

SACE Review

By David Knuckey

The review of the controversial SACE has dominated the education headlines in recent months. Just one year after the new certificate formally began, it is under review by the State Government – thanks to unrelenting criticism from parents, teachers, principals and education experts.

The New SACE was announced six years ago and has been the subject of scepticism ever since. The new ‘flexibility’ in the certificate – the crux of the New SACE - is criticised as lacking in the basics; ‘dumbing down’ our school certificate.

With SA’s basic skills apparently slipping faster than the rest of Australia, parents, educators and the broader community fear even fewer children will leave school with the basic skills needed to find work. In particular the ‘Research Project’ has been savaged by criticism from all quarters – including the students themselves.

With the announcement of the review of the SACE, SAASSO has received calls and emails from parents asking what involvement their association has had and will have in the review process.

In late 2011, SAASSO was approached by the SACE Board to provide input into their strategic planning process. Below, you can read an excerpt of SAASSO’s feedback, in which the topics of the Research Project, basic skills and parent and community confidence in the SACE are addressed.

In the first part of the process, SAASSO was asked to provide general comment on the SACE Board’s Strategic Plan.

“The priorities of the Strategic Plan are admirable and ambitious.

In particular, the plan addresses challenges identified by the recent OECD report on the assessment and evaluation of Australia’s education system. The Strategic Plan includes key areas of concern such as teacher assessment skills and alignment of SACE and the new national curriculum.

The ‘innovation and relevance and ‘professional capacity’ sections are particularly appropriate.”

Please provide any feedback on specific elements of the plan:

“Defining clear and rigorous assessment standards – much parent (and community) feedback centres on concerns of SACE being ‘dumbed-down’. These concerns have been expressed for several years and to date, the response from the government and education authorities has been to dismiss these concerns. This has also been supported by student claims of weak aspects to the new SACE.”

“The key to the new SACE – to provide a more flexible system is laudable, but it is vital that it does not allow our children (especially those at risk) to slip through without attaining the minimum standards necessary for work and life.”

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The SACE Board asked a series of questions on their draft strategic plan and secondly asked for suggestions of topics the Board should focus on during 2012. You can download a copy of the SACE Strategic Plan at www.sace.sa.edu.au



Please comment if there are gaps and/or strategic considerations that should be strengthened further:

“Community Engagement: The Strategic Plan focuses significant attention on building and strengthening relationships within the education sector – the school sectors, universities, training providers, the federal education authorities and international communities – however, there is no mention of parents.

Community confidence is listed as a ‘success indicator’ – there is growing community sentiment, questioning the standards of the new SACE, yet there is little in the Strategic Plan to address this problem. Eroding confidence will hurt those students who do not continue to further study, instead seeking to enter the workforce. What do our small business owners think of the new SACE and what standards are they looking for?”

“Parent Engagement: There is no mention of developing relationships with parents. Feedback to SAASSO is that there is little consultation with parents following the sign-off of the original SACE plan. Parents are concerned at the lack of review of whether their children are on the right pathway.”

“Pathway Guidance: There is concern of a skill gap in pathway counselling for students. This is not necessarily an area a physics, history or art teacher would be expert in, yet it is falling to them to provide this assistance. It is not appropriate to simply place another level of responsibility on teachers. All schools need dedicated specialists in this area to work with students and parents.”

“Basic Skills: NAPLAN and international studies reveal a continued slide in South Australia’s basic skill standards. Even universities express concern about this problem in their students. This is an across-the-board issue, requiring action from all

levels; including the SACE Board. Given the dramatic impact of basic skills on a child’s potential (particularly those most at risk), more must be done by SACE to ensure all students meet minimum skill levels.

Students have suggested dropping the ‘research project’, or making it optional in favour of an additional subject. There is merit in this. Parents have suggested dropping or scaling back the ‘Research Project’ in favour of a basic skill program.”

Please comment here if there are strategic considerations that have been given too much emphasis in the draft plan:

“There is strong emphasis on ‘engaging’ the education sector, while only ‘providing’ information to parents and the rest of the community; risking the development of an insular perspective. Currently, the most common comments about the SACE involve it being dumbed-down and student criticism of the research project.

Less internal focus in favour of increased community engagement will improve the Board’s understanding of community concerns and generate community confidence.”

What should be the top priorities for the SACE and/or the SACE Board over the next year (i.e. what should we be focussing on in 2012)?

1. How to ensure basic skill levels for students – particularly those most at risk.
2. Improved understanding of parent concerns. SAASSO suggests a face-to-face forum with the SACE Board and parents, to hear concerns about the new SACE. SAASSO would be keen to work with the Board to facilitate this exchange.
3. The Board interact with employers missed by existing consultation



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channels. Community concerns of a ‘dumbed-down’ SACE ultimately impacts on those children most at-risk when they seek employment. There are strong links within the education sector and traditional stakeholders, but our children require the wider community to have faith in their school certificate.

Following submission of our feedback on the SACE Strategic Plan, Chief Executive Paul Kilvert contacted and met with SAASSO for a frank discussion of our suggestions. SAASSO General Secretary, Frankie Bray has also been invited to sit on the SACE Evaluation Committee. ■