



Tuesday, 16 October 2018, The West Australian, page 22  
Esther Hill (Director of Djoowak: The Beyond Boundaries Institute)

# Rethink needed to suit needs of WA students

## ■ Esther Hill

Inside schools, it is sometimes felt we are slaves to “systems” that are serving bureaucratic ends rather than serving the young people whose uncertain futures are in our hands.

However, when we look across our nation, there are some green shoots of change — change that signals hope for a responsive and future-focused education system. In NSW, an extensive review of the curriculum, led by Geoff Masters, includes a focus on “how the curriculum could be redesigned and presented to better support teaching, learning, assessment and reporting”. Further, in the ACT, the Future of Education Strategy released in August outlines the pillars and principles that will lead to greater student agency, shifts in classroom practice, an emphasis on measuring and reporting on learning progress, not only in academic domains, but also in wellbeing and 21st century skills.

In South Australia, too, we see signs of transformation: the SA certificate of education has been “modernised” and reviewed to ensure the end of schooling promotes “the Australian curriculum general capabilities (literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology, personal and social, critical and creative thinking, intercultural understanding and ethical behaviour), innovation and entrepreneurship”.

Victorian students and teachers have long enjoyed fewer compulsory subjects and a focus on learning progressions rather than year level curriculum.

When looking at the agendas for

education in the States and Territories we see common themes emerging:

■ The need to streamline a curriculum that inhibits schools’ ability to be flexible in response to students’ needs.

■ A move away from year level curriculum (a “one size fits all” approach) towards understanding learning as a progression — that students who are of the same age can potentially have vastly different abilities.

■ The need for students to have agency and ownership of their learning, choice and opportunity to develop their passions.

■ Opportunities for students to make links between disciplines and develop capabilities in applied contexts.

■ Opportunities to develop skills in innovation and entrepreneurship (not necessarily “making money” but learning that focuses on how students can work collaboratively, solve problems, generate solutions and add value to the lives of others).

So how is WA faring and listening to the recommendations in the national Gonski review?

Many principals and teachers in WA will, I am sure, attest to feeling that they are slaves to an overcrowded curriculum and to a regime of standardised testing that has increasing levels of accountability and that causes increased levels of anxiety for students and staff.

Are NAPLAN, OLN and ATAR dictating to our students what learning is all about?

It could be argued that students in our schools are made to feel like they are constantly preparing for “the next thing” — preparing for success in the cycle of NAPLAN testing,

preparing for OLN, preparing for ATAR.

When can they feel that they are learning to improve and progress? Are we allowing, indeed encouraging, our students to progress at an appropriate pace with an appropriate level of challenge?

Our WA curriculum is seen by many as restricted, rigidly presented in year levels which leave behind some students while simultaneously holding others back. In finding a better way, we need to ask questions. Some might include: do our most senior students have the opportunity to demonstrate broad competencies across disciplines? How well do our ATAR courses ensure that students are ready for the rigours of university? How much does the assessment regime impact on the wellbeing of vulnerable young people?

Across Australia there is increasing pressure on ATAR as the culmination of 12 years of schooling.

It is seen by many as a limited, narrow measure whose use is rapidly running out.

How well are we poised in our schools to provide portfolios of evidence of student projects and broad competencies, if that were to be the currency of university entrance? (I note as one example, ANU’s changes to its 2020 entry requirements.)

If education in WA is not just about assessment and measurement, if it seeks to enable our young people to tackle their future with skill, insight and confidence, then education in WA needs to develop systems that work for West Australian children.

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