

ACT BSSS Board Chair Opinion Piece 2019

The student voice of senior secondary

Young people can have a powerful voice.

Young adults in Canberra senior secondary colleges now have that voice. The ACT Board of Senior Secondary Studies (BSSS) developed an exciting new initiative in 2019 forming a student forum to hear the ideas of young people from across the ACT to inform our work.

These students, drawn from across senior secondary schools, have been active in articulating what they think about education and how we can improve their preparation for the future. Students discussed a range of topics including student wellbeing; post school opportunities; and quality assessment, teaching and learning. In addition, they were the first student group to participate in the national review of senior secondary pathways.



Students were unanimous in their views that great learning begins with great teachers. With the curriculum excellence of the ACT Senior Secondary Certificate crucial and central to the empowerment of teachers and students, there is no doubt that powerful teaching and learning occurs. Most of all because our teachers are passionate about their subjects and inspire a love of learning in their students.

The architects of the ACT senior secondary system developed an educational structure that honoured and valued students. The system actively positions the teacher to be at the centre of teaching and learning as they make decisions that meet the needs and interests of their students. Teachers have the flexibility to tailor learning and devise pathways that lead to a variety of options post school, embracing diversity.

Students were adamant that courses needed to be relevant to their lives in order to engage them in their learning. BSSS senior secondary curriculum is written to reflect contemporary issues and allow students to engage in real world problems. As an example, the recently written *Humanities and Social Science Framework* has been developed to allow for integrated courses which enable students to gain deep understandings of concepts related to real-world problems. Curriculum being delivered in ACT schools is progressive and forward looking in its design. In addition, it embraces and respects all cultures.

I am pleased to share with you the recent development of the Indigenous Culture and Languages course. The introduction of this course is a first for the ACT senior secondary system. I thank the United Ngunnawal Elders Council (UNEC) for their support in providing an opportunity for learning, friendship and reconciliation.

The ACT senior secondary system has much to offer young adults. As an example, this system leads the nation with a comprehensive suite of STEM courses that include Engineering Studies, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Earth and Environmental Science, Agriculture, Flight, Electronics and Mechatronics, Forestry, Oceanography, Interdisciplinary Science, Senior Science and Human Biology. There is much to be proud of.

The recent development of a Data Science course enables students to analyse and understand big data, then draw conclusions which in turn can lead to solutions – skills that we all need our young people to have; solutions that our future depends on. The ACT is the first jurisdiction in Australia to develop a Data Science course for senior secondary students.

The BSSS is also dedicated to addressing the needs and interests of students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities. The BSSS has accredited 68 modified courses which make provision for students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities to be integrated into mainstream classrooms. Again, we are the first in the nation.

The BSSS is a cross sectoral statutory authority leading senior secondary curriculum, assessment, quality assurance and certification. The BSSS has a rich tradition of collaborating with all stakeholders across the ACT including government and non-government schools, universities, CIT, parent associations and industry. Responsible for ensuring that every student has a pathway and that every student matters the BSSS sets high standards whilst embracing diversity. Rather than narrowing and restricting learning, the BSSS curriculum gives broad opportunities for students and also recognises their co-curricular activities.

Students are able to focus their final studies with extended levels of depth in areas of interest and strength or equally build a learning journey that is broad and extensive across range of courses. Preparation and opportunity are available for every pathway and expectation.

A sample of student pathways

Student 1: Vocational pathway – English, Mathematics, Furniture Construction, Hospitality including ASBA, co-curricular recognition in sport and leadership.

Student 2: Tertiary pathway – ANU Extension course in Biology, English, Mathematics, Data Science, Interdisciplinary Project, co-curricular recognition in debating.

Student 3: Mixed pathway - English, Mathematics, Indigenous Culture and Languages, Metal Products, Robotics and Mechatronics, co-curricular recognition in community service.

Student 4: Modified (M) program for student with intellectual disabilities – Contemporary English (M), Food for Life (M), Contemporary Mathematics (M), PE (M), Social and Community Work (M), co-curricular recognition in work experience.

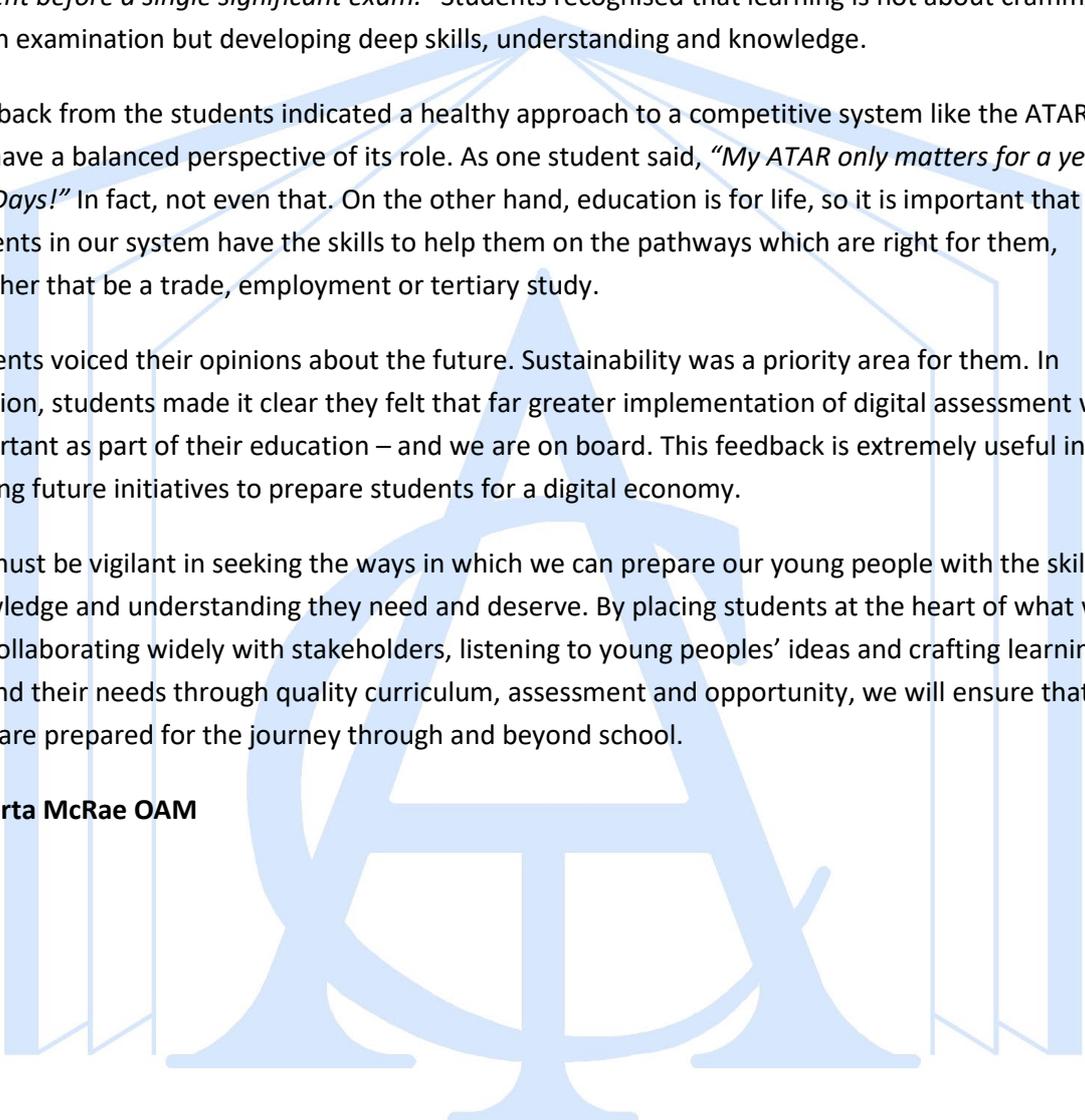
A key aspect of our system is continuous assessment that is supported by the ACT Scaling Test. One student remarked that the scaling test combined with continuous assessment, *“is a motivator in a sense that students are encouraged to achieve throughout both senior years, not just to learn the content before a single significant exam.”* Students recognised that learning is not about cramming for an examination but developing deep skills, understanding and knowledge.

Feedback from the students indicated a healthy approach to a competitive system like the ATAR and still have a balanced perspective of its role. As one student said, *“My ATAR only matters for a year! 365 Days!”* In fact, not even that. On the other hand, education is for life, so it is important that students in our system have the skills to help them on the pathways which are right for them, whether that be a trade, employment or tertiary study.

Students voiced their opinions about the future. Sustainability was a priority area for them. In addition, students made it clear they felt that far greater implementation of digital assessment was important as part of their education – and we are on board. This feedback is extremely useful in guiding future initiatives to prepare students for a digital economy.

We must be vigilant in seeking the ways in which we can prepare our young people with the skills, knowledge and understanding they need and deserve. By placing students at the heart of what we do, collaborating widely with stakeholders, listening to young peoples’ ideas and crafting learning around their needs through quality curriculum, assessment and opportunity, we will ensure that they are prepared for the journey through and beyond school.

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