



# Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

MELC  
Multicultural Education  
and Languages Committee  
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Government of  
South Australia



## Response from the Multicultural Education and Languages Committee

### MELC

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The Multicultural Education and Languages Committee (MELC) provides advice to the South Australian Minister for Education on three interrelated areas of education: languages education, multicultural education and the internationalisation of education. The Committee works across the three schooling sectors and encompasses ethnic and community languages programs.

The MELC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review.

In respecting all of the diversities that learners bring to their learning, our response focuses particularly on their linguistic and cultural diversity. Since knowledge is culturally formed and applied, and since language is a central mediating resource for learning, we see linguistic and cultural diversity not as a trait but as constitutive of all learning.

The MELC Statement: Reimagining learning as intercultural engagement describes a shift in the goals and orientation of teaching and learning that positions students as participants engaging in diversity rather than as observers of diversity. It outlines the intercultural capabilities and dispositions that all children and young people need to develop to enable them to navigate this diversity and to learn to live in a globalised community and world.

We recommend the MELC Statement as a resource to inform the redevelopment of the declaration: <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/about-department/minister-education/multicultural-education-and-languages-committee-melc/melc-statement>



## Response

### 1. What are your expectations of a national aspirational declaration on Australian education?

A national declaration should recognise the linguistic and cultural diversity of learners and the society in which children and young people will live and work. This requires a strong conceptualisation of what linguistic and cultural diversity means in education. Intercultural learning as described in the MELC Statement: *Reimagining learning as intercultural engagement* provides a valuable conceptualisation.

There are elements of an instrumentality within the discussion paper that reduce the value of the personal, social, and cultural. A more humanistic view of education is required. There should be an expectation that young people coming out of school are capable of operating successfully and comfortably in linguistic and cultural diversity, both in Australia and beyond. There needs to be strong referencing to the international nature of education and the internationalisation of education. Throughout their schooling young people need opportunities to prepare for acting and interacting effectively in local, national and international contexts.

Further, the declaration should be profoundly about education with a strong positioning of knowledge and learning. This sounds obvious but it can no longer be taken for granted. The conceptualisation of learning needs to go beyond the acquisition of skills and include knowledge, knowhow (capabilities), dispositions and values. The value of both deep-discipline and interdisciplinary/ transdisciplinary knowledge needs to be foregrounded.

The declaration should acknowledge the role and responsibility of educators and our education systems in shaping citizens who interact with each other with respect, civility and openness. Education plays an important role in creating shared values, which then become the foundation on which our society is based. Shared values should be those that encourage dialogue, debate, critical thinking, compassion, reciprocity and understanding.

### 2. Who should the national declaration inspire and/or guide?

Although it is recognised that the declaration has multiple audiences, including teachers, educators, (curriculum policy makers), students, parents and the broader community, first and foremost the national declaration should inspire and guide teachers. The declaration should speak to teachers in language that inspires them.

### 3. How has the Melbourne Declaration impacted or influenced you?

The declaration is a positioning statement of value in relation to education. Languages are positioned as a valued part of the curriculum experience, which is important and should be retained.

It is noted that whatever is prioritised as a national collaborative effort becomes a defining piece of the Australian educational jigsaw; what is not included falls by the wayside, at least to some extent. This has resulted in NAPLAN and STEM becoming the focus of educational attention in recent years, whereas other crucial areas such as languages, multicultural/intercultural/international education and indeed the humanities seem to receive less attention. This imbalance needs to be addressed.

Since 2008, apart from the development of the Australian Curriculum: Languages, there has been no activity at all in relation to languages (policy) education and what was previously called multiculturalism.

**4. What do you consider are the three most important economic, social and technological changes that will shape the future of education in Australia?**

Young people need preparation for challenges and uncertainties they may face. Schooling must enable them to live a fulfilling life in ways that go beyond employment and specific careers. Young people need to develop capabilities and dispositions such as reflection/reflexivity, creativity and problem solving, entrepreneurial thinking and resilience.

MELC considers the most important changes that will shape the future of education in Australia to be:

- Societal diversity / increasing mobility
- Advanced technologies
- Climate and environmental change
- Geopolitical shifts that impact international relations and the world order.

The discussion paper captures the technological changes and the changing nature of work very well. However, the changing nature of society is given insufficient attention. In paragraph 15 there is a conflation of population growth, diversification and ageing. Specific attention needs to be given to the growth and diversity of the population and how this shapes society, and to work from a perspective of strength rather than from one of problem or deficit. The theme of a diverse population is not expanded on at all within the paper. What is absent from the discussion are the changes that result from the increasing (and the increasingly complex) linguistic and cultural diversity in Australia and in the world, and what this means in educational terms.

**5. How can a national declaration best reflect that Australians need to continue to participate in learning throughout their lifetime?**

Begin the declaration with a clear statement on learning – its centrality, its processes and its linguistic and cultural shaping – and the need to embrace diverse knowledges from diverse cultural environments.

The statement should declare that knowledge is created and communicated through language within a cultural context and that different people bring different insights, experiences and knowledges to the process. There cannot be an assumption that ‘our’ knowledge is the only knowledge.

In the framing of learning in the declaration there needs to be recognition that learning is a complex phenomenon; it is personal, social and developmental. People are fundamentally curious. We need to promote that sense of curiosity and foster their desire to continue to understand and make sense of the world. Rather than simplifying and reducing the complexities of learning, the declaration needs to promote the ability of young people to navigate that complexity. A conceptualisation of learning is needed that goes beyond the acquisition of skills and includes knowledge, capabilities, dispositions and values – with strong value placed on both deep-discipline and inter/transdisciplinary knowledge.

In terms of lifelong learning, young people need to be able to entertain and deal with multiplicity: multiple perspectives, multiple faiths, multiple domains of difference and multiple experiences. They need to develop the capabilities to engage with and understand ‘otherness’ with curiosity, openness to difference, and a willingness to make sense of and reconcile multiple perspectives. (MELC Statement, page 2)

To be critical and creative thinkers and to see things differently, young people need to have deep disciplinary knowledge and be reflective, having the flexibility of mind to be able to apply knowledge in diverse environments/contexts, both within and beyond immediate contexts. They need to develop the capability to step back from and critically reflect on their own linguistic and cultural assumptions, perspectives, experiences, reactions and responses in relation to those of others. (MELC Statement page 2)

The concept of ‘confident learners’ should be framed in terms of young people having the agency to co-construct learning, empowering them to make decisions around their learning (ie a metacognitive capability).

The declaration needs to include educational goals for all young Australians, including children in the years prior to primary school education. Early childhood education lays the foundation for lifelong and life-wide learning.

When considering lifelong learning the education system needs to provide conditions that enable progress and to nourish a sense of investment in learning, recognising the cumulative nature of languages learning.

**6. How could the concepts of equity, excellence and the attributes for young Australians in the Melbourne Declaration be updated to ensure they are still contemporary over the next decade?**

The education goals in themselves remain valid, however, in the 10 years since the last declaration we have seen few gains in both equity and excellence. The very nature of what we mean by these terms needs to be revisited. The discussion paper and the goals reflect a highly traditional view of equity and diversity, one that perpetuates a view of diversity as necessarily co-referenced with ‘cohesion’. It is time to have a stronger conceptualisation of what linguistic and cultural diversity means in education and to recognise the linguistic and cultural diversity that all students actually bring. (See MELC Statement)

Further, the structures and cultures of schools are not conducive to equity, and the declaration should be a trigger to examine the learning environments, structures, timetables and cultures of schools.

In recent years there has been an overemphasis on the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics along with a concomitant attenuation of the social and humanistic value of education for advancing society and for analysing and understanding any notion of advancement. The vision of learning expressed in the declaration needs to be peopled; it needs to recognise the diversity of people in relation to language/s, literacy, knowledge and knowing.

There is no sense in the discussion paper of using learning to generate new knowledge and ideas or the power of generating new knowledge through comparison of one knowledge system with the diversity of knowledge systems that exist in the world. There is no sense that diversity is the

fulcrum for creativity as young people encounter knowledge, ideas and the world in different ways.

Paragraph 37 presents the usual discussion in which learner attributes are reduced to measurement. Measurement implies there is an end point that can be measured. There is a risk of advancing the notion that anything that is worthwhile must be measured and therefore only that which can be measured is worthwhile and therefore offered for learning.

**7. Are the eight areas for action in the Melbourne Declaration still contemporary and how well do they address the goals?**

The snapshot of reforms and influential reports since 2008 as tabled on page 8 of the discussion paper indicates that little has been achieved in the past 10 years. It is also clear that the actions identified in the declaration have indeed become the major priorities of education. This raises questions about the prioritisation process and its impact on what we understand and value in education more broadly.

**8. Are new priority areas for action needed? And are there areas that should no longer be a priority?**

The priority areas currently present a very monolingual framing of education. There needs to be a greater emphasis on the learner, learner diversity and learning in diversity. Intercultural learning, language and language learning, literacy and multilingual literacy also need to be prioritised. The revised declaration needs to reflect and address the plurilingual and pluricultural nature of our society, our world and education itself.

Further, if we want young people to develop rich discipline knowledge, then teacher education, particularly pre-service education, needs to be a priority. If students are to learn in depth, we need a teaching workforce that has the depth. This requires increased time in pre-service education in the various disciplines and in developing curriculum, pedagogy and assessment expertise. It also requires genuine engagement of understanding and pedagogical knowledge with linguistic and cultural diversity. This should be a norm for all learners and a basis for all learning.

**9. Are there better ways to measure and share progress toward achieving the declaration's goals?**

There appears to be an assumption that tools such as frameworks and standards in and of themselves will lead to improvement. There is an assumption that consistency and conforming to frameworks will yield the improvement, but this is not necessarily the case. For example, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership standards have become the tools of compliance rather than tools that might generate change in practice. Monitoring and reporting mechanisms on their own are not sufficient to propel change in practice. All the kinds of data being gathered need to be supplemented with qualitative data related to actual improvement and experience.

All of the reform agreements and partnership agreements described in paragraph 47 are high-level mechanisms that fail to connect with the prime audience, namely, teachers, educators and – through them – students and parents.

**10. How can we ensure the education sector works together to achieve the goals of the declaration?**

National collaboration should be about sharing the learning, rather than just measuring a limited number of prioritised measures. We need an ecological view of education and a plan for collaboration that travels through to teachers and positions them as key change agents. Action research is a practical way for teachers to involve themselves in systematic investigation of their own practices in teaching and learning. That educational action research is participatory when teachers, students and administrators aim to understand and change and share that learning. The whole qualitative dimension of bringing the successful work of teachers to the fore through national collaboration, through processes such as action research, is missing. These are ways of both engendering and nurturing teacher engagement and engendering change in practice.

**11. Is there anything else you would like to add before completing this online submission?**

The MELC Statement: Reimagining learning as intercultural engagement describes an orientation and goals for education in linguistic and cultural diversity. The process of development was collaborative and informed by current international research, with strategic input and endorsement from educational sectors and a broad range of professional educational and community organisations in South Australia.

The statement comprises:

- a vision
- goals for learners outlining the intercultural capabilities and dispositions that all children and young people need to develop
- an elaboration of two key ideas about learners and learning as intercultural engagement
- suggested approaches teachers, leaders and education sectors can take to realise this vision.

The MELC believes that work in this area requires a shift in understanding and that it is this conceptual shift that will lead to change in practice. The shift is towards an orientation to teaching and learning that positions students as participants engaging in diversity rather than as observers of diversity. The statement recognises the crucial role of language and languages and reinforces a whole of curriculum perspective that involves all educators.

The MELC Statement has resonated with principals, who are key contributors to the process of change, and is a focal resource for shaping teachers' and school leaders' professional learning across all sectors in South Australia.