Independent Schools Queensland
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Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

From the Executive Director

Independent Schools Queensland's *What Parents Want*[1] survey clearly identifies the factors that drive the success of independent schools such as: their ability to prepare students to fulfil their potential in later life; high quality teachers; catering for individual student needs; values; and good discipline. These might all be described as "in-school" factors which are determined and driven by the autonomous governance and management of independent schools.

There are also factors external to individual schools which significantly impact their sustainability and success. These include the outcomes and standards of other schools in an area and the comparative cost of attending them, capacity (yes, there are some areas of Queensland where there are not enough available places for children wanting to attend independent schools), and demographics.

Perhaps the most important of the external factors is the state of the economy. "It's the economy, stupid" is commonly used in a political context but could just as easily be applied to the overall health of the independent schooling sector.

This is not surprising given *What Parents Want* found 93 percent of parents with children attending independent schools in Queensland rely on their salaries, either wholly, or in combination with other sources such as part scholarship/bursary, or other family members, to meet schooling costs.

Further, as reported in *What Parents Want*, of the 23 percent of parents who considered changing schools, about a third nominated financial reasons.

The first section in ISQ's inaugural *Trends Book* published in 2018, examined the state of the economy, the outlook and what it means for independent schools. It concluded that "a healthy economy means more parents are in employment and earning the income which allows them to meet school fees" and "just as important is consumer confidence in current and future economic conditions as this will be factored into parents' decisions about expenditure on independent schooling".

The recently released Statement on Monetary Policy from the Reserve Bank of Australia[2] is worth examining to understand current and future economic conditions[3]. It reports the outlook for the global economy remains reasonable and that the Australian economy is projected to grow by about 2.75 percent in 2019 and 2020. Further, the main domestic uncertainty continues to be the outlook for household consumption, which is being affected by a protracted period of low wages growth and declining house prices.

The Reserve Bank statement says the Australian labour market remains strong with a significant increase in employment. Some lift in wages growth is expected, although this is likely to be a gradual process.

It notes inflation data for the March quarter were noticeably lower than expected and suggests subdued inflationary pressures across much of the economy. Looking forward, inflation is expected to pick up, but to do so only gradually.

The relationship between inflation, wages growth and school fee increases in Australia presents one of the biggest economic challenges for independent schools. Over recent years, fee increases have far outstripped both inflation and growth in wages indicating a long-term sustainability issue in terms of the ability of parents to meet school fees from salaries.

1 Available at https://www.isq.qld.edu.au/advocacy-representation/what-parents-want-survey
2 Available at https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/smp/2019/may/
3 The Reserve Bank, based on current economic conditions, decided to leave the cash rate unchanged at 1.50 percent meaning no change to interest rates

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Figure 1: Consumer Price Index by Annual Percentage Change (March Quarter) – Brisbane

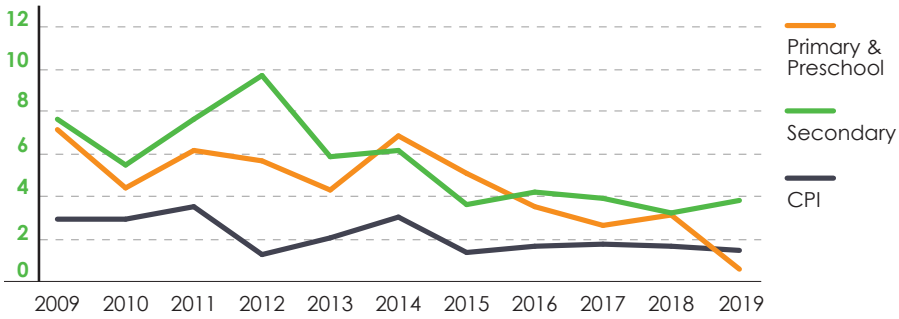


Figure 2: Wage Price Index Growth by Sector

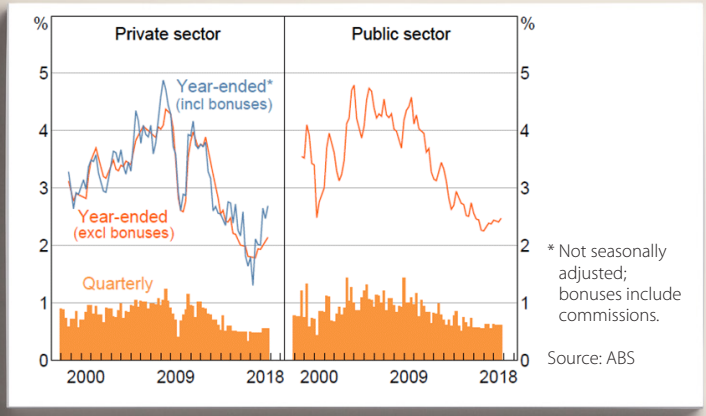
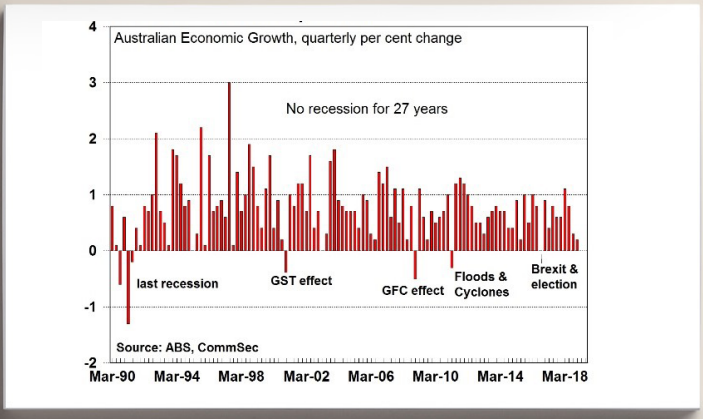


Figure 3: Record Economic Expansion



The March 2019 quarter Consumer Price Index (CPI)[4] shows an increase of 1.3 percent nationally and 1.5 percent for Brisbane for the 12-month period. However, the education component of the CPI during this same period was 2.9 percent nationally.

The education component of the CPI can be broken down into three groups – primary and preschool education, secondary education and tertiary education.

Figure 1 outlines the historical data for the primary and preschool and secondary components compared to the overall CPI for Brisbane from 2009 to 2019. The education components basically reflect fee increases and these have been well above CPI for the past decade.

For the year ending March 2019, there was a significant reduction in primary and preschool fee increases, which for the first time in many years have fallen below CPI.

This fall in primary and preschool was not reflected in secondary school fee increases which increased over the corresponding figure for the proceeding 12 months.

Figure 2 outlines the Wages Price Index (WPI) by public and private sectors[5]. The gap between wages growth and fee increases is a real challenge for independent schools and one that is likely to have an impact on long-term sustainability.

There is no easy solution to this disparity with schools operating in an environment where salary costs are increasing at between 2.5 percent and 3 percent annually, student-teacher ratios continue to fall and there is an increasing number of non-teaching staff in schools associated with student needs, pastoral care and compliance[6].

4 Available at https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/latestProducts/6401.0Media%20Release1Mar%202019
5 Sourced from the Reserve Bank of Australia (2019) *Statement on Monetary Policy*, p. 62
6 As confirmed by the ISQ publication *Trends in Income & Expenditure at Independent Schools 2012-2016* (March 2018)

The gap between wages growth and fee increases is a real challenge for independent schools and one that is likely to have an impact on long-term sustainability.

There is no easy solution to this disparity.

Australia has enjoyed a long run of economic expansion. As shown in Figure 3, it has not had a recession[7] for 27 years – the last being in the early 1990s.

These very favourable economic conditions have been a strong foundation for the growth of the independent schooling sector over many years.

However, school boards and management need to be mindful of the challenging economic conditions facing Australia and their potential impact on their school and school community.

At the recent economic briefing for member schools provided by ISQ's Alliance Partner the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, Ryan Felsman, Senior Economist at CommSec described financial markets across the world as volatile with a "synchronised slowdown" – a slowing Chinese economy, US-China trade deficit, UK investment freeze, manufacturing activity decelerating and negative US and UK politics via their leaders Donald Trump and Theresa May respectively. He said in Australia, we have cautious consumers, tighter lending and elevated debt, and a federal election.

School boards should consider how their school community would respond to higher interest rates, job insecurity or job losses. They should ask the question are fee increases above the rate of CPI coupled with low wages growth sustainable into the future?

Most importantly, schools need to ensure that parents value independent schooling as a worthwhile investment in their children's future and a good use of their discretionary income.

By addressing these questions, schools can be prepared for any change in economic conditions impacting on the ability of parents to pay school fees.

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Executive Director

7 A recession is defined as two consecutive quarters of negative Gross Domestic Product growth.

ARE LEARNING PROGRESSIONS THE PANACEA THE AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING SECTOR NEEDS?

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The policy background

The Gonski 2.0 report *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, released last year was critical of the current state of education in Australia:

Since 2000, Australian student outcomes have declined in key areas such as reading, science and mathematics. This has occurred in every socio-economic quartile and in all school sectors (government, Catholic and independent). The extent of the decline is widespread and equivalent to a generation of Australian school children falling short of their full learning potential.

(Australian Government, 2018a, p. ix)

David Gonski AC and the review panel observed that "the presentation, implementation and focus of the curriculum… could be improved" and that the current "industrial" model is guaranteed to ensure that "millions of students attain specified learning outcomes for their grade and age before moving them in lock-step to the next year of schooling" (p. ix). The report goes on to argue that structural elements in the current curriculum such as "inflexibility in curriculum delivery, reporting and assessment regimes, and tools focussed on periodic judgements of performance" need to be addressed (p. ix).

The Gonski 2.0 report promotes "continuous diagnosis of a student's learning needs and progress" as an alternative approach. It recommends that learning progressions should be independent of age or year level because teaching curriculum content based on year or age levels rather than levels of progress leaves some students behind and fails to extend others. This rationale is most acutely embodied in three of the recommendations from the report (see Figure 1).

The Australian Government then developed some significant national policy initiatives out of the Gonski 2.0 report findings. The *National School Reform Agreement* between the Australian Government and the states and territories encapsulates key Gonski priorities, with the first two of these being pertinent to a discussion on learning progressions (LPs):

- Enhancing the Australian Curriculum to support teacher assessment of student attainment and growth against clear descriptors;

Figure 1: Recommendations from Gonski 2.0 Report

RECOMMENDATION 1 | Embed a focus on individual student achievement through continuous learning progress in the policies and practices of all schools and systems, with the expectation that each student should achieve at least one year's growth throughout each year of schooling.

RECOMMENDATION 4 | Introduce new reporting arrangements with a focus on both learning attainment and learning gain, to provide meaningful information to students and their parents and carers about individual achievement and learning growth.

RECOMMENDATION 5 | Revise the structure of the Australian Curriculum progressively over the next five years to present the learning areas and general capabilities as learning progressions.

(Australian Government, 2018a, p. xiii)

- Assisting teachers monitor individual student progress and identify student learning needs through opt-in online and on demand student learning assessment tools with links to student learning resources, prioritising early years foundation skills. (Australian Government, 2018b, p. 9)

By late December 2018, the Australian Government required implementation of these national policy initiatives as "a condition of Commonwealth funding to States and Territories under section 22(2) of the Act" (Australian Government, 2018b, p. 10). Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) has been directed by Education Council to undertake a review of the Australian Curriculum by 2021 with a clear plan of what that review will comprise, to go to Australia's education ministers no later than mid-2020. If ACARA does, as suggested by Gonski, replace the current Australian Curriculum achievement standards with a learning progressions approach, then independent schools will be obliged to implement these.

Development of learning progressions

Gonski AC and the review panel claim that the current Australian Curriculum achievement standards, while perhaps demonstrating a continuum of sorts, are too coarsely grained to show incremental gains for individual students across one year of teaching because the lack of granularity of year-level achievement standards means that reporting against those standards hides progress and attainment for some students and does not amount to a diagnostic assessment of real learning (Australian Government, 2018a).

In regard to recommendation 5, the Gonski 2.0 report (p. 34) further argued that there are six fundamental requirements for the development and introduction of learning progressions:

- the reform be developed for implementation in stages over the next five years;
- learning progressions be developed for each of the general capabilities and learning areas in the Australian Curriculum;
- each progression be comprised of increasingly challenging levels of proficiency independent of age or year level;
- each attainment level in the progression be defined by criterion-referenced descriptions of the knowledge, skills and understandings typical of that level;
- the number and type of criteria defining each level should enable teachers to make valid and reliable assessments of student attainment, and should not be adopted before this has been proven by extensive trial;
- the learning progressions be national and described and applied consistently across states and schools.

The report was heavily influenced by the work of Laureate Professor John Hattie, Professor Geoff Masters and others, such as this article written by Masters for *Teacher* magazine. Therefore, it was not surprising when the Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training, in his response to the Gonski 2.0 report, established an "expert reference panel to shape a shared vision for this important work and provide advice on how to take it forward" (Cawsey, Hattie & Masters, 2018, p. 1) of which Masters and Hattie were members, together with Christine Cawsey. The expert reference panel produced a report for the Commonwealth Minister in late September – *Growth to Achievement* (Cawsey, Hattie & Masters, 2018). One of the panel's key recommendations was much anticipated:

"Adopting, adapting and creating resources to better inform educators when they 'diagnose a student's current level of knowledge, skill and understanding, to identify the next steps in learning to achieve growth, and to track student progress over time against a typical development trajectory', regardless of an individual student's age, year level or starting point" (p. 1).

At its 14 December 2018 meeting, Education Council accepted a proposal from ACARA for "proof of concept" work to begin on the development of learning progressions. In pursuing this work, one of the issues ACARA has been grappling with is whether:

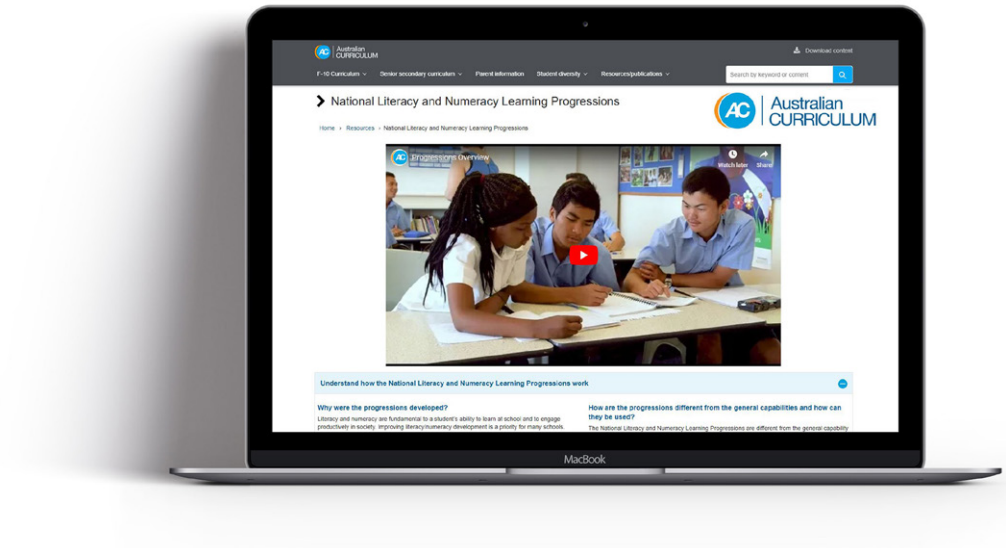
- the Australian Curriculum learning areas and general capabilities are written as learning progressions, in effect learning progressions *replace* and hence become the Australian Curriculum; or
- learning progressions are developed and used as a *resource* to underpin and inform the Australian Curriculum. In effect learning progressions would be incorporated as part of the development and improvement of the Australian Curriculum but would not replace or become the Australian Curriculum.

At time of publication, Education Council has agreed that any learning progressions being developed would be a resource rather than a replacement for the Australian Curriculum. However, Education Council will re-examine (and sign-off on) learning progressions at least three times over the course of their development, and changing political priorities may impact this decision.

In March 2019, the Australian Education Senior Officials Committee (AESOC) agreed to ACARA's proposal to begin a six-month discovery phase of work on learning progressions, with a report due to Education Council by the end of the year. At this stage, ACARA

ARE LEARNING PROGRESSIONS THE PANACEA THE AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLING SECTOR NEEDS?

Figure 2: National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions



is limiting the developmental work to learning progressions in reading, writing, numeracy and critical and creative thinking (ACARA, 2019).

What are learning progressions?

According to Popham "a learning progression is a carefully sequenced set of building blocks that students must master en route to mastering a more distant curricular aim. These building blocks consist of subskills and bodies of enabling knowledge" (2007, p. 83). A more recent definition by Charlotte Waters from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) describes a similar notion of learners moving "from early knowledge, skills and understandings to more advanced knowledge, skills and understandings within a domain" (2018, p. 2).

ACARA (n.d. a) already has National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions (NLNLPs) as a resource for teachers (refer Figure 2). These learning progressions were developed with significant input and energy from state and territory curriculum authorities, academics, subject specialists, practicing teachers and professional associations, based on empirical evidence; and validated by student responses in NAPLAN and work from the student work samples. They were supported by theoretical understandings from highly qualified academics in the field. A learning progression was described only where substantial evidence already existed about typical student progress in an area of learning.

The NLNLPs were published to the Australian Curriculum website in late 2017 and the position of the education sectors in Queensland was that these were a valuable resource for teachers. For some students, the described attainment of the Australian Curriculum is not possible, and they need "intensive, individualised instruction or support in a highly structured or specialised manner for all courses and curricula, activities and assessments" (Australian Government, 2019, para. 2).

As a resource, the NLNLPs could be useful for staff designing highly individualised learning programs – particularly for students on the "extensive" level of adjustment of the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD).

When developing new learning progressions, Cawsey, Hattie, and Masters (2018) recommend analysing students' performance on tasks and then calibrating those tasks based on student success rates. Once the sample sizes are large enough generalised descriptions of increasing proficiency are possible (p. 4).

Another method is that used for the development of the current NLNLPs. That is, a "horizontal structure that identifies the different 'elements' or 'strands' of learning, and a vertical structure that divides that learning into 'levels' of increasing sophistication or proficiency that function as signposts or steps along a typical developmental pathway" (usually not age or year based) (ACARA, n.d. a). They were then mapped to NAPLAN results. As an example, the element of

> *"A learning progression is a carefully sequenced set of building blocks that students must master en route to mastering a more distant curricular aim" (Popham, 2007).*

numeracy has a range of sub-elements including "Understanding Money". Figure 3 outlines a progression of how a student increases their sophistication of understanding about money. This is clearly a relatively simple learning progression of only seven steps, however other progressions such as the writing sub-element, "Creating Texts" has 11 steps with the last one being very sophisticated (ACARA, n.d. b).

Figure 3: Numeracy Sub-element "understanding money"

MATCHING
- **matches like coins and notes (matches 10-cent coins as being alike)**

FACE VALUE
- **recognises 5c, 10c, 20c and 50c coins based on face value**
- **recognises $1 and $2 coins based on face value**

SORTS
- **sorts and counts the number of coins with the same face value**
- **identifies situations that involve the use of money**

COUNTING VALUE OF COINS
- **determines the equivalent value of coins to a maximum of 10 coins of one denomination**

COINS OF ONE VALUE TO $5
- **determines the equivalent value of coins to $5 using one denomination of 5c, 10c, 20c or 50c coins (Sam has $1.20 in 5-cent coins. How many 5-cent coins does Sam have?)**

COINS OF MIXED VALUES
- **determines the equivalent value of coins to $5 using any combination of 5c, 10c, 20c or 50c coins**

GIVING CHANGE
- **uses complementary addition (the shopkeeper's method of adding change to obtain the amount tendered) to determine the difference between two amounts, rounding as necessary**

Source: ACARA, n.d. b

Advantages and disadvantages

Critics of learning progressions point to issues associated with their use. For example, in a case such as the above, the issue of how to demonstrate attainment at a particular point on the progression is critical. As Greg Ashman (2018) explains:

"Another major problem for learning progressions is that they often neglect context in cases where context is a far greater factor than any difference between adjacent levels on a learning progression. For instance, at CrT6 on the National Literacy Progression students write, 'four or more sequenced and clearly connected ideas' whereas at CrT7 they are able to, 'support ideas with some detail and elaboration'. Imagine a child writing about a family fishing trip versus a child writing about the role of The Senate in Australian government. It is far easier to support ideas about the fishing trip with detail and elaboration than it is to write four or more sequenced and clearly connected ideas about The Senate. This is not surprising because writing is essentially a record of thinking and so writing about ideas that are harder to think about will be more challenging than writing about easier ideas.

Any teacher who therefore wants to demonstrate that children in his or her school are making a maximum rate of progress along the writing learning progression would therefore be well advised to choose really simple ideas for children to write about. We have an incentive to dumb-down the curriculum. And that's why, without a shared understanding of the curriculum that students will be exposed to, learning progressions are meaningless" (para. 12).

An advantage of learning progressions is that teachers may gain benefit from greater focus and detail about the typical ways in which students learn to read for example. Mapping individual students on a learning progression about reading/understanding texts could be extremely productive in terms of the 'what next?' for an early years teacher.

Imagining a similar scenario in a Year 8 mathematics classroom could be challenging. Although it is commonly understood that a 'typical' Year 8 mathematics classroom will have approximately six years of difference in ability between the highest performing students and those who are not coping with the content, it could be quite another thing to then suggest that each student is mapped against learning progressions and then worked with individually, to "move them forwards" in their learning.

Perhaps it is at this point that the Gonski 2.0 priority of an online and on-demand student learning assessment tool with links to student learning resources, would be of use. The assessment resources would provide teachers with immediate and specific feedback to support them in identifying the most appropriate teaching strategies to move the student's learning forward. It could also provide the student with information about their own learning and inform the development of learning goals. The information could also be used to place 'like' ability students into groups for differentiated support.

Again, in regard to its use, a hurdle could be that many schools are reporting how difficult it is to employ appropriately discipline-qualified teachers, and so some classes are often staffed with teachers who have not had mathematics, for example, as a major component of their university training. These teachers will often revert to teaching mathematics the way they were taught because their main teaching subject (not mathematics) becomes the focus

of any professional learning. Such teachers, even if they had a learning progression and online formative assessment tool to tell them the next step, might not be familiar with the recommended strategies to employ to move the student forward. This is not as a result of learning progressions obviously, but it is something that will need to be considered before the idea of learning progressions as a panacea becomes fixed.

Achievement standards

As witnessed in New South Wales last year, an enthusiastic systemic embracing of learning progressions can have significant industrial reprisals – particularly in the secondary context.

However, if it is accepted that student learning outcomes do need to be improved, currently the imperative is for teachers to implement the Australian Curriculum well. If teachers understand the achievement standards and are planning from them, teaching to them, assessing them (gathering evidence) and reporting student progress against achievement standards, then student learning is expected to improve because of the rigour of that curriculum.

In 2002, Graham Maxwell, working on behalf of the Queensland School Curriculum Council (QSCC) at the time, defined achievement standards as representing "sequential targets for student learning and provide the point of reference for assessing what stage of development has been reached along a continuum of learning outcomes" (QSCC, 2002, p. 4).

ACARA (2012) have described their achievement standards as "what students are typically able to understand and able to do. They describe expected achievement. Across F–10 the set of achievement standards describe a broad sequence of expected learning" (p. 22).

It can validly be argued that the ACARA achievement standards already represent a continuum of learning. Increased resources and professional learning to ensure that this curriculum is implemented well will serve to improve student outcomes across the nation. If they can be supported with finer grained signposts and on-demand assessments to support teacher judgements, then that can only help. The issue will be if the learning progressions confuse the task for teachers and increase the number of masters to whom teachers are already answering.

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