



Better and Fairer Education for Students with Disabilities

Submission in response to the Invitation
from the Expert Review Panel

1 August 2023

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Executive summary

Students with disability are falling behind in terms of educational outcomes. However, this need not and should not be happening.

Students with Additional Needs (SWANs)/Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) are educational assessment tools which have been developed over more than 15 years and which are aligned to the Australian curriculum. They now contain unique data and insights which facilitate students with disability meeting their potential.

The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System should make recommendations to ensure that the NSRA:

1. Encourages the much more widespread use of SWANs/ABLES
2. Extends reporting of SWANs/ABLES to parents, and
3. Builds on the unique SWANs/ABLES database to develop individualised benchmarks and progressions to optimise educational outcomes for students with disability/additional learning needs.

Introduction

The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System (the Review) and the Terms of Reference identify students with disabilities as one group that is at risk of falling behind without intentional intervention and support.

This submission targets the needs of this group by advising on tools to ‘drive real improvements in student outcomes’ for students with disability not just outputs, such as attendance at mainstream schools. More specifically, it provides advice on ‘how data collection can best inform decision-making and boost student outcomes’ so that students with disability/additional learning needs have the opportunity to reach their potential.

The Review also indicates that there exists an identified gap in the national and state data sets regarding students with disabilities and a recognition that this cannot be rectified with the use of usual tools and data collection methods.

This submission responds to the Expert Panel’s request for advice on assessment tools that can help systems, schools, teachers, and parents understand how well their students are learning and where intervention and targeted resources might be required. This need has been recognised in other reviews as well, such as in the current NDIS Review.

The SWANs/ABLES assessment program

Students with Additional Needs (SWANs)/Abilities Based Learning and Education Support (ABLES) are assessment tools specifically designed for students with disability whose educational attainment is below the NAPLAN level. The development of these tools commenced in 2007. It has involved two Australian Research Council Linkage Grant projects that funded 7 PhD projects in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education.

The SWANs/ABLES tools assess nine areas: communication, emergent literacy, interpersonal development, personal learning skills, understanding of emotions, early numeracy, digital literacy, movement, and problem-solving skills. These are the foundational skills needed to learn and to access the general curriculum. They also align with the general capabilities as set out in the national curriculum.

The validation of these nine assessment areas has involved input from hundreds of teachers and assessment data on thousands of students with additional needs. The process of development involved a co-design process to ensure their utility and feasibility for teachers, regardless of their expertise with students with additional needs, which means use of the tools can be scaled with fidelity and so quickly grow their positive impact on the learning needs of students with disability.

At the core of SWANs data on student learning are rich, calibrated standards that can provide a common language across the system. The SWANs/ABLES currently has a unique database of student learning in general capabilities spanning 15+ years. Such data can be used to empirically validate standards that are written in language that is clearly accessible to teachers.

SWANs/ABLES outcomes map closely to the general capabilities in the Australian curriculum and the complex competencies that are increasingly becoming recognised as fundamental for young people. They are skills such as thinking and collaboration that are essential for learners to be able to explore their interests and continue their development and learning through school and in further education or work. Moreover, such general capabilities provide a line of sight and continuity of learning from early childhood to school, tertiary education and employment. The strength in such a line of sight and consistency is that there is a connection from one year to the next. This provides students with disability with the opportunity to have the skills they develop from year to year valued and recognised, rather than focus on unrelated silos of information from one year to the next.

The SWANs/ABLES assessments and associated materials are groundbreaking due to their focus on student ability and learning. SWANs/ABLES therefore extend the curriculum to describe in positive terms, students' abilities and general capabilities so as to provide teachers with information regarding on what students can do, rather than what they cannot do. The tools also guide teachers where students need to focus next in order to progress. SWANs/ABLES primary purpose is to support teachers to improve educational outcomes for students with additional needs.

We know from the formal validation evidence to date that when used well, SWANs/ABLES can be very effective (e.g., QCAA, 2021; Victoria State Government). The evidence-base underlying the work is extensive and has been ongoing from 2007 to now (see list of publications). There has been a book, six doctoral theses, journal articles, conference proceedings and presentations and industry reports.

Moreover, evaluations of the SWANs/ABLES resources have found that they support teachers to better plan and collaborate to implement teaching and learning strategies for students with additional needs. It is used in all states and territories in Australia, a testament to its utility and quality (QCAA, 2021; Victoria State Government).

Opportunity for the NSRA

Our proposal is that the NSRA could include significant effort and encouragement to extend the use of SWANs/ABLES resources to provide data on the learning of students with disabilities and form the foundation for an evaluation framework that focuses on feedback from teachers, schools, and parents in order to build a common understanding and alignment in expectations of teachers, schools, parents and students. It is only when the expectations of teachers, schools, parents and students align that educational outcomes will be optimised.

The Review should make recommendations so that the NSRA:

1. Encourages the much more widespread use of SWANs/ABLES

The use of SWANs/ABLES depends on the take up by state and territory education departments, schools and teachers. This means that many students whose education would benefit from access to these tools are missing out.

While mandatory take up also has drawbacks, because of the risks of poor usage, we think that much more needs to be done to encourage their use. We therefore recommend that all education departments should endorse the use of these well-tested tools and actively encourage their take-up by schools and teachers through in-service teacher development programs.

2. Extends reporting of SWANs/ABLES to parents

Currently, as a teacher focused tool, the SWANs/ABLES tools do not include a report to parents/carers. The way that parents are provided with the assessment results and involved in the feedback needs to be carefully designed so it does not result in a means to *compare* performance to students, teachers and schools. The developmental nature of the learning needs to be emphasised and the focus should be on where the student is at in their learning and where they need to go next to progress best.

To provide such a rich picture of student learning and progress, a profile of learning can be designed. This will provide individualised information regarding a student, their strengths, and what can be worked on to progress their learning. Facilitating a channel for parents/carers to access such information and providing them with a way to feedback is one way to productively involve parents/carers in the reporting of student learning. The parent module would then also provide enriched opportunities for parents to reinforce school-based learning priorities at home, leading to improved outcomes.

3. Develops individualised benchmarks and progressions for students with disability/additional learning needs

Develop innovative analytics methods to develop individualised benchmarks that provide expectations of success based on the unique attributes and context of a young person. Growth patterns based on norm-referencing (based on age or grade-level) cannot apply to all students with disability. Students with disability have distinct patterns of learning and growth and students can often also regress or experience learning loss.

Such considerations are important to account for so students, parents and teachers can work with standards and expectations of growth that are appropriate and useful to support instructional and planning decisions and optimise outcomes.

Use of such optimal, individualised outcomes will provide a way of operationalising standards that are not used bluntly to measure teacher and school performance. Individualised expectations can support teachers in their practice to improve student outcomes rather than to judge teacher performance. Such considerations are particularly important as there is a reported shortage of

teachers. Working with and supporting teachers with appropriate tools and resources should be prioritised.

In summary, individualised benchmarks can and should be used to align expectations of schools, teachers, parents/carers and students with disability. Further, a common understanding between schools, teachers, parents and students is integral for student success and this can be achieved through the more widespread and better use of SWANs/ABLES.



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Supporting material

Doctoral theses

- Gale, L. (2018). The acquisition of goal-directed movement: Developing and reporting a measure of learning readiness for use in classroom settings with students with motor performance needs [Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne]. Minerva Access. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/217267>
- Kamei, T. (2019). Thinking to learn: an investigation of assessing and teaching thinking skills for students with disability. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne]. Minerva Access. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/224151>
- Roberts, E. (2014). Design and validation of an instrument to assess development of intrapersonal learning skills for students with an intellectual disability and students with autism spectrum [Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne]. Minerva Access [Abstract only]. <https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/39767>
- Strickland, J. (2018). The design and use of a learning progression of emergent numeracy to support the instruction of students with intellectual and development disability. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne]. Minerva Access. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/219848>
- White, E. (2019). Digital literacy for students with disability: recognising ability and supporting learning through assessment, evidence and expertise. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne]. Minerva Access. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/224996>
- Woods, K. (2010). The design and validation of measures of communication and literacy to support the instruction of students with learning disabilities. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne]. Minerva Access [Abstract only]. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/35468>

Evaluations of SWANs and ABLES

Queensland trial and evaluation:

- <https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/p-10/student-diversity/students-with-disability/ables>
- https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p_10/ables_case_study_1.pdf
- https://www.qcaa.qld.edu.au/downloads/p_10/ables_case_study_2.pdf

Victorian Department of Education and Training ABLES case studies evaluation report:

- <https://www.education.gov.au/download/2920/achieving-inclusiveness-through-ables/4048/document/docx>

Publications and Journal articles

- Coles-Janess, B., & Griffin, P. (2009). Mapping transitions in interpersonal learning for students with additional needs. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 33(2), 141–150.
<https://doi.org/10.1375/ajse.33.2.141>
- Griffin, P., Woods, K., Coles-Janess, B., & Roberts, E. (2010). Mining the gold: assessing students by ability, not disability. *Teacher: The National Education Magazine* (210), 34–37.
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/aeipt.182276>.
- Kamei, T., Johnston, J., & Milligan, S. (2022). What SWANs has taught us about learning and assessing, general capabilities, and inclusion and diversity. *Australian Educational Leader*, 44(1), 11. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.508525384015112>
- Kamei, T., & Pavlovic, M. (2021). Investigating differential item functioning to validate a thinking skills learning progression for students with intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 106.
doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2020.101726
- Kamei, T., & Pavlovic, M. (2022). The development and validation of a thinking skills assessment for students with disability using Rasch measurement approaches. *Journal of Applied Measurement*, 22(3/4), 191–213.
- Roberts, E. & Griffin, P. (2009). Profiling transitions in emotional development for students with additional learning needs. *Australasian Journal of Special Education* 33(2). 151-161.
- Woods, K., & Griffin, P. (2013). Judgment-based performance measures of literacy for students with additional needs: Seeing students through the eyes of experienced special education teachers. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 20(3), 325 – 348. doi: 10.1080/0969594X.2012.734777

Book

- Griffin, P., & Woods, K. (2020). *Understanding Students with Additional Needs as Learners*. Switzerland. Springer Nature.

Conference proceedings

- Balt, M., White, E. H., & Strickland, J. (December 2018). Developing arguments for the validity of Australian assessment and reporting tools in international contexts: Piloting a translated version of selected SWANs tools in Germany as an initial step. Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Sydney, Australia.
- Kamei, T. & Woods, K. (2016). The development of problem-solving rubrics to define learning progressions to support the inclusion of students with additional learning needs. *Proceedings of the Australian Association for Research in Education Annual Conference*, Melbourne. pp. 1-12
- Kamei, T. (2018). Thinking skills instructional strategies: Teaching students with disability to be better thinkers. *Proceedings of the Australian Association of Special Education Annual Conference*, Cairns. pp. 1-10
- Kamei, T. (2021). *The SWANs/ABLES project: A resource developed by and for teachers to support the teaching and learning of students with additional learning needs*. Paper presented at the Research Conference 2021: Excellent progress for every student: Proceedings and program. <https://research.acer.edu.au/rc21-30/rc2021/papers/18/>

- Kamei, T. (2020). *Impact of Teacher and Student Background on the Assessment and Instruction of Thinking Skills* Paper presented at the Proceedings of the American Education Research Association (conference cancelled), San Francisco. <http://tinyurl.com/v39tnnw>
- Kamei, T. (2022). *An adaptation and validation study of an observation-based assessment in early childhood education* Proceedings of the American Education Research Association, San Diego.
- Kamei, T., & Pavlovic, M. (2019). *Development of a thinking skills progression for students with intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder*. Paper presented at the Proceedings of the American Education Research Association, Toronto, Toronto, Canada.
- Nawaz, S., Kamei, T., Srivastava, N. (2023). Nuanced Growth Patterns of Students with Disability. In: Wang, N., Rebolledo-Mendez, G., Dimitrova, V., Matsuda, N., Santos, O.C. (eds) *Artificial Intelligence in Education. Posters and Late Breaking Results, Workshops and Tutorials, Industry and Innovation Tracks, Practitioners, Doctoral Consortium and Blue Sky. AIED 2023. Communications in Computer and Information Science, vol 1831*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36336-8_95
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- White, E. H., Woods, K., & Poed, S. (2017, July 2–7). The assessment and development of digital literacy in students with vision impairment and additional learning needs: Preliminary findings from a current PhD study [Conference paper]. 9th ICEVI European Conference, Bruges. <http://www.icevi-europe.org/files/2017/empowered-by-dialogue/icevi-europe-2017-proceedings.pdf>
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- Woods, K., & Griffin, P. (2010). Teachers' use of developmental assessment to support communication proficiency for students with additional needs. Paper presented at the AARE International Research in Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia.