbourne Declaration* acknowledges these goals, there is still work needed to ensure that this acknowledgement is translated into tangible reform and is consistent and embedded in school practice.

The current eight areas for action include a focus on supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions. The action areas also separately focus on early childhood, middle years and senior years of schooling. It is now clear that the focus on supporting successful transitions should not be limited to the later years of schooling, but rather ensuring successful transitions across all phases of education from early childhood to primary, middle and secondary schooling, and post-school education and training options. Successfully navigating these transitions is particularly important in supporting educationally disadvantaged students. This should be a key focus in either updating and refreshing the existing areas for action or the inclusion of an additional action.

## 8. Are new priority areas for action needed? And are there areas that should no longer be a priority?

Since the development and release of the *Melbourne Declaration* in December 2008, there has been a seismic shift in the presence, influence and nature of technology and the digital environment. Many educational activities have shifted to the online environment and the impact of social changes such as social media have not only evolved but are now entrenched in the lives of young people.

While this generation of learners may be comfortable with operating in an online environment technically, the impact on this shift in terms of learning outcomes, brain development, the nature of studying and study skills, and human social interaction are yet to be fully understood. Successful learners will need digital literacy to understand how to harness the benefits of the dynamic online environment with the possible disadvantages of constant distraction and stimulation.

Improving our understanding of the impact of this rapid technological and social change and its impact on teaching and learning and individuals and society should be a new priority area for action.

Another area for focus is the fragmentation of policy at the system level, along with overload and duplication of accountability measures at different levels of government make careful, considered and sustained action difficult at the school level. What is required is stable long term bipartisan agreement of an overarching vision for education that builds trust within schools, teachers, and school leaders to make local decisions about addressing difficult questions regarding students' learning.

## 9. Are there better ways to measure and share progress toward achieving the declaration's goals?

While the goals should continue to present high level aspirations, there should also be complementary documentation supporting the national declaration. These should include agreed national plans detailing evidence-based approaches to achieving the goals and agreed frameworks for assessing progress towards the goals. These plans and frameworks should be dynamic and be subject to scrutiny, adjustment and improvement over time.

Progress may look very different for different cohorts of students in different contexts; there is no one-size-fits-all measure. Progress is not just about academic achievement, it may manifest in the wellbeing of students, the active participation in voluntary roles and responsibilities, the ability to demonstrate interests and passions and develop healthy relationships. The temptation to rely solely on measures of progress simply based on a narrow point in time snapshot should be avoided.

Schools are experiencing heightened pressure from governments, school communities and from the general public about what their work should be and how it should be measured. The expectations on schools to undertake an expanding role in society can dilute and distract from their core business. Support for the profession and the provision of time to allow schools to be successful is imperative in building an equitable and excellent education system.

## 10. How can we ensure the education sector works together to achieve the goals of the declaration?

The ability to ensure the education sector works together to achieve the goals of the declaration is linked to the initial questions posed in the review around the expectations of a national aspiration and who should be inspired, influenced and impacted by it. If we can establish what our expectations are of setting national goals and who is engaged with their achievement, then the sector working together to achieve the goals follows naturally.

Critical to the success of the education sector working together to achieve the goals of the declaration will be ensuring that all relevant stakeholders have the opportunity to be consulted not only on its development, but also on its implementation as part of an iterative process.

The forum to discuss the review of the *Melbourne Declaration* was an important first step along this path. Formalising the opportunity for ongoing consultation and feedback on progress will be an important innovation for developing a process for working together and when considering how successful this has been over the next decade.